

The Real Competition

By Drew Souders

This was it.

I looked around me to see my team behind me, wiping off their shoes as they prepared to take the floor. Dark green jerseys stood in stark contrast with the white walls behind us, drawing attention to the stern, concentrated expressions of the players. All of the work, the determination, the long nights of practice—it all came down to this.

At the sound of a loud buzzer coming from inside the stadium, we began to move. As I took my first step out of the locker room tunnel and onto the hardwood, my heart skipped a beat. Stands that seemed to go on for miles stretched out all around me, and I felt the eyes of hundreds of fans dart over to where I was standing. I took a deep breath, walked out to the court—and took my place next to the journalists on press row.

I saw the dark green jerseys of St. Vincent-St. Mary flash by my peripherals as I found my seat next to the professionals covering the game. As the Division II finalist started to form lay-up lines and stretch out, I began to organize my things. Before the team had made 10 spinning, acrobatic finishes around the hoop I had my notepad, OHSA Championship booklet and my tape recorder organized in neat, straight rows across my work area.

Just then, Thurgood Marshall took the floor. I saw the Irish's coaches tense up. The game strategy had already been set; this was too big of a game for the coaches not to take the time to plan meticulously. They moved closer together and began to whisper, undoubtedly discussing the finer points of the game plan that they had drilled the team on again and again at practice. Before I could attempt to decipher what they were saying a large camera rolled in front of me, obscuring the coaches from view. My attention was drawn to the camera's destination; already a group of six photographers had gathered just behind the baseline to prepare their equipment for the big game. To my surprise, I found the

anxious, determined look of the coaches mirrored on the faces of the journalists. They were comfortable; it was obvious by the way that they filed into their positions behind the basket that this was not their first time documenting game. Nevertheless, the camera crews tinkered with lenses and adjusted their cameras' ISO right up until tip-off in order to ensure that the photographers could follow the game plan they had set out in preparation for that day.

The booming voice of the announcer turned my attention back onto the court. Players jogged out onto the floor as their names were read, performing their pre-game handshakes with their teammates and then jogging over to the other bench to shake the opposing coach's hand. I looked down the sideline where I was sitting; two rows of seats stretched the entire length of the court, each one filled with a journalist shuffling papers around in their own kind of pre-game ritual.

When the ball was finally tipped and players started to fly up and down the court, I could not seem to focus on the game. Fingers flew over the keys of laptop computers far faster than high school athletes could ever sprint down the court on a fast break.

Before long, I gave up on watching the game. I had seen hundreds of basketball games in my lifetime, and had played in hundreds of my own. It was highly unlikely that this contest could rival the excitement of Michael Jordan's last-second fade away or the relief I felt as a Duke fan after Gordon Hayward's half-court shot rimmed out in the 2010 NCAA Championship game. What became infinitely more interesting to me was the low-profile competition that was taking place on the sideline.

Press row was a constant whirl of activity throughout the entire game. Journalists took constant notes over different aspects of the Division II Championship, noting key performances by star players for use in post-game interviews. Cameramen snapped hundreds of pictures from every possible angle, searching for strong action shots to use on the front cover of their publications. Even I was kept busy, struggling to organize mountains of box scores and informational packets that were being handed to me every few minutes. The audience had been tricked; people who had paid good money to sit in the front

of the stands near the court were missing a vital part of the Division II Championship game, an element that begins to overshadow the event itself.

As I attempted to decipher the meanings of all of the letters on my box scores sheet, it occurred to me that I had entered a different world. From my seat on press row I had the opportunity to witness all of the different parts of sports journalism, from lunch accommodations to press conferences, that all come together and let the system run like clockwork.