

Love thy neighbor: A championship in Chapel Hill

By Shaker Samman (<http://www.dukechronicle.com/staff/shaker-samman>) | Tuesday, April 4



(<http://www.dukechronicle.com/multimedia/29335>)

CHAPEL HILL—Within seconds, they started running.

From the restaurants and the bars and the shops they came, speeding past storefronts and through intersections until they amassed at the corner of Franklin and Columbia.

They lit fires, and climbed lamp posts and screamed out into the night. Some set off fireworks. Some cried. And all of them cheered. After 12 months of replays—12 months of misery—they got their win. The students at the North Carolina got redemption.

The shot—the buzzer-beater that broke their hearts—weighed heavily until now. Just minutes ago, during the broadcast, when Jim Nantz spoke nostalgically of Kris Jenkins' miracle three for Villanova, they could hardly stomach the pain. Fans turned away from the screen. They checked their phones and ordered drinks and forced conversations. Anything so as to not relive that moment. Relive that pain.

Last year, after the shot dropped, thousands crawled through the streets of Chapel Hill, silent and despondent. There was no hope. No joy. No light in the world. Only misery.

But now, as smoke fills the air and students fill the streets, the feeling is different. The corners once occupied by tear-stained Jumpman t-shirts are splattered with celebratory beer cans. The bars once filled with morose diehards drinking the pain away are painted with light blue jerseys and beaming smiles. Outside of He's Not Here, a popular student bar, someone sings "Glory, Glory Hallelujah."

He's found his calm. He's made his peace with God.

A few blocks down the road, a handful of his classmates pull broken chairs and traffic cones into the mob. Thousands are crammed tightly as drinks rain from the balcony above. This is their night. This is their perfect night.

Hours before the game started fans spoke of their anxiety. One, Patrick Brown, a 2012 North Carolina graduate said he was on edge, but managing the stress. You could tell he was doing poorly, he said, if he started biting his nails. He guessed he wouldn't get to that point until the second half.

His fingers were in his teeth by the pre-game introductions.

That fear—that crippling anxiety—was to be expected. For the second time in two years, North Carolina reached the national championship game, only to meet a storied program with a big name point guard and chip on its shoulders after years of coming up just short.



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By / The Chronicle

The Tar Heels now have six national championships, one more than Duke.

We all know what happened last spring. And for a moment, a repeat seemed destined. A back-and-forth game with a handful of late lead changes felt familiar. And it was. A key Gonzaga triple was matched by a Joel Berry answer. A Bulldog defensive stop was followed by a forced turnover. There was no dominant team for most of the night. Only missed calls and questionable fouls. But in a game overshadowed by whistles, a few moments managed to shine through, like the aforementioned Berry dagger to keep North Carolina alive, or the Justin Jackson breakaway dunk or the final missed Gonzaga prayer that clanked off the rim.

All were inconsequential compared to what followed. When the buzzer sounded, a city erupted. The pain they carried for a full year vanished, replaced by elation and euphoria.

How do you find closure with something out of your control? How do you make peace with something that bludgeoned you emotionally, and spiritually? For some, the win was all it took. The catharsis spread from their seats in the bar to their spot in the mob as they moved as fast as their feet could take them.

One fell to his knees just short of the gathering. He sat there, a few dozen feet from the corner of Franklin and Columbia and sobbed. No one stopped to console him. They knew what he felt. They knew why his hands cupped his cheeks and his dark blonde hair fell forward over his eyes. They knew why he hunched forward and wailed.

They knew because they felt it too. They felt that memory melt away—the one that haunted them each time they walked past the shirt they wore that day or saw the bar they watched from or smelled the stench of stale beer. After Monday night, the pain didn't exist anymore. Only adrenaline. Only endorphins.

One student, seeing her peers climb atop lamp posts and branches, turned to her friends.

"WE NEED TO CLIMB SOMETHING. LET'S CLIMB THE TREE."

And up she went, finding a perch above the light blue sea. She sat there, cheering and singing as fireworks peppered the smoky sky.

When they first invented fireworks, the explosions were thought to ward off evil spirits. The bright lights and loud pops would send any demons away. And so it's fitting that the celebration on Franklin street saw dozens of flashes and bangs. There was evil to be rid off.

Evil like the NCAA, which many students claimed unfairly targeted their school. Evil like Villanova, which ruined their dream season last year. And evil like Duke, which started the year No. 1 and consistently frustrated the Tar Heels.

As one of the Blue Devils' fallen angels, I should loathe North Carolina. I should want them to feel the pain they felt after last season's title game, and nothing else. But I couldn't.

I remember watching from the floor in 2015, barely holding back tears as the confetti fell from the rafters in Lucas Oil Stadium. I remember running through the streets of Indianapolis clutching my head, incapable of understanding what occurred.

As I sprinted alongside thousands of Tar Heels, I was conflicted. I hate North Carolina. I do. With all my heart. But seeing them feel what I felt—watching them run and scream and burn and climb, I was happy. Because there's something beautifully human about redemption. In falling just short, and watching the world crumble around you before coming back even stronger.

Twelve months after having their hearts ripped out by Villanova, they experienced the purest form of ecstasy. Their demons exorcised. Their dreams reached.

And as the mob continued to grow, and the chants crescendoed, for the first time in 12 months, Chapel Hill had no more demons to fight.

They won.

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