On Sunday evening, March 25, 1979, the NBC Sports production team gathered in a conference room at the Hotel Utah in Salt Lake City to go over the game plan for the following night’s NCAA men’s basketball championship game. George Finkel, the game producer, spoke first. He laid out the manner in which he and his broadcasting team of Dick Enberg, Al McGuire, and Billy Packer would be presenting the contest between Michigan State and Indiana State.

The next person to speak was Don McGuire (no relation to Al), who produced the pregame, halftime, and postgame segments that were hosted by Bryant Gumbel. Before beginning a career in television, McGuire had worked as the sports information director at the University of New Mexico, where the associate athletic director was a man named Bob King. King had since moved on to become head basketball coach at Indiana State University, but before the start of the 1978–79 season, he developed an aneurysm in his brain and had to undergo emergency surgery. That forced King to hand over the reins to his young assistant, Bill Hodges, who despite having no previous head coaching experience had guided the Sycamores to a stunning 33–0 record and a berth in the national championship game. Now, McGuire told the group that he wanted to air a story on King, the incapacitated head coach, during NBC’s pregame segment on Monday night.

McGuire was abruptly interrupted by Don Ohlmeyer, the executive producer of NBC Sports. A large, domineering, and sometimes bombastic man, Ohlmeyer had spent a decade at ABC Sports learning at the knee of the legendary producer Roone Arledge. While working for the popular, eclectic program *Wide World of Sports*, Ohlmeyer learned the importance of developing a story line to pump up interest in a sporting event.

“Nobody cares about Bob King,” Ohlmeyer said to Don McGuire. “What about Magic and Bird?”

Ohlmeyer was referring to Earvin “Magic” Johnson and Larry Bird, the All-American stars at Michigan State University and Indiana State, respectively. An uncomfortable silence fell on the room. “Well,” McGuire said, “Dick, Al, and Billy are going to be talking a lot about those two during the game. And we’ve got a highlights piece set to music ready to go for halftime.”

“Oh, you’re going to do them in the pregame, too,” Ohlmeyer snapped. “Those guys are the stars here. That’s who people want to see.”

Ohlmeyer’s edict left McGuire in a bit of a pickle. In the first place, he now had less than twenty-four hours to put together a quality piece. More problematic was Bird’s notorious antipathy toward the media. He had gone through most of the season without speaking to the press, and McGuire had no idea whether Bird would consent to be interviewed so close to tip-off.
The following morning, Don McGuire sent Packer and a camera crew to the University of Utah’s Special Events Center, where the Indiana State Sycamores were just completing their game-day shootaround. Fortunately for NBC, Bird agreed to answer a couple of questions. Packer began by asking him how he felt about playing for the national championship.

“Well, this is probably the biggest game I’ll ever play in my life,” Bird replied in his high-pitched Hoosier twang, which made “life” sound like “lahff.” As he spoke, Larry looked not at Packer but straight ahead and slightly downward. He had a disconcerting habit of resisting eye contact with people he didn’t know well.

Bird continued, “I just feel like I’m representing not only myself and my team, but we’re representing our school and our town, Terre Haute. It means so much to me just to even be here that we’re gonna give it all we got, and we’re gonna try our hardest to win.”

“You know,” Packer said, “a lot of people were surprised yesterday, Larry, when you mentioned you played ball with Magic Johnson in the World Invitational Tournament.” Packer was referring to the tournament the two of them played for Team USA the previous summer that culminated with a game against a squad from Russia in Lexington, Kentucky.

Larry cracked a wry smile. “Well, you know me and Magic played in that game, and you know it’s funny ’cause Magic’s such a great passer, but he wouldn’t give me the ball. And you know I need the ball.”

The interview had been surprisingly pleasant and light. Larry left the court with his team, and the Michigan State Spartans strode into the arena. Packer knew there was no concern over whether Magic Johnson would consent to an interview. The broadcaster had never dealt with an athlete who so enjoyed the give-and-take with the media.

“It’s a dream come true, really, for me,” Johnson said in answer to Packer’s first question. “I won a state title [in high school] back in my home state, and then my next accomplishment was going to the NCAA and playing a game like tonight in the finals. It’s a dream come true, and like I said, it’s an awful important game. I just hope we play up to par and win the game.”

Packer then told Magic what Bird had said about him. Johnson flashed the bright ivory smile that would soon earn him millions of dollars. “Well, I hope he don’t think I’m gonna pass it to him tonight, either. But I thought I passed him the ball. Maybe he forgot.”

Don McGuire was pleased to hear that Packer’s excursion had been successful. He now had enough material to make NBC’s pregame show an all-Magic-and-Bird affair. In retrospect, it seems inconceivable that anyone involved in producing the game could have failed to recognize the significance of the impending confrontation between these two compelling characters. Ohlmeyer, however, possessed an innate sense of theater that
allowed him to see beyond the attraction the game would have for a hard-core basketball audience. He knew that if NBC could draw in the casual sports fan, and even the nonsports fan, the network would have something bigger than just a game. It would have an event.

By one measure, the impact of the 1979 NCAA championship game would be apparent a few days later. Nielsen Media Research reported that the contest had generated a 24.1 rating, which meant that nearly a quarter of all television sets in America were tuned in that night. Thirty years later, that remains the highest Nielsen rating for any basketball game, college or pro, in the history of the sport. Thanks to the proliferation of channels that has taken place since then, it’s unlikely the number will ever be surpassed by another basketball game. Consider that the 2008 NCAA final between the University of Memphis and the University of Kansas yielded a 12.1 Nielsen rating, a healthy number by modern standards. When Magic’s and Bird’s former pro teams, the Los Angeles Lakers and the Boston Celtics, met in the 2008 NBA Finals, it was hailed as a dream scenario for the league. Yet the highest rating any of the six games delivered was a 10.7.

While the success that Magic and Bird later enjoyed in the pros added retrospective luster to their first meeting, it does not account for the intense interest the two of them generated that night. Those millions of viewers had no idea they were watching the birth of the most storied rivalry in modern American sports. They were simply drawn in by the dramatic story line ripped straight out of the Old Testament: little Indiana State, which had competed in the NCAA’s Division I for only ten years, was taking on Michigan State, the mighty Big Ten team, for the title. That concept might not have been so titillating if they were playing a best-of-seven series, but the one-and-done format of the NCAA tournament made it irresistible. Anything could happen, the thinking went, so you’d better watch. “This was a classic David versus Goliath story,” Ohlmeyer says. “It made people feel like this was a once-in-a-lifetime event.”

“It was testimony to America’s fervor for the underdog,” Dick En-berg says. “Here comes Indiana State and this big blond guy and four chemistry majors. The argument was, they played in a minor league. Are they really that good? And they’re matched up against the Big Ten power. Dramatically speaking, it was truth strangling fiction.”

Bird’s story strangled fiction by itself. Many people knew the skeletal details—small-town farm boy drops out of Indiana University, spends a year working on a garbage truck, resurfaces at Indiana State, and leads the Sycamores through a storybook undefeated season—but before the championship game, Indiana State had played on national television just three times. The 1979 NCAA final gave many Americans their first glimpse of Bird. “You didn’t get to see everybody [on television] all the time. So in those days, it was a big treat when the tournament finally rolled around,” says Bob Ryan, the longtime sportswriter for the Boston Globe. Bird’s tight-lipped approach to the media only added to his allure. “There was just enough known about Bird and just enough unknown,” says Lynn Henning, who was a columnist at Michigan State’s hometown paper, the State Journal. “A little mystery goes a long way.”
Bird was so underexposed that his roommate and teammate at Indiana State, Bob Heaton, would later say that up until the championship game he had friends in Denver (where Heaton had played before transferring to Indiana State) who thought Larry was black. This touches on another aspect of Bird’s matchup with Magic that drew in the big audience. The two central protagonists were both highly skilled big men who wore the number 33, but the similarities ended there. Magic was black; Bird was white. Magic loved being the center of attention; Bird was painfully shy. Magic grew up in urban Lansing; Bird was the hick from French Lick. Magic played for the big state school in the high-profile Big Ten; Bird toiled in obscurity for the small college that competed in something called the Missouri Valley Conference.

Most of all, America tuned in to the 1979 NCAA championship game in record numbers because people understood that these two young men played a unique, exquisite style of basketball. It wasn’t their physical gifts that drew folks in. Magic and Bird weren’t especially quick or agile, and neither man would be a candidate for the high jump. Yet they were intense competitors and great thinkers on the court. Those qualities manifested themselves in the prettiest play of all: the pass. More than anything, Magic and Bird were great passers. They were truly something to see.

“Magic was a six-eight point guard and that was certainly unique, but it wasn’t as if he was David Thompson. It wasn’t as if he was Michael Jordan,” says Dave Kindred, who covered the game for the Washington Post. “He succeeded because he knew how the game was played, and so did Bird. I’m not going to deny they were great athletes or had great hand-eye coordination, but they weren’t preternaturally gifted athletes. Watching them was watching basketball the way it should be played.”

On that Monday evening, more than two thousand miles from where Indiana State and Michigan State were taking the court in Salt Lake City, the general counsel of the National Basketball Association was settling in front of a television in the living room of his home in Scars-dale, New York. The NBA was in the midst of a terrible season beset by sagging attendance, plummeting TV ratings, and the growing perception that white America would never buy in to a sport dominated by black players. David Stern wouldn’t become the NBA’s commissioner for another five years but, as he watched Magic and Bird go at it that night, he couldn’t help but hope the pro game was about to get a badly needed boost. “We were very excited at the NBA that these two extraordinarily gifted athletes that were generating this much attention were coming our way,” he says.

Some eighty miles northeast of Stern’s home, a dozen or so ambitious, young wannabe television executives were wrapping up another long day of work in their cramped offices in Bristol, Connecticut. They had spent the day continuing their preparations for the launch of a new cable television venture, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, which would soon be known as ESPN. The official launch date was September 7, and the channel’s founder, Bill Rasmussen, had signed a deal a few weeks before with NCAA executive director Walter Byers to broadcast all the NCAA championship contests that were not being aired by one of the big three networks. The deal gave ESPN the rights to use NBC’s feed of the early rounds of the NCAA tournament, beginning in
“We kept telling ourselves, this time next year we’re going to do the games leading up to this one,” Rasmussen says. “Having a contract with the NCAA was huge to us at that point. Our network was really built on college basketball.”

From his courtside seat at the scorer’s table in Salt Lake City, Dave Gavitt sensed he was glimpsing into a bountiful future for the sport. Gavitt, the soft-spoken, whip-smart athletic director at Providence College, was serving his first season as a member of the NCAA men’s basketball committee, and having participated in the NCAA’s negotiations with ESPN, he understood better than most the potential that the emergence of cable television offered. Over the previous few months, Gavitt had secretly met with coaches and administrators from Georgetown University, St. John’s University, and Syracuse University in hopes of convincing them to join Providence in a new basketball conference that would comprise schools located in the major television markets of the northeast. Gavitt did not realize how quickly his brainstorm would come to fruition—the Big East would begin competing during the 1979–80 season—but as the Magic-Bird faceoff got under way, he sensed his idea was coming along at an opportune time.

“Television had the ability to take something big and make it bigger,” Gavitt says. “We felt like we were on the cusp of that with college basketball and the NCAA tournament.”

As Stern, Rasmussen, and Gavitt watched the 1979 NCAA championship game, each was optimistic that it would have a positive impact on his own corner of the basketball world. But because they could not perceive all the external forces aligning that night, they could not fully comprehend what was really happening.

The game of basketball was about to change forever.

The 1979 NCAA championship game helped to catapult college basketball, and especially the NCAA tournament, into the national consciousness. In fact, the game kicked off a six-year stretch that could fairly be characterized as the golden era of the NCAA tournament. Between 1979 and 1985, the tournament introduced to the country six players who would dominate the NBA over the next two decades: Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, Isiah Thomas, Michael Jordan, Patrick Ewing, and Hakeem Olajuwon. That period also included two of the greatest championship-game upsets in sports history: North Carolina State over Houston in 1983 and Villanova over Georgetown in 1985.

In 1979, the NCAA tournament was expanded to include forty teams (up from thirty-two the year before). The tournament was expanded twice more over the next five years—to forty-eight teams in 1980 and to sixty-four in 1985. With the exception of the addition of the sixty-fifth team to accommodate an opening-round game in 2001, the tournament has not been expanded since.

The television rights fees have undergone a similar explosion. The 1979 NCAA tournament grossed $5.2 million in TV revenue. That figure doubled when NBC renewed its contract for two years in 1980. When CBS wrested the rights from NBC prior to the 1982 tournament, it paid $48 million for three years. CBS’s price doubled again when it forked over $96 million for another three years in 1985. The fees grew so fast that in
1999 CBS and the NCAA agreed to an eleven-year, $6 billion deal that commenced with the 2003 tournament.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the NCAA tournament had built its popularity on the dominance of John Wooden’s UCLA Bruins, who won ten championships in twelve years. Many observers worried that the tournament would falter when that run ended in 1975, but the Magic-Bird championship game firmly stamped the NCAA tournament as the place where stars are born and the impossible becomes possible. It also came at a most propitious moment: the dawn of the cable TV era that would be dominated by ESPN, when administrators like Dave Gavitt were maneuvering to acquire more exposure for their universities, during a period when the NBA had so much room to grow under its soon-to-be new commissioner David Stern. As the NBA prospered in the 1980s thanks to the Magic-Bird rivalry, the league continued to offer a forum where fans could enjoy the great athletes they first discovered during the month of March.

Thus, as Indiana State and Michigan State convened at center court in Salt Lake on March 26, 1979, all the pieces were falling into place to transform basketball. The only thing those pieces lacked was a catalytic event to transform the interest into true madness. “The college game was already on the launching pad,” Al McGuire said. “Then Bird and Magic came along and pushed the button.”

Excerpted from WHEN MARCH WENT MAD by Seth Davis. Copyright (c) 2009 by the author and reprinted by permission of Times Books, an imprint of Henry Holt and Company.