

Jumping Through Hoops

Why Penn Wins

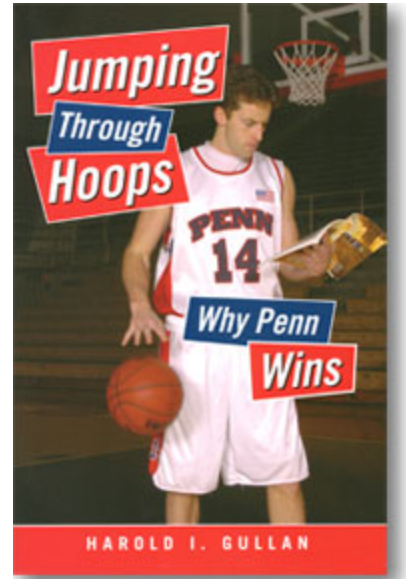
Harold I. Gullan

From "BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION"

...This whole mega-hyped phenomenon had not yet been dubbed "March Madness," but all the elements for such lucrative lunacy were already in place. The impact of nationwide television pushed it over the edge. Ratings meant revenue, escalating millions in advertising. Showering some of it on ardently cooperative universities and their major conferences placed an unprecedented emphasis on winning at all costs. Ultimately the men's Division I NCAA basketball tournament was expanded to a field of sixty-four teams, in venues across the nation, extending over three weeks—one-and-done, the eventual champion obliged to win five games in the 1970s, expanded to six in the 1980s. With so much sustained competition, what sports fan could resist laying his loyalties and logic on the line, eventuating in today's "bracketology" and gambling's biggest bonanza?

In that same 1970-71 season, when Villanova came so close to toppling mighty UCLA, the men's varsity basketball team at the University of Pennsylvania enjoyed its most successful campaign, before or since. As is so often the case in Philly sports, local teams intertwined, in this instance Penn and Villanova. (Indeed, Ed Mahan, the noted sports photographer responsible for our cover, is the son of 'Nova's Art Mahan.)

Under coach Dick Harter, the Quakers completed their regular season undefeated, 26-0: 14-0 in the Ivy League; 4-0 in the Big 5. They were ranked second in the nation. The names still resonate—Steve Bilsky, Dave Wohl, Corky Calhoun, Bob Morse, Jim Wolf. In the regular season they had beaten Villanova 78-70. In the first round of the NCAA tournament, played in West



Virginia, the Quakers outlasted a tough Duquesne team, 70-65. In the second round, in Raleigh, Penn had an easier time with South Carolina, 79-64. Two days later came the return match with Villanova, the East Region finals. Coached by the redoubtable Jack Kraft, then in his ninth season, the Wildcats had an impressive record of their own, 21 and 5.

To this day it's difficult to discern exactly what happened. With a trip to the Final Four at stake, the wheels simply came off. Penn was demolished, 90 to 47. Among many others, John Wooden was "astounded," not at the outcome, "because anything can happen in basketball," but at the margin. Steve Bilsky, today Penn's director of athletics, put it succinctly: "We stank," he said, "everybody, the players and the coaches." The head coach soon departed to take over the reins at the University of Oregon. Harter found little solace in the ultimate irony that Penn had in fact gone undefeated, Villanova having used an ineligible player. Perhaps he could see the future—a talent gap inevitably widening between the Ivies, with their unyielding standards, and just about everyone else.

Yet for the rest of the 1970s, Penn's success transcended such limitations. The very next season, under Chuck Daly, the Quakers defeated Villanova twice, the second time 78 to 67, in the NCAA tournament, before falling to North Carolina. In 1978-79, under Bob Weinhauer, Penn finally made it to the Final Four, overcoming Iona, North Carolina, Syracuse, and St. John's on the way. Nearly 9,000 raucous fans, serenaded by the Penn band, filled the north stands of Franklin Field to give the team an unforgettable sendoff to Utah: "Show no pity in Salt Lake City!" Alas, Penn lost to the ultimate national champion, Magic Johnson's Michigan State powerhouse. In the consolation game, no longer held, the Quakers were defeated in overtime by DePaul, 96 to 93. But what a run it had been. In 1980, Penn returned to the postseason, beating Washington State before falling to Duke.

From 1980 on, Penn has won their league and gone on to the NAAs more consistently than all the other Ivies put together, particularly during the record-setting success of coach Fran Dunphy's seventeen seasons. Yet there

has been only one NCAA tournament victory, over Nebraska in 1994, 90 to 80. Often, as in 2006, the outcome was agonizingly close. The opposing coach, wiping his brow, invariably commends Penn's players for their tenacity and skill. What they generally lack is the sheer athleticism and size of the coveted blue-chip specialists in today's big-time programs. The gap is hardly likely to close. However well-coached, tough and smart, as things are today, that the Quakers get this far is in itself a sort of annual miracle. They operate under a different set of rules, the rules of sanity. They persist in continuing to represent college sports, played by authentic student-athletes.

That is what we celebrate in this book—the exception that should be the norm, even in this most challenging and competitive arena. And so, never more than now, our focus is really less on why Penn wins than on why Penn matters.