

Joe Huber

The *Other* Hoosiers

Several parts of the dialogue from Coach Jay McCreary were constructed from accounts of Muncie Central players and are not true direct quotes.

Larry Campbell's head bobbed inside the 1950 Chevrolet with each bump on the highway to Indianapolis. Larry was a junior at Muncie Central High School and followed his father to every basketball game he could. They loved their Muncie Central Bearcats, and were on their way to see another state title game that his Bearcats were favored heavily to win. His father looked to his mother sitting in the passenger seat and smiled. Nothing turned the lips up on the face of an Indiana man quicker than the thought of state championship basketball.

The air in the car grew tense from the impending game. There was a note of suspense and excitement that hung from the imagination of riding home with a happy feel of accomplishment for Larry's classmates. The cool air outside couldn't rush by fast enough as the dark green auto whirred along the highway. With each of the yellow dashes painted on the highway passing, the moment of tip off grew nearer. For that 17 year old boy, that couldn't happen fast enough.

The Bearcats had won the title just two years ago, their fourth. They were tied with Frankfort for the most state titles in the 54 years the tournaments had been played in Indiana. But the once mighty Frankfort was bounced in the first round of the tournament. The tournament had already featured 63 games and now

game 64 loomed. Only one game left for the title. Only one team that stood between Coach Jay McCreary and his Bearcats standing alone as the single most decorated team in the state. The smallest school in a state title game since little Thorntown High School won in 1915 was on the other end of the ticket. And not many people were giving little Milan High School a chance to beat Muncie Central.

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While the fans were driving down to the game, the players had already arrived on their big yellow bus. The Butler Fieldhouse was always a spectacular sight for any high school boy to see, but the Muncie Central Bearcats varsity squad had some boys that already had two state titles under their belts. Maybe the size and history inside the soon to be filled bleachers would captivate the Indians of Milan, but the Bearcats had the attitude as they walked into the locker room that the home of the Butler Bulldogs didn't faze them.

Leon Agullana was one of the smallest members of the Muncie Central squad with a burst of speed so fast it looked like he could catch a rabbit. He always carried himself with a self-described "cockiness" about him. He was quicker than you, and he knew it. Leon wasted no time getting ready for the game and pulled on his sneakers. The locker room was actually looser than he expected. Coach McCreary was walking the boys through a few last minute preparations.

"Milan runs a cat and mouse offense," Coach McCreary reiterated, "That means we have to be ready for anything."

This team had already seen the cat and mouse offense earlier in the season against Frankfort, the other team with four state titles. But Frankfort was having a

rough season. Frankfort had lost to many smaller schools along the way, including the team facing Muncie Central later that day.

The Bearcats were certainly not looking past the Indians. Milan was no stranger to the tournament, and just the year before made it to the semi-finals before losing to the eventual champion. Coming into this tournament, they boasted a 19-2 record. They crushed most of the teams in their way to this point without much difficulty. But Muncie Central had knocked off both the number one and two teams on their way to face Milan. The Indians and their cat and mouse defense made them an interesting opponent, one that almost the entire city of Muncie and Coach McCreary thought they'd certainly be able to defend their "gimmick" of an offense.

But when the Bearcats ran into Frankfort and that cat and mouse style of play earlier in the season, they lost. This time they weren't going to be surprised by the maneuver. They were ready for the quick breaks into the lane around the bigger, slower players. They had Augie, their speed man, little Leon Agullana.

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As Larry and his parents arrived at the Butler Fieldhouse parking lot, the air was chilled. The large, half oval shape seemed taller than any building as the fans started to pour out of their cars and creep towards the "Cathedral of Indiana Basketball" like ants returning to the colony. There was purple and red everywhere with a slight breeze seemingly urging everyone inside. It was easy to see the excitement for the sold out game. Tickets were being scalped outside for as much as \$50 to poor souls that were unable to get theirs beforehand.

When Larry got into the line to hand off his ticket he took one last look at the brick exterior of the building and parted ways with his parents. He would be watching this game with his friends and fellow students. The smell of popcorn entered his senses and the sounds of a crowd began to form. Larry rushed to the student section and made his way down as close to the floor as possible. As he climbed into the bleachers he found a spot in the third row. The crowd was still filling in and the exposed steel beams above created an imposing view of the stadium. It was so large, so open.

The fans around him were decked in purple, but the masses at Butler Fieldhouse weren't there for the mighty Bearcats. It was apparent when Gene Flowers, the star forward of the Muncie Bearcats, led his teammates onto the court. A small section of applause and cheers rang forward, but it was a different story when Milan took the floor about 15 minutes later.

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As they waited in the wings, nobody on the team shouted anything inspiring. There was no "rah rah". It was calm. A calm that fell over Augie and the rest of the team that wasn't paying attention to any of the hype. Nothing from anybody was going to get them over-excited for the game they were supposed to win. They simply took the floor with a quietness that seemed to intimidate the crowd.

Running lay-up drills and passing drills, the Bearcats were alone on the court. There were ten Muncie Central ball players passing and shooting, rebounding the missed shots in the noisy gym. There was no sign of the Milan Indians. There were

rumors of this waiting tactic. Coach Marvin Wood of Milan held his boys back to make the other team sweat. Cat and mouse. Cat and mouse.

Augie thought there was no use thinking about why they weren't warming up. This time, in his mind, little Milan was going to find itself the mouse. As he was running a lay-up drill, the cheer block for the Indians started.

"Where? Where? Where's our team? Down in the shower room, picking up steam."

It was quiet at first, almost inaudible. It didn't pull Augie's attention and didn't even register at first. But then the chant got louder.

"Where? Where? Where's our team? Down in the shower room, picking up steam."

The crowd of almost 15,000 was now packed into their seats and cheering. It was closer for Muncie Central and their fans, but it was starting to seem like this was a home game for the Indians as the rest of the fans started to join in, making it impossible to miss.

"Where? Where? Where's our team? Down in the shower room, picking up steam."

Augie and the team pretended not to hear it, but as the game drew nearer it was impossible to miss. The game was moments away and there was still no sign of Milan. They were still deep within the bowels of the Fieldhouse, trying their best to enter the heads of Muncie Central's stronger, taller, faster boys.

Cat and mouse. Cat and mouse.

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Larry hadn't yet noticed that Milan was still not on the court. He was busy carousing with friends and chatting about their chances. Jimmy "Skeeter" Barnes and Phil Raisor were the two guards and likely the best chance for the Bearcats to slow down Ray Craft and Bob Plump, the two stars for the Indians. The crowd was noisy and non-descript other than a chant coming from the other side of the gym.

"Where? Where? Where's our team? Down in the shower room, picking up steam."

It was hard to hear from where Larry was sitting, so he didn't pay much attention to the action on the floor yet. His attention would be drawn to the court very quickly though as nearly the entire crowd joined in unison to scream so loud that the structure of the Fieldhouse must surely have been in question.

Coach Marvin Wood led his team from the locker room and onto the floor. It was time for Milan to take on Muncie Central.

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On the floor it was so hard to hear anything because everyone's mouths were pointed at the floor like a firing squad. But the roar that erupted when the ten men in red flooded onto the court felt like the lions had been let loose at a Roman gladiator fight. The crowd was definitively for Milan, and the Muncie Central players knew it. There was no pregame animosity. No speeches or rah rah's from the Bearcats leaders. Just Coach McCreary quickly summarizing how he wanted them to play. "We're in the final game. This is it. Go out there like we've done all season. Go," and McCreary sent his boys to the floor.

Augie knew he would start the game on the bench. He was the sixth man for the Bearcats, so there was no surprise that he was watching as the game began. The first quarter went quickly. Ray Craft from Milan would hold the ball and drive past Phil Raisor every time into the lane. Raisor was an average defender when you played his game, but Craft was playing a half-court game designed to slow the ball movement.

Craft also took advantage of Raisor's speed and blew past him into the lane over and over. Plump was usually the driver of the offense, but when they were able to take a three point lead at the end of the quarter, Plump and Coach Wood were both willing to let Craft become the main ball handler.

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Everyone around Larry Campbell that wasn't wearing purple was cheering for Milan. When the Indians took the lead it was so loud that even if someone had a bullhorn you couldn't hear them. The deafening noise rolled in and out of the stadium, pouring over the fans nearest to the court. One could only imagine how loud it felt to the ten boys on the court, half in purple and half in red.

Larry pushed closer with a few fans that decided to hit the half time concessions a little early. He was now sitting in the second row, close enough to high five his classmates if they wanted. Behind him the cheers began to flood the court again, louder than before. Milan was working their game again. Craft was blowing past Raisor and either finishing the drive himself or giving it away underneath. Either way, Milan was taking control of this game quickly.

The quarter was almost half over, nearing the four-minute mark. The Muncie Central faithful knew something had to be changed, and apparently Coach McCreary did too. Larry and the rest of the crowd were glued to the game as the Coach pointed to his speedster and secret weapon. Augie rose up from the bench.

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When Augie entered the game, Milan had taken control of the game. They had an eight point lead and Ray Craft was still driving the lane hard every time. He was able to evade defenders left and right by crossing over or spinning around. Craft saw the shorter Agullana and didn't expect to see him in already. But Craft was certain that he would still be able to work his game.

As Bob Plump dribbled the ball up the court, he passed it to Ray Craft. Craft was isolated with Augie and tried to take him into the lane. Augie was a state tournament quality pole vaulter, a position determined primarily by speed, and moved quickly to shut down Craft's maneuvers. Craft pulled back. He waited on the corner near half court and looked around the floor to see the layout.

Cat and mouse. Cat and mouse.

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From where Larry Campbell sat, the mood had certainly changed once Augie checked in. He was taking away the drives that Craft was once slicing up. More high fives were being tossed back and forth between he and his friends. There was almost that air of confidence again, something that had been lacking since the opening tip.

The game seemed to be turning around and with Augie back in the game, Larry's Bearcats cut the lead down to six at halftime. Milan put another three points to their lead. And as people left for halftime concessions, Larry moved one more row down. He was sitting with his feet on the court, watching his team walk into the locker room down by six.

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Muncie Central wasn't stunned. They had faced this cat and mouse offense earlier in the year. They knew that they had contained it better in the latter portions of the second quarter. They had brought the lead back down to six, but were still fighting to force themselves back into this game. Ray Craft's incessant driving brought him the games top scoring honors in the first half. Once Augie took the court, Plump became the driving force once again for Milan. McCreary's plan was working. Force them to shoot outside. Take away the inside lane.

McCreary looked around the locker room and remained calm despite his team's deficit. "You've got a long way to go. This team isn't going to let you have this. They want it too. They've worked hard too," McCreary said with a stiff, calm demeanor. He poised himself and said, "You are going to have to go out and rebound. You'll have to play defense. Go."

The team stood up and again headed towards the court, which sounded like an army of millions from the echoes through the corridors connecting the gym to its inner-sanctum of locker rooms. There was no discernable chants, no cheers for either side to rile up the teams. Only deafening, bone shaking noise.

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The team came out onto the court and looked energized. Larry could tell his team was now refocused. An energy surged through the stands and the crowd was again so loud that one might think the dribble had to be affected by shaking ground. Muncie Central took control of the half and it seemed that each time Plump or Craft drove the lane it was quickly taken away. Craft was all but shut down in the third quarter as Augie removed the speed factor from Craft's game. Milan tried to reset and the crowd watched as Muncie's fast break offense took hold.

Each time the crowd would screech and squeal for a Muncie Central basket, it would erupt twice as loud for Milan. All around Larry were dissenters and naysayers. The crowd was definitively Anti-Muncie Central, and both Larry and Augie knew it. Larry tried to pipe his own voice of comfort and support for the Bearcats as the third quarter waged on, Muncie now only down by four, but all any of the Muncie Central players could hear on the court was a collection of sound waves coming together. When Muncie Central drove the court and sank another bucket the lead was slashed to two. Time was winding down and the crowd noise no longer seemed to shake the boys in purple.

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As the clock ticked away the final seconds, Muncie Central was pushing the ball up the court. They wanted to tie it heading into the fourth. Prior to any legends being made, there was a shot that went up that was just as magical at the moment to every Bearcat fan. Augie pulled around on a screen and made his way to the right of the rim about 19 feet away from the hoop.

The ball came his way and Augie stepped into his shot with only moments left on the clock. The air seemed to stop in the Fieldhouse. Both sides were holding their breath, both sides were readying their vocal chords for both positive and negative reactions. Sweat seemed to stay in the air as it fell from ten boys on the court. Both Coaches on their feet. As the ball fell through the bucket, little Augie, Coach McCreary's secret weapon on defense, just hit the biggest bucket in the game yet. Muncie Central was now tied with Milan at 26 points each.

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The crowd erupted like a single organism with the shout. For the majority of the crowd, it was a shout of anguish as they were cheering for the ball to fall short. Augie was called for a charge, but in those days it didn't negate the bucket. Larry wondered aloud to his pals why they ever called a charge on a jump shot, but Larry also didn't care. His boys were tied heading into the fourth quarter. Their comeback had only just begun though. The fourth quarter needed to be played yet, and he wasn't about to get excited for his classmates just yet. Looking over to the bench and settling into his seat, neither Larry nor anyone else in the stands could imagine what Coach Wood would tell Bob Plump to do in just a few short minutes.

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Milan's Ronnie Truitt came out of the break and almost immediately fouled Jim Hinds. While the Bearcat strolled to the free throw line with a calm way about him and held the ball between his hands, the crowd seemed to forget it was supposed to be yelling. Looking down, Jim put the ball on the court deliberately and with intention. He came out of his dribble and focused on the backboard. The shot

sailed through the air and made the most satisfying noise a shooter can hear.

Muncie Central had their first lead since the first quarter.

The sound of the net drooping made the crowd refocus their noise and shouted as loud as they could. Hinds was unphased and nailed his second attempt as well. With Muncie taking a 28-26 lead, Bob Plump had orders from Coach Wood to do something never before seen in a state title game. In fact, it wasn't really much seen around Indiana basketball. Coach Wood had a bit of a surprise for the Bearcats and the fans at Butler Fieldhouse.

Cat and mouse. Cat and mouse.

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Plump strode the ball very slowly across half court, and from the first row it was easy to see him. But what he did next shocked Larry Campbell and the rest of the crowd. Plump picked up the ball... And stood.

The crowd waited for Craft to come over and receive a handoff or for a pass to Truitt. Larry looked to his friends after a few seconds and everyone was stunned for just a moment. It seemed to grow quieter than even before the gym was filled with the near 15,000, all of whom seemed to be questioning what was happening. This didn't seem to make sense. Larry checked the scoreboard and sure enough, Milan trailed Muncie Central, 28-26. Why would Milan want to waste clock while they were down?

Cat and mouse. Cat and mouse.

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Augie looked over to Skeeter after Plump had been holding the ball for an entire minute. He motioned and Barnes said, "Let him hold it."

Augie stayed tight on Craft as he didn't want to be the defender caught napping. Two minutes passed and again Augie motioned to Barnes. Barnes shrugged and the crowd began to whip into a frenzy. The noise level grew to a point that one would never expect to see while the ball was sitting in a single position. Not dribbled. Not passed. Just sitting in Plump's hands for now three minutes.

Coach McCreary said nothing and motioned to his boys to let him hold it. Cat and mouse was one thing, but to hold the ball wasn't Indiana's style for basketball. Coach Wood didn't care about any of that, and was certain this move was right for his team, their best chance to win. As Plump held the ball past four minutes, the crowd began to get restless. After four minutes and 14 seconds, Plump again put the ball back on the ground, creating a roar from the crowd that must have generated a sonic boom, it was a miracle the roof stayed on top of the Fieldhouse. Plump's drive resulted in him taking a shot and missing. Muncie Central leapt and rebounded, bringing the ball back up the court.

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When a bad pass fell out of bounds, Milan again gained possession. Milan moved the ball around the court in a weave before it was passed it to Ray Craft about 18 feet from the rim. He jumped straight into the air, high above the rest of the boys on the floor and let the ball go. Craft had just knotted the game back up at 28 points.

Larry and the rest of the Bearcats faithful groaned as Skeeter fouled Plump. Bob Plump was one of the purest shooters in Indiana basketball and drilled home both shots. Muncie Central again found themselves down, 30-28.

Larry watched on excitedly as the next possession found a Muncie Central miss. The group from the north sighed collectively as they watched what would likely be the clinching shot fly from Ray Craft's hand. It seemed that Milan would upset the big city Bearcats.

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As Craft's shot flew through the air, Augie and the rest of the Bearcats watched on as they got into position. The ball rolled around the rim and seemed to be willed out. The Bearcats leapt through the air and brought the ball to the court with them. Driving quickly up the court with a little less than a minute to play, Gene Flowers ended up with the ball in his hands. Augie was still running his motions on the offense when Flowers threw the ball toward the backboard with his right hand and the ball gently fell off the glass and through the rim.

With that delicate shot, Flowers proved that Muncie Central wasn't dead yet and was now tied again with Milan. 30-30. With 48 seconds left, Coach Wood didn't seem phased and looked again at Plump, signaling to his point guard a familiar gesture.

Cat and mouse. Cat and mouse.

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The entire crowd on pins and needles, Larry stayed standing. The gym felt like it was being held up by nearly 15,000 suspension cables, each supported by the

bodies of the crowd. The rigid arms of each fan inside the Fieldhouse showed signs of involuntary flexing throughout. Only 48 seconds stood between either team and the title if they could make a bucket. The chorus of voices joined in again as Plump held the ball and stalled just over half court.

35... 34... 33...

“Would they wait until the last second,” thought Larry.

28...27... 26...

Just when this game couldn't get any more intense, Plump was adding to the lore and mystique by stalling for even more time.

20... 19... 18...

And then a whistle.

Cat and mouse. Cat and mouse.

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Augie and the rest of the team headed over to the bench. Coach McCreary told the boys what they could expect. The team already knew it, but it was time for them to see if they could stop it.

“Watch Plump.”

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The entire gymnasium knew where the ball was going. Everyone in the state knew where the ball was going. The crowd grew so tense that they were even quiet for the time that began to drip away as it was inbounded by the Milan Indians.

With 10 seconds left and time ticking away, the crowd joined in and the voices poured onto the floor, flooding the ears of each player.

9... 8... 7...

Larry could hardly believe that Plump was still dribbling behind the circle when with six seconds left Plump began to drive to his right, taking Skeeter with him.

5... 4... 3...

As Bob Plump rose in the air, it was no longer a game of cat and mouse. Skeeter rose his right hand in the air, but Plump was falling backwards. His hand would never hit the ball. The crowd collected to suck every molecule of air from the gym into their lungs and held their breaths together as the ball flew through the air as time ran off the clock.

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Up to now in their run to the state championship, Muncie Central was never the defeated. It was never their defeated faces immortalized in photos. Never their frowns. Never their sighs or tears. They had always been the victor. It wasn't supposed to end here, not in Indianapolis. They were supposed to drive their big yellow bus home holding a trophy.

But it was this way. It was Skeeter frowning and Augie tearing up. It was Flowers and Hinds on the ground, heads between their knees and heartbroken. Coach McCreary soothed his boys and told them he was proud. Even school administrators stepped onto the court to offer their condolences. Coach McCreary also told his boys to stand up. They were going to pay a visit to the winning team in their locker room.

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Larry and his parents met up again, not much was said on their ride home. There would be a bon fire waiting at the high school for all the fans. Larry would go and depart from his parents again, but the entire car ride home not much was said other than “what if...” and “that wasn’t much like Indiana basketball”. They were right. Indiana basketball was supposed to be fast and quick. That game was slow and didn’t move. The sting of the loss hurt, but the town rallied at the bon fire to show their support for the boys. Larry would be there too.

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Augie and the boys headed to the Milan locker room, shaking hands and congratulating the team that just bested them in the 32-minute contest. Plump and Coach Wood were gracious and humble in victory.

As the boys sat on the bus after receiving their state runner-up rings they were comforted by the fact that they had beaten both number 1 and 2 to get there. They had played their hearts out, and in reality were the team people less expected to see in that title game. And while they were bigger, faster, and stronger, they became nothing more than the mouse.