

How the 1979 U Penn Men's Basketball Team Made It to the Final Four



It's been over 45 years since the University of Pennsylvania men's basketball team made it to the NCAA Final Four in March 1979. Since then, every Ivy League men's basketball team has fallen short of the Final Four, with the best modern runs being Sweet 16 trips by Cornell in 2010 and Princeton in 2023.

How did Penn do it?

A 9-Seed Against Coaching Legends

Starting as a 9-seed in a 40-team tournament, Penn won four straight games against Iona, coached by Jim Valvano; North Carolina, a 1-seed and heavy title favorite coached by Dean Smith; Syracuse, coached by Jim Boeheim; and St. John's, coached by Lou Carnesecca. These coaches are considered among the all-time greats in NCAA basketball history.

Penn's coach, Bob Weinbauer, had served as an assistant for four years under head coach Chuck Daly. In the 1978-1979 season, he was promoted to head coach. Previously, Weinbauer coached basketball, baseball, and football at Massapequa High School in Massapequa, New York.

No Scholarships, No Freshmen

Penn did not offer athletic scholarships and, under an Ivy League rule, freshmen were not permitted to play varsity basketball. As a result, top high school talents such as Gene Banks from West Philadelphia -- considered the country's premier high school player in 1977 and recruited heavily by Penn -- went elsewhere. In this case, Duke.

In March 1978, Penn advanced to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA tournament before narrowly losing to Duke, whose star player was Gene Banks.

"Ride the Wave"

During the summer of 1978, Coach Weinbauer wrote a handwritten letter to each player explicitly stating that one of their goals was to not just make the NCAA tournament -- but to get to the Final Four. Players did not roll their eyes. They absorbed it, got more confident as the season went on, and adopted the phrase "ride the wave."

The Secret Weapon: A Visit to Chapel Hill

In the fall of 1978, Coach Weinbauer was invited by Dean Smith to attend UNC's preseason basketball practices in Chapel Hill. There, Weinbauer gained a detailed understanding of UNC's system, practice structure, and teaching methods.

Weinbauer adopted the UNC structure at Penn. Practices were short, focused segments with a high repetition of core actions and an emphasis on execution over raw scrimmaging. Clear role definitions enabled Penn's roster to execute complex, big-time concepts without losing discipline.

Prior to Penn's game with UNC, Weinhauer told his players: we can play with these guys. Here's exactly how they want the game to look, and here's how we'll disrupt it. Penn's players carried that as a secret chip on their shoulders -- knowing their coach had done a deep dive on UNC's system.

Defensive Identity

Defensively, Weinhauer's "we fear no one" mentality translated into aggressive on-ball defense instead of sitting back. During the UNC game, Penn dictated terms for long stretches rather than reacting. Some of Penn's players later said that UNC did not respect their athletic ability, which meant UNC's ball-handlers ran into more resistance for longer periods than they anticipated from an Ivy team.

Weinhauer taught his players about UNC's secondary break strategy -- the phase of transition offense that comes right after the initial fast break when UNC did not score immediately. The key was knowing the order of UNC's transition reads and building Penn's rules to choke off UNC's first options before UNC could flow into their passing game.

Flipping the Script on Offense

Offensively, Penn did not slow the game to a crawl. Knowing how UNC guarded, Penn was willing to run and attack before UNC could fully set, flipping the script on a supposed athletic mismatch. Penn spaced the floor with capable shooters and handlers, which meant UNC's weak-side defenders could not sit in the lane without giving up clean catch-and-shoot looks.

Rather than always attacking their own man, Penn often drove at UNC's help player -- catching the next defender mid-rotation, before he could square and show his chest. UNC's help chain was constantly one step late. This is one reason why observers noted that Penn was more athletic than UNC expected: Penn constantly put UNC players in late, awkward closeout and rotation situations instead of classic one-on-one contests.

The Odds and the Audience

The 1979 Penn men's basketball team faced odds of approximately 100-to-1 to make the Final Four, according to betting sources at the time.

The Ivy Cinderella team's semifinal matchup -- Penn vs. Michigan State -- drew an estimated 15 million viewers on a Saturday afternoon in March 1979.

The 1979 NCAA final game is still widely cited as the most-watched men's college basketball game ever, featuring Magic Johnson's Michigan State vs. Larry Bird's Indiana State. It drew approximately 35 million viewers -- still more than double what a typical NCAA title game draws today.

A Turning Point for College Basketball

1979 is widely seen as a pivotal year for the NCAA. The Magic Johnson-Larry Bird title game turned the men's basketball tournament from a big event into a true national TV phenomenon and money machine.

In 1979, TV rights for the NCAA tournament were approximately \$5.2 million. That fee doubled in 1980 and jumped to \$48 million by 1982. Today, the TV rights fee for the NCAA men's basketball tournament is approximately \$1 billion per year under the current CBS/Turner deal.

About the Author

For over 30 years, [Laurence Allen](#) has served in various executive roles overseeing value-oriented trading and investment management teams typically focused on alternative assets. He has been a pioneer in developing secondary markets liquidity for mortgages, private debt, and alternative assets. Mr. Allen has advised numerous institutional investors, private funds, and family offices worldwide. He received a BS in Economics with honors and an MBA in Finance from the Wharton School of the

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