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March Monotony: Last two minutes put me to sleep

Yaawwnnn.

I finally figured out why UNLV head coach Jerry Tarkanian chews his towel during NCAA games. He's trying to keep from crying out in frustration about the last two minutes of any collegiate basketball game.

Those last 120 seconds provide proof positive that time indeed can stand still and last for an eternity. They call the NCAA Tournament March Madness, but I think it should be renamed March Monotony. What has at times proved to be a heart-stopping, gripping game for 34 minutes comes to a screeching halt and an exercise in tedium for the last couple of minutes.

In fact, I actually believe that the reason we turned our clocks back this weekend was to make up for all the time wasted during those eternal two minutes.

Football's two-minute warning is a signal to clutch those pillows in anticipation. Roger Staubach made two minutes go by so quickly, Cowboy fans often wondered what exactly had hit them. Basketball fans just want to hit anything in frustration.

Instead of a lightning-paced, dramatic, fast break conclusion, we are stuck in limbo while the best of games sputter to a more than timely death.

Instead of sudden death, basketball fans are forced to suffer a fate close to that: death at the hands of coaches who have hoarded timeouts like a miser who stashes his pennies. Including the infamous (and inevitable) TV timeouts, each coach has an opportunity to bring the game to a screeching halt nine times. And they usually do.

If you ever need to get classified information from someone, bypass the conventional methods of thumbscrews and Chinese water torture. Head for the big guns and force them to spend the last two minutes of any NCAA basketball game in front of the boob tube.

It's not pretty. Announcer Dick Vitale is as frustrated as the rest of us.

"During the tournament we get a lot of people who aren't normally rabid basketball fans to watch, and I think we turn some of them off with the way the games seem to drag in the end," Vitale said.

This season we have heard about the number of games that had been decided with last second shots and heroics, but try to keep the following thought in mind:

Through the first 60 games of the Tournament, the final two minutes have averaged out to an exasperating 10 minutes and 19 seconds to play.

You know CBS has to be happy with those numbers. It gives them an opportunity to cram in a few more high-priced commercials. So instead of being bombarded with high-flying antics of Todd Days and Stacey Augmons, we see that damned bunny march across the screen again and again.

Finally, a solution

Mike Krzyzewski, head coach at Duke, said he subscribes to the theory of too little basketball, too much time.

"Some of these games are just dragging on too late into the evening," Krzyzewski said.

That means during the final two minutes of any basketball game, we can watch Johnny Carson's monologue at the two-minute mark, then switch to David Letterman as the final buzzer sounds.

So what do you do?
Houston Chronicle sports writer Fran Blinbury came up with three not so novel, but effective, ideas. First, prevent teams from carrying over timeouts from the first half. Second, adopt the NBA rule of stopping the clock after the basket in the last two minutes. Thirdly, finally award an automatic two-shot foul instead of the one-and-one.

Maybe then we could go back to enjoying college basketball at its finest, instead of just trying to survive those never-ending final two minutes that is packed with a yawning stretch of dueling timeouts, fouls and free-throws.

Newspaper: 25 UT players used steroids

AUSTIN (AP) — Twenty-five University of Texas football players used anabolic steroids since the NCAA's 1986 ban on the drugs, eight Longhorns players told an Austin newspaper.

Offensive lineman Shay Shafie said at least three current members of the squad have used steroids, but he would not identify them.

Several other players also said they knew of teammates who used steroids during the 1989 season, the Austin American-Statesman reported Sunday.

One player, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said: "I would say there were about 20 to 25 (players on steroids during 1987) that I remember. Most of those were offensive linemen, but some of the defensive backs and other guys tried them. They (steroids) were everywhere. They weren't that tough to get."

Texas Athletic Director DeLoss Dodds said he plans no investigation into the alle-

gations of steroid use. He said the school would not discipline any players it learns had used steroids because, under the school's drug policy, a first positive test carries no punishment.

Using steroids became an NCAA violation on Aug. 1, 1986, and the sale and possession of steroids was outlawed in Texas last year.

The NCAA established a year-round drug-testing program in January with stiffer penalties for offenders. Athletes caught using steroids will be suspended for one calendar year after the first offense. Second-time offenders will be banned for life.

Although the Southwest Conference and the University of Texas have regularly tested players for steroids since 1986, some players have been able to use the drugs and avoid the tests, the teammates said.

The players say the steroids were supplied by other football players who occa-

sionally sold the drugs to teammates. One player, unidentified by the paper, said two Texas offensive linemen sold a six-week supply of the steroid Anavar for \$35 to \$50 in 1988.

The players said teammates generally used steroids during spring training to build up their muscles in the off-season, enhance their weight-lifting prowess and "look good on the beach" during spring breaks.

The Longhorn players feared taking steroids during football season because of the risk of pulling muscles and failing drug tests, the newspaper's sources said.

However, several players said the steroid users avoided the university's tests.

Two players said teammates on steroids avoided testing positive by bringing in urine samples from teammates who did not use steroids and taking masking agents like probenidic to avoid detection. The NCAA and SWC tests pick up probenidic, but

Texas' testing does not, according to the newspaper.

Dodds said the school conducts drug tests on three randomly chosen male athletes each week. The tests are administered by outside clinical pathologists and sent to out-of-state laboratories.

"The numbers on any positive test have gone down to almost zero — I'm talking everything," Dodds said, referring to steroids and street drugs. "I think we had one positive test from our testing last year — I'm not saying steroids. The year before we had five."

The SWC began testing for steroids in the fall of 1986, initially testing 36 football players and 14 other athletes at each school at different times during the year. In 1989-90, the league tested 30 football players — 22 starters and eight others chosen at random.

Sports Focus: Texas A&M Basketball

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Thornton leaving A&M with fond memories

By CLAY RASMUSSEN
Of The Battalion Staff

Hanging on the bulletin board of what once was John Thornton's office at G. Rollie White Coliseum was a sticker that read, "Big John's In Town."

Sunday, after Thornton cleared his office for incoming men's basketball coach Kermit Davis Jr., nothing but a



Photo by Mike C. Mulvey

Outgoing coach John Thornton has seen both sides. He walked the sidelines confidently in A&M's win over Texas Tech March 4 (above, left). As an assistant to Shelby Metcalf, Thornton (above, right) patiently waited for his chance.



Battalion file photo

bleached mark remained — the remnants of a space that hadn't seen the light of day for nine years at Texas A&M. Davis was named A&M's coach last Wednesday.

Thornton said he knew it was coming. When Athletic Director John David Crow came up to visit him Wednesday morning, he saw the writing on the wall.

"The way things were going, I kind of expected it to happen," Thornton said. "I knew what they were doing. It's hard to be discreet about something that big, and it didn't really surprise me."

Throughout the Aggies' turbulent season, Crow had said that Thornton, although an interim coach, would be considered an applicant for the permanent spot. Thornton was optimistic, but knew his only real shot at retaining the job would be to guide A&M into the NCAA Tournament.

"I think I was realistic from the very beginning," Thornton said. "First of all, the situation of my good association with (former A&M coach) Shelby Metcalf of nine years was going to come into play. The way his dismissal happened seemed to suggest they were looking for a break, a fresh start."

"I think that sort of sealed my fate." Thornton said he felt that he never really received a chance to show either Crow or A&M what he was capable of doing to the basketball program.

His focal point this season was just to weather the turmoil and try to keep the Aggies united and in contention for a spot in the Southwest Conference Post-Season Classic. A recurring phrase came out every time Thornton talked about goals — just have fun.

And, for the most part, it seemed to be working. A&M played an up tempo game and always hung close, even against SWC powers Arkansas, Texas and Houston.

But experience would hinder them all year.

"I'm not saying everything I did worked out, but I know at least I tried," Thornton said. "I know in the short time I've had to work with, I feel I could give myself good marks in the area of pulling out all the stops."

Thornton brought new life to Aggie basketball. He became A&M's No. 1 public relations man, going from class to class, trying to drum up some support for the team.

He even went so far as to raffle off one of his players to the public.

Even now, Thornton said he believes he could turn the program into a re-

spected one around the SWC.

"I think I know enough about the situation here as well as I would know about any situation," Thornton said. "I think given the opportunity, sure, I've got enough confidence to believe that I could've done a heck of a job and make this program into something very positive. But that's not a possibility right now."

In the press conference introducing Davis, Crow said Thornton "definitely" was considered for the job. That definite consideration was reduced to a short meeting between the two after A&M's

opening-round loss to Texas in the Post-Season Classic.

However, Thornton said he understood Crow's predicament.

"I think the Athletic Department had to do with what they felt was best," Thornton said. "It doesn't matter whether I think I've been treated fairly or not because they're the ones calling the shots, and I've understood that framework from the very beginning."

"This is the way this business goes. And the fact is that things like this happen sometimes — one's misfortunes end up being somebody else's break."

The end of Thornton's short era as A&M head basketball coach came quickly. He was contacted by members of the media Tuesday night and informed that Davis had flown to College Station to meet with Crow.

Anticipating what was to come, Thornton went to G. Rollie White the next day to tie up some loose ends and take care of business before flying to Denver for a coach's conference at the Final Four.

Crow walked into Thornton's office at 9 a.m. to break the news to him.

"He just explained to me the situation as best he could and thanked me for the job I'd done, and that was it," Thornton said. "I think it was handled with as much class as it could've been."

Soon after the meeting with Crow, Davis called Thornton and discussed the team situation and recruiting status.

"Although it was a very professional phone call, it was strained to a certain extent," Thornton said. "I was as honest and as straightforward as I could have been under those circumstances. He was trying to get a background on the team since it was all new to him."

Ill feelings between Crow and Metcalf came to a boiling point during an impromptu news conference held by Metcalf after the Arkansas loss in January.

Metcalf accused Crow of publicly criticizing him around the A&M campus and at the NCAA Annual Convention in Dallas two weeks earlier.

Crow responded two days later by removing Metcalf of his coaching duties and naming Thornton as the Aggies' interim coach. Crow said that at the end of the season, a nation-wide search would be conducted for a new coach, and that Thornton would be included in that search.

Thornton took control of a situation that was, at best, awkward. He led A&M to a 5-6 record and the team earned a berth as the sixth seed in the Post-Season Classic in Dallas.

Thornton said he tries not to dwell on what might have been, and that he has strict priorities in life — wife, family, and basketball.

But not necessarily in that same order. After winning his first game as the Aggies' coach, Thornton's eight-year-old son Gabe asked him to have lunch with him the next day at his school.

But the next morning, Crow contacted Thornton and asked if he could meet with him for lunch and discuss the game.

Thornton turned Crow down — he already had a lunch date with his son.

Thornton said he would like to stay in NCAA Division I coaching, and that his nine-year tenure at A&M would make him a valuable asset to many schools.

Thornton stands a good chance of returning to the University of Texas-San Antonio to coach its basketball team. Thornton briefly served as UTSA's intramural coordinator in 1978.

Thornton joined Metcalf's staff in 1981 as an assistant coach. Metcalf said at the Arkansas press conference that he was grooming Thornton to become his successor after the 58-year-old coach retired.

"I hope I can get the point across that I'm ready," Thornton said. "I'm prime to do a job, and being 37 years old and having the experience I have, I'm ready to go."

"I'm not ready to give coaching up."



Photo by Scott D. Weaver

First meeting. Thornton (right) meets with incoming head coach Kermit Davis Jr. (left) for the first time Sunday outside G. Rollie White Coliseum. Davis' assistant coaches James Green (left) and Fletcher Cockrell (right) stand back.