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This UCLA Victory Is Blue Heaven

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OAKLAND -- Wait one Wooden minute.

Why are those Bruin players running across the court? Cedric Bozeman screaming at the crowd? Ben Howland dancing in his wrinkled suit?

And why is Gonzaga's Adam Morrison stretched out on that court, heaving, crying, crumpled?

Wait one Walton second.

Gonzaga won, didn't it? The Bulldogs led by 17 points in the first half, by nine points with 3:27 left, by five points in the final minute, right?

They had bullied the Bruins, outsmarted the Bruins, shoved them into next season, it was over, finished, done.

What happened?

"We dug deep," said Jordan Farmar, pale, breathless.

And up came UCLA basketball.

That's what happened.

On this most amazing of nights in the NCAA regional semifinals at the Arena, tradition happened, history happened, the greatness that once was Bruin basketball happened.

"Once again, UCLA basketball has a belief that we are among the best in the nation," said Dan Guerrero, athletic director.

It was a belief in the unbelievable, a 73-71 victory over Gonzaga that even this courtside witness still has trouble fathoming, and I'm not alone.

"I can't explain it, I can't try to explain it, I don't know what happened or how it happened," said Ryan Hollins after waltzing around the court with Bozeman. "I just know it happened."

It was a game in which the Bruins led only once.

It was a game in which the Bruins had to stop the Zags from scoring on their last six possessions, and did.

It was a game in which the Bruins needed a last-second steal, and got one.

All of which set up a play that is symbolic of a burgeoning era, the Ben Howland era, a coach who has his team so disciplined, it can pull out a comeback win even though he blew his last timeout with 4:53 left.

Start with the Farmar steal of Gonzaga giant J.P. Batista on a full-court press in the last seconds with the Bruins trailing by one.

It came on a trademark Howland trap, Farmar and Bozeman harassing Batista into losing the ball.

"I don't know where we got it from," said Farmar, but everyone knows.

Now, look at Farmar's pass to Luc Richard Mbah a Moute after the steal, the guard finding his teammate under the basket even though some guards would have jacked the shot themselves.

"As soon as Jordan got the ball, he looked at me," said Mbah a Moute. "I knew it was coming. I couldn't wait."

Now, look at what happened after Mbah a Moute made the layup with a couple of seconds left to give the Bruins their only lead.

Did he celebrate? Did he wander around looking for someone to hug?

No, he ran back downcourt to defend, ran into Gonzaga guard Derek Raivio and forced a loose ball.

"We are always taught around here, the game is never over," Mbah a Moute said. "There is always more time."

And when the ball hit the ground, Mbah a Moute showed something else they are always taught.

"We always know about the possession arrow, and I knew we had it, so I knew if I could get a jump ball, it would be ours," he said.

So he dived, locked up Raivio, and the Bruins controlled the game, finalizing the score with an Afflalo free throw.

This same Afflalo who picked up his fourth foul with 15:24 remaining on Morrison's three-point basket, leading to a four-point play that gave the Zags a 10-point lead.

At that point, I'll admit it, I pronounced the game over.

With UCLA's deliberate offense missing its leading scorer, how could it come back fast enough?

With UCLA's defense missing its best defender, who was going to stop Morrison?

"It was desperation time," admitted Afflalo.

But with Howland shouting the plays on offense, and running up and down the sidelines as if trying to play defense, the Bruins slowly climbed back.

One minute, it was reserve Darren Collison going coast to coast with a runner and a shout.

"No quit anywhere, we just couldn't find any quit," Collison said.

The next minute, it was the slight Hollins fighting over the Gonzaga elbows.

"I think most of us are too young to understand the impact of what just happened," Hollins said. "We just know that it's pretty amazing."

In the end, a team that missed its first eight shots of the game couldn't miss.

In the end, a team that committed four consecutive turnovers at one point in the first half held tight.

In the end, it was Ben Howland waxing.

"It's really just a testament to the character, the toughness, the heart of our players," he said.

In the end, it was Adam Morrison weeping, with Afflalo and Hollins walking over to pick him up and hug him.

"That' s just a sign of obviously a great program," Morrison said, adding, "They had enough guts as a man to come over in their moment of victory, pick somebody up off the floor."

In the end, it was Bruin fans remaining in the stands long after their team had left the court, clapping, chanting, howling loud enough to be heard from Westwood to ... Indianapolis?

"U-C-L-A."

Sound familiar?

