

Cinderella men dance on;  
George Mason pulls stunner of stunners

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BY: Erik Brady

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WASHINGTON -- They played a fairy tale of a basketball game Sunday -- and Cinderella lived to dance another day.

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George Mason University, the outside-the-Beltway outsider turned belle of the ball, is going to the Final Four. And at this point, four wins into what could become the most incredible run in NCAA men's basketball tournament history, it's clear the Patriots can win it.

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"We're not going just to go," guard Lamar Butler said in the on-court bedlam moments after his Patriots beat Connecticut 86-84 in overtime in the Washington, D.C., Regional final. "We can win. We know we can win. Everybody is surprised by us except us."

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Just ask top-seeded Connecticut, which was the favorite to win the tournament before it began -- while George Mason was barely noticed, except by some critics who thought the Patriots were not worthy of their at-large bid.

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Sunday's game was played 22 miles from George Mason's campus in the Virginia suburbs and a mostly green-and-gold-clad crowd lapped up every improbable moment. The fans screamed and urged and beseeched their team at every gut-wrenching turn.

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And when it was over, as coach Jim Larranaga cut the net, twirled it in the air, then wore it around his neck, they stood and cheered and believed. Some wore yellow shirts with two words in green block letters: "Cinderella Story."

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LSU, in 1986, is the only other No.11 seed to reach the Final Four. No mid-major team has gone to the Final Four since Indiana State and Pennsylvania in 1979. But Indiana State had Larry Bird. And Penn had made numerous NCAA tournament appearances, including in 1978, when it won a game, and two runs to the final eight in the early '70s.

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By that metric, George Mason is easily the most unlikely underdog to reach this point since.

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When the team returned by bus to campus Sunday evening, they were greeted by about 6,000 fans in the 10,000-seat arena where 4,500 typically come to see them play. The crowd cheered. Music played. Senior center Jai Lewis took a victory lap with the regional championship trophy. And the Patriots, led by Larranaga, danced.

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Should the Patriots win twice more, screenplays and books and songs will be written about them.

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Villanova and North Carolina State won big upsets at Final Fours in the 1980s, but they came from power conferences. George Mason comes from the little-regarded Colonial Athletic Association. And when it was all over Sunday, their fans chanted, "C-A-A! C-A-A!"

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Larranaga told his team before the game that in this case CAA stood for Connecticut Assassins Association. "So every time he would talk, he'd just say 'CAA,' and we just knew what it meant," Lewis said. "That was our motivation, every time out."

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Larranaga, 56, is big on motivation. He often gives his team quotes of the day. Sunday's came from William Jennings Bryan: "Destiny is not a matter of chance; it is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for; it is a thing to be achieved."

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That, Larranaga said, is what his team did Sunday. "We need to earn our respect," he said. "No one is going to give it to us."

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These guys are good

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The question is: How did George Mason do it? How did a program, which had never won an NCAA tournament game two weeks ago, win four of them against Michigan State (a Final Four team last season), North Carolina (last season's national champion), Wichita State and UConn (the 2004 national champion)?

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The answer is GMU is not really Cinderella. The Patriots (27-7) are very good. They win because they have players, including three senior starters, who are interchangeable parts and they yield matchup problems for other teams, even heavily favored ones.

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Tony Skinn is a lightning-quick 6-1 senior guard who plays the point but can also shoot. Forward Will Thomas, 6-7, was strong enough to get 19 points and 12 rebounds against UConn's much bigger front line but is so good handling the ball he had no turnovers in 44 minutes.

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And while the 6-7 Lewis gave up 4 inches to UConn's Hilton Armstrong, his 275 pounds created plenty of space inside. He drew so many fouls that he tried 14 free throws, 10 more than anyone else.

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Larranaga convinced his players they are just as good as UConn (30-4). And they played as if they were better -- especially the starters, each of whom scored at least 10 points.

The Patriots have no one taller than 6-7, yet they outrebounded UConn 37-34.

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"Basketball is more than a physical game; it's a mental game, too," Skinn said. "I know I'm usually the fastest guy on the court," but he pulled back on several fast-break chances. "We knew we were the better team in halfcourt. We saw that on film."

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With 2:51 left in regulation, as GMU led 69-65, CBS cameras zeroed in on Jackie Engelhardt, who held up a beige slipper with golden sparkles. The picture was worth a

thousand words, but she said the shoe cost \$9.99 at T.J. Maxx. She bought a pair after the Michigan State game. She has never worn them. She plans to in Indianapolis .

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Her husband, Jim, was George Mason's sports information director when Larranaga was hired nine years ago. He offered pizza to try to get local reporters to come to the news conference that day. Few showed up. Maryland , Georgetown and George Washington garner more attention around town in normal times, which these are not.

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A gaggle of reporters surrounded Larranaga on the floor after the game. He explained his players play well because they play loose. "If you tense up, you can't play," he said. "Basketball is a game of instinct. You develop patterns of play. We don't ever play scared."

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The crowd chanted: "Lar-ran-a-ga!" Then it chanted, "Bil-ly Pack-er!" Packer is the CBS analyst who said teams from mid-major conferences did not deserve as many at-large bids as they got this year.

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"I hope next year Mr. Packer comes to see us play in the Patriot Center ," George Mason President Alan G. Merten said. "I can offer him a seat next to me."

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Packer will have a seat at courtside Saturday when George Mason plays Florida in a national semifinal.

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Mason thrives in D.C. backyard

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UConn's Denham Brown took a last-gasp three-point shot at the end of overtime that could have ousted GMU. But the clock did not strike 12 for Cinderella. The ball bounded off the rim and Larranaga ran across the court, his arms raised high. He beckoned his wife, Liz, out of the stands. They hugged as UConn quickly left the court.

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Jon Larranaga, the son who played for his father at George Mason, watched from the stands with his wife, Elyssa, who picked the Patriots to win it all in her office pool: "She kept asking, 'Can Mason win this game?' We believed."

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Larranaga's other son, Jim, played for him at Bowling Green and now plays in Italy . Larranaga said young Jim told him: "I can't be there Sunday, but you need to win so I can come next week for the Final Four."

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George Mason's starters all come from Maryland , not far from Washington . Their families saw them win Sunday. Senior guard Lamar Butler's father held him in a long embrace on the court after the win.

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Butler is emerging as the face of this team. He walked out of a timeout near the end of the game and looked delightedly at the GMU throng roaring its approval. He looked at the score and the crowd and the drama and let out a long "whooh" through his wide-open mouth. Then he smiled ear to ear.

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Officially, the Patriots were the road team. In reality, they were never more at home.

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