

Fave Five #3: Kent State vs. Indiana, 2001

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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In 2001 and 2002 Kent State won four games in the NCAA Tournament, beating opponents from the Big Ten, Big 12, SEC and Big East. As a Golden Flash fan I love all of those games in different ways. But I don't love all of them equally. The first time is always special in a way the others are not. For Kent State the first time came in the opening round of the 2001 Tournament, when the Flashes headed west to San Diego to take on the Indiana Hoosiers.

What's a bit strange is that the breakthrough came courtesy of perhaps the third-best of the four teams that, between 1998 and 2002, put Kent on the map as a mid-major power. The 2000-01 Golden Flashes were a nice team- the guard troika of Andrew Mitchell, Trevor Huffman and Demetric Shaw was a strong one and jumping-jack forward Kyrem Massey provided an athletic element- but they were a year between the inside power of center John Whorton (who had used up his eligibility the previous season) and the dynamic presence of Antonio Gates (who wouldn't be along until the following season.) Like many mid-majors Kent lacked strength in the paint and inside-outside balance.

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Nevertheless the Flashes were good enough to go 23-9 and finish 13-5 in the MAC, good for second place in the conference behind Central Michigan. They then swept through the MAC Tournament, knocking off the O.G. Miami in the title game behind Huffman's 27-point effort. The win gave Kent its second-ever NCAA berth; it's first, in 1999, ended in a [first-round loss to Temple](#) in which the outcome wasn't as close as the 61-54 final margin.

For its second trip to be more successful the Flashes would have to beat another perennial power, one that had gone through a tumultuous year. Indiana had been rocked by [the ouster of legendary head coach Bob Knight](#) in September of 2000, just prior to the season. With interim coach Mike Davis providing a calming influence the Hoosiers put together a solid campaign, going 21-12 and reaching the Big Ten Championship Game before losing narrowly to Iowa. Unlike Kent, the strength of the Hoosiers was up front with 6'9" center Kirk Haston and 6'11" freshman power forward Jared Jeffries.

Also unlike Kent, the Hoosiers had a long history in the NCAA Tournament. 2001 would be their thirtieth appearance in the Big Dance overall and their sixteenth in a row. But their recent Tournament history hadn't been good; Indiana hadn't reached the Sweet Sixteen since 1994 and had suffered several embarrassing early-round losses in recent years, including a [lopsided defeat at the hands of unheralded Pepperdine](#) in the first round of the 2000 Tournament. Of Indiana's rotation players, only Kirk Haston had contributed to a Hoosier team that had won a Tournament game. This was an inexperienced team with a first-year head coach: not a combination that usually makes for a long run in March.

Nevertheless the fourth-seeded Hoosiers were favored to defeat the thirteenth-seeded Golden Flashes at Cox Arena in San Diego. In this, the last year before the noxious pod system went into effect, the teams were slotted in the West Regional. The West had been chock-full of upsets and near-upsets thus far: ninth-seeded St. Joseph's, tenth-seeded Georgetown and eleventh-seeded Georgia State had already won; fourteenth-seeded George Mason had nearly beaten Maryland, and later that night fifteenth-seeded Hampton would stun Iowa State. Fifth-seeded Cincinnati held serve by drilling Brigham Young; the Bearcats would play the winner of the Indiana-Kent contest.

For a partial fan like me the circumstances were ideal. The game was played in prime time on a Friday night and our shabby little lakeside house in Stow was packed with people eating,

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drinking and cheering Kent on to, hopefully, its first-ever NCAA Tournament victory. The opponent was a bit intimidating- Indiana, a five-time National Champion- but these weren't the Hoosiers of old. Steve Alford and Keith Smart weren't walking through that door; neither, for that matter, was Bob Knight. Hadn't Cleveland State's first NCAA Tournament victory been over Indiana?

Win or lose it was gratifying to see Kent State playing March basketball again. The 1999 appearance had been brief but intoxicating and it whetted my appetite for more. I had rooted for Kent State for a long time, back when NCAA Tournament bids were the stuff of dreams. Now it was reality, and that reality was heady stuff. For schools like North Carolina and Kentucky it was no big deal; it was expected. For Kent State this was special. It was a moment not to be taken for granted. Just seeing the Flashes play in the Tournament was wonderful. To see them actually win, well- that was almost beyond my wildest dreams.

It sure looked that way for much of this game, at least. Indiana wasted no time exploiting its inside edge, going to Haston early and often. The former Tennessee Mr. Basketball was all but unstoppable, finishing with 29 points and nine rebounds, game highs in both categories. The taller Hoosiers dominated the backboards as expected and kept Kent's excellent guards under wraps for the entire first half. Huffman, Kent's leading scorer during the regular season, limped into intermission with just four points. Indiana led 42-34 at the half and seemed on its way to a fairly routine victory.

The second half was more of the same- at least at the beginning. Indiana continued to dominate inside as its margin grew. With 13:41 remaining Haston converted a three-point play to give the Hoosiers a 54-42 lead. On the surface it appeared this was Indiana's game all the way. But under the surface were signs of trouble. Hoosier guards Dane Fife and Tom Coverdale were starting to pile up fouls, and Coverdale was battling a hip injury he had sustained in the first half. Jared Jeffries, Indiana's freshman star, was also in foul trouble. It may not have seemed obvious to the crowd in Cox Arena, or to us watching nervously in that shabby little house in Stow, but the seeds had been sewn for a Kent State comeback.

Huffman got the ball rolling immediately after Indiana had taken its biggest lead of the night on Haston's three-point play. The junior from Petoskey, Michigan, drilled a three-pointer and two layups to spearhead a quick 12-2 run, and suddenly it was 56-54 at the midway point of the second half. Now the underdog-friendly crowd in San Diego was back in it, and so were we. And Indiana was beginning to show the strain. Hoosier shots that had tickled twine in the first half were clanging off the rim in the second. Turnovers were starting to accumulate- ten in the second half, eighteen overall. Indiana still clung to its narrow margin as the minutes began to

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tick down, but Kent State was now the aggressor. All that remained now was for the Flashes to push their way into the lead.

With 5:38 remaining they did just that when a Huffman layup made it 64-63 Kent. A minute later the Hoosiers suffered their cruelest blow when Coverdale, the only true point guard on their roster, fouled out on a reach-in. The fiery redhead compounded his felony with a technical foul when he complained about the call. Huffman's subsequent free throw made it 65-63 with 4:34 to play.

Indiana would regain the lead at 66-65 on a Haston free throw with 3:30 left. But the Hoosiers were scrambling without Coverdale, their floor leader. "Without him," Mike Davis admitted afterward, "we started panicking." Indiana would keep its lead for six seconds. Huffman drained a jumper to put Kent back in front- for good, as it turned out. After Jeffries missed on the other end the Flashes used all but one second on the shot before having the ball knocked out of bounds. With 2:34 left Huffman took the in-bound pass and fired up an off-balance three-pointer. The shot arced through the air and sliced through the net, giving Kent a four-point lead.

Now it occurred to us that the Flashes were in the driver's seat, up two scorers with time running out. Now they were in a position to win; now they should win. All they had to do was match buckets with the Hoosiers. Haston made a layup to cut the margin to two but Demetric Shaw responded with a tip-in to make it a four-point game again. A.J. Moye sliced it back down to two on his own tip-in with 49 seconds to play. Now, with a fourteen-second difference between shot clock and game clock, the Flashes needed another score to ensure their victory.

Up to this point Andrew Mitchell, the tough little point guard, had been a virtual spectator for the Trevor Huffman Show. The junior from Detroit averaged 12.2 points per game during the regular season but had scored just seven on 2-of-11 shooting in this game. Now, he would make the shot that would ice the game. With 21 seconds left Mitchell froze Indiana guard Kyle Hornsby with a cross-over dribble, pulled up and swished a fifteen-foot jumper. That made it 74-70, and now we knew that Kent State was going to win, was going to advance in the NCAA Tournament.

The final score was 77-73. After whooping it up for a while in that little lakeside house in Stow we settled down for a little post-victory poker game. I lost ninety bucks. I didn't care all that much. Losing at poker was old hat. Kent State winning in the NCAA Tournament was not- at

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least, not yet. At the time I didn't know Kent's season would end two nights later, when Cincinnati administered a [66-43 beat-down](#) on the Flashes. I didn't know Kent would go 30-6 the following season and reach the Elite Eight. For all I knew at the time, this would be the only Tournament win ever.

So I savored it. I still do.