

THE OFFICIAL DIGITAL MAGAZINE OF THE WISCONSIN BADGERS

# VARSITY

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## BACK FOUR MORE

WISCONSIN WOULDN'T BE DENIED  
IN QUEST FOR FINAL FOUR RETURN







DAVID STLUKA

## COVER STORY

# BUILT ON BELIEF

From the time they walked off the floor a year ago, the Badgers had no doubt they could be back in the Final Four. Now, the team's quest to "Make 'Em Believe" is nearly complete.



ICON SPORTSMAN

## ROAD TO THE FINAL FOUR

## HOW THEY GOT HERE

From go-karts to Chanticleers and from Will Ferrell to Wildcats, a look back on the Badgers' run to a second-straight Final Four.

## LUCAS AT LARGE

## BEN THERE BEFORE

Few are more qualified to assess the Badgers' chances vs. Kentucky than Ben Brust, who will be watching the Final Four from afar.



DAVID STLUKA

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# VARSIITY

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# Brust believes Badgers can take title

Indianapolis and Lucas Oil Stadium are miles away; 4,672 miles away, to be exact, from Pasvalys, Lithuania and Pasvalys Arena; a 1,200-seat venue that will be the site of Saturday's matchup between Lietuvos Rytas and Pieno Zvaigzdes. Ben Brust is planning to take a nap between games.

The other game Saturday is a Final Four rematch between Wisconsin and Kentucky which will tip off in the middle of the morning (3:47 a.m.) for Brust because of the eight-hour time difference between the United States and Lithuania. "I wish I could be there," said Brust, a backup guard for Pieno.

His heart will definitely be with his alma mater and the Badgers, even though the 23-year-old Brust unintentionally left his 2014 Final Four ring back at his parents' home in Hawthorn Woods, Illinois, after signing a professional contract to play this season in the Lithuanian Basketball League (LKL).

Upon relocating to Pasvalys, a small community of less than 10,000 some two hours from Vilnius, the capital and largest city in Lithuania, Brust admitted, "It was a crazy transition and it all happened so fast that I did forget some things that I wish I had."

What he has is memories, Final Four memories. Brust and Sam Dekker led UW in scoring

with 15 points each in the 74-73 loss to Kentucky. "That whole day was surreal when you know it has come to an end," Brust said. "There are so many mixed emotions from that game; losing at the buzzer."

What he misses most are the little things, day-to-day things, like playing video games with Josh Gasser. "It's just so much different professionally versus college," Brust said. "Just the amount of time you spend with each other, it's so different, I don't even know how to compare and contrast."

**"IT'S QUITE AMAZING, BACK-TO-BACK FINAL FOURS," SAID BRUST. "IT SPEAKS TO THE PROGRAM AND WHAT COACH (BO) RYAN HAS BEEN ABLE TO DO."**

Brust still loves playing basketball. Coming off the bench for Pieno, he's averaging 20 minutes, 7.5 points and 2.7 rebounds. "There have been good spurts and bad spurts and OK spurts, a little bit of everything," he said. "I'd probably say there have been a lot of ups and downs."

But he expected as much before he agreed to the one-year contract and he's taking it all in and making the most of the experience. "There are so many different styles of play," he

said, "and teams play different ways and you're just constantly changing and adapting and trying to game plan for that."

There are plenty of other ex-Wisconsin players who have gone through similar transitions, including former teammates Jared Berggren who's in Belgium, and Jordan Taylor, who's in Israel. Beyond group texts, they can stay in touch through Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat.

"Anyone who has played in this program is pretty much fully invested," Brust said. "I don't even want to say it's a brotherhood, but it's just something that everyone cares about. I talk to Jordan all the time. We've actually watched some (UW) games together via FaceTime and we've talked about it."

There has been plenty of buzz around the Badgers, aka the Buzzcuts, a nickname of choice for some national pundits/bloggers. "It's quite amazing, back-to-back Final Fours," said Brust, who has grown out his hair a little. "It speaks to the program and what Coach (Bo) Ryan has been able to do."

Brust has caught every NCAA tournament game, so he saw Dekker drill five triples in what was a Brust-like shooting exhibition against Arizona. "I've seen it in practice and going one-on-one against Sam," he said, "and I'm just so happy to see that



finally come out, especially on this stage.”

Frank Kaminsky’s development has been equally stunning to most observers and Brust is no exception. “I think back to when I had my apartment my sophomore summer and Frank would come over and we would sit and play video games,” Brust said. “Never in my wildest dreams did I ever...”

Before finishing that thought, he added the qualifier, “Not that he couldn’t do it.”

Pausing, he said, “I just didn’t think then that I was sitting next to the national player of the year. His growth from freshman year to now is unbelievable. He’s a mismatch when you put a smaller guy on him, a bigger guy, a quicker guy. He can work it any way, any style. It’s almost unfair at times to watch.”

Brust didn’t leave anyone out in discussing what has made this team click, from starters to reserves, from stars to role players. “You can go down the list,” he said, “and talk about how each person has been valuable. Everyone on the roster has done a good job of chipping in.”

As far as the Kentucky challenge, which is obviously formidable because of the Wildcats’ talent and depth, their size and length, particularly on defense, Brust is still confident. Overly so, perhaps, in that he went “Daxter Miles Jr.” with a tweet

predicting that the ‘Cats would be 38-1 on Saturday.

“The good thing about playing for Wisconsin, especially with this team, they only have to worry about what they do,” he said, “because what they do is in their control and that’s the way you like to think about it and not in terms of, ‘Well, we need them to play bad.’”

“They just need to play a good, solid game overall and not change anything they’ve been doing all year because that’s what has gotten them to this point. But it also helps that you’ve got an experienced front line that can match up with and give them problems.

“In touching the post, you don’t necessarily have to go up against their two shot-blockers; you can draw some people down there and kick it out to guys who can knock down shots. I’m just excited to see it all come full circle because I’ve got a good feeling about this one.”

Brust was revving up his engine. “They never gotten too big for themselves this year and they’ve always had their eye on what they wanted,” he said of the return trip to the Final Four. “Clicking at the right time is big and they’re clicking, and that’s what makes them dangerous right now.” ■



DAVID STLUKA





# In many ways, Badgers make us proud

I remember meeting Sam Dekker when he was a senior in high school and I've always liked the way he played; he has so much ability as everybody saw in the Arizona game.

He's another example of an in-state athlete who decided to stay home, and it makes me feel good seeing the success that he's having. I really do like him as a person. I like this team. Who wouldn't?

Someone interviewed me in Los Angeles and asked if I was concerned with all the publicity that our players were getting. I guess maybe they thought it could be a distraction. I told them, "It's good, it's healthy because it's not just one guy."

Sam has gotten a lot of publicity but then so has Frank Kaminsky and deservedly so — he's the best player in college basketball this season.

Nigel Hayes has also had his share of publicity and Josh Gasser has had his share, too. But I see them having fun with it and fun with one another; they don't take themselves too seriously.

These players have shown some personality and people around the country have gravitated to them. Take Nigel, for example. He's very unique.

The thing that I like and appreciate the most is how Bo Ryan and his coaching staff have taken these guys and molded them into the team that they are.

No one got complacent over the success that they had last year in getting to the Final Four. They've worked harder than ever and they're a better team than they were a year ago.

I remember telling people on campus how hard it is to get to a Final Four let alone get back two years in a row. It's no small feat because of all the great teams that are out there.

All you need is one game when you're not shooting well to get knocked out. Or one game when someone catches fire — like we did in the second half last Saturday. We couldn't miss.

I was really impressed with how our guys handled themselves, how they focused and competed for 40 minutes in the win over Arizona.

It was just an exciting atmosphere. We have a lot of alums on the West Coast and they were out and about. A lot of former students living there came up and introduced themselves.

Plus, it really makes you feel good that there is a connection with some of our former football players. They wanted to be part of this and share in the success of our basketball team.

I talked with Russell Wilson and Matt Davenport and I was with Scott Tolzien. I was glad to see Chris Borland.

For someone as recognizable and respected as Aaron Rodgers, it was great to see him there

pulling for our team and Sam. I like having him in our camp.

We've always had a great relationship with the Packers. Anything we've asked of them, any type of assistance, they've always been willing to help. They've always pulled for us.

Right now, I think a lot of people are pulling for us across the country. You can't put a price on the publicity that this basketball team is receiving and the exposure for our university.

I've always talked about how the athletic department is the front porch, and that's not to belittle any other department on our campus. Most of them are among the best in the nation and the best in the world.

But people follow athletics through the media and we're representing the university and every department as a result of the exposure.

Our players do extremely well when they get behind the microphone and in front of the camera. They represent everybody, including our alums and fans; they make them all very proud.

This year, we had a Heisman finalist in Melvin Gordon and now we have Frank, who's up for every major award and playing in his second Final Four in as many years.

You can talk about us not getting all the 5-stars in recruiting.

But we get guys who play like 5-stars. ■



# Badgers' run was once only stuff of dreams

**O**n the flight back to Madison last Saturday night/Sunday morning, a few of us were thinking about a question we posed to ourselves — ever think we would see a Wisconsin basketball team make three Final Fours, including back-to-back runs to college basketball's biggest stage?

For those of us who been close to the program for 20 years or more, the answer was no. We could just shake our heads and acknowledge how incredibly lucky we are to have an up-close look at a program that has become one of the nation's best.

The University of Wisconsin takes great pride in the sustained success of the basketball and football programs. Since 1996, no school has enjoyed the run of bowl games and NCAA tournaments quite like the Badgers. Eighteen bowls. Eighteen invitations to the Big Dance. Texas is next in line with 17 each, followed by Florida with 19 bowl games and 14 NCAA tournaments.

Heady stuff, isn't it?

I remember back to when I started this gig 27 years ago. I thought it might be cool to one day see the Badgers in the NCAA field. This year it was about securing a No. 1 seed. This week it is about what the Badgers need to do to beat Kentucky. As of yet, nobody has been able to accomplish that, but throughout the



**I REMEMBER BACK TO WHEN I STARTED THIS GIG 27 YEARS AGO. I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE COOL TO ONE DAY SEE THE BADGERS IN THE NCAA FIELD. THIS YEAR IT WAS ABOUT SECURING A NO. 1 SEED.**

season, several observers have suggested the Badgers have the goods to get it done.

It will take a nearly flawless effort. In January, Ole Miss took the Wildcats to overtime. In the very next game, Texas A&M pushed Kentucky to double overtime. In early March, Georgia did so many things well, but struggled at the free throw line. In last Saturday's Midwest Regional title game in Cleveland, Notre Dame was superb, but

some empty possessions in the closing moments left the door open just enough for UK to keep its record unblemished.

The Badgers are in no need of a history lesson. The memory of last spring's one-point loss in the Final Four has helped drive this team all season. But that intangible guarantees nothing. Just ask Arizona.

Besides, Bo Ryan has never been big on playing the revenge card. This is bigger than pay-back. This is about advancing to Monday night. It was interesting to hear some of the players last Saturday night in Los Angeles.

Of course they were thrilled to earn another trip to the Final Four, but it did not take long to realize there is more to do. As Josh Gasser pointed out, last year they felt like they were on top of the world. This time around, it is more like "what's next?"

In time, this team will fully understand and appreciate what it has accomplished. In the meantime, the Badgers will continue to have fun, joke around and prepare to face their most challenging opponent of the season.

While they prepare, the rest of us can get a head start on understanding and appreciating what this team has done. For most, this is territory people only see in their dreams. The Badgers are living it, and Badgers fans are loving it. ■





# BUILT ON BELIEF



## ‘WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?’

It was the question that didn't need to be asked in the wake of Wisconsin's heartbreaking loss to Kentucky last April. No one in the Badgers' locker room doubted their ability to return to the Final Four. But their drive went well beyond the power of positive thinking, manifesting itself in a year's worth of work not only on basketball, but on building a bond that's as unique as it is unbreakable.

BY MIKE LUCAS ■ [UWBADGERS.COM](http://UWBADGERS.COM)



Two years ago, Frank Kaminsky got a chance to truly live his life like Joe College. And he hated it. Kaminsky and some of his buddies, five in all, went to the Florida panhandle for spring break. Their destination was Panama City Beach, a no-holds-barred, anything-goes retreat on the Gulf of Mexico.

“It was terrible, I never want to go back,” he said of the MTV-anointed Spring Break Capital of the World. “Everybody talked about how great it was, and we went there and it wasn't that great. There were the crowds and the constant need to do something and I was happy when we got back home.”

Escaping to Florida sounded like a good idea to Kaminsky after the Badgers, a No. 5 seed, had tapped out so meekly in the NCAA tournament

by losing their opening game to No. 12 seed Mississippi, which was led in scoring by its punky shooting guard Marshall Henderson.

It was a bitterly disappointing ending for a senior front line of Jared Berggren, Mike Bruesewitz and Ryan Evans. The Badgers made only 15 of 59 field goal attempts (.254) and finished with an embarrassing total of 46 points (or nine fewer than they scored in the second half last Saturday against Arizona).

Kaminsky played 10 minutes and scored two points (on 1-of-4 shooting) in the Ole Miss loss. His sophomore season, thus, ended with a whimper. Appearing in all 35 games, with two starts, he averaged a little over two more minutes (10.3 from 7.7) and two more points (4.2 from 1.8) than he did as a UW freshman.





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What hurt him more than anything was how the seniors went out — Berggren, in particular, had been a mentor — since it marked just the third time in 13 years the Badgers had punched out in the first round. The lone highlight was the energy level of freshman Sam Dekker, who had a team-high 14 points.

Reflecting on what would be a seminal crossroads for the program, Kaminsky admitted, “It’s crazy but a couple of years ago we didn’t have the opportunity to go very far in the tournament.” And that was followed by a Final Four. “And this year” he said, “we planned to be in Indy for spring break.”

And that just so happens to coincide, of course, with another Final Four appearance for the Badgers, who will attempt to do something that hasn’t been done in 38 games so far — hand Kentucky its first loss in Saturday’s second semifinal game at Lucas Oil Stadium.

Kaminsky still hasn’t forgotten what it felt like

to reach this point last year, only to come up short, 74-73, in the semis to these same John Calipari-coached Wildcats at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas. He will never forget the feeling in the Wisconsin locker room, a numbing, punch-in-the-gut feeling.

“It was such an emotional game,” Kaminsky recalled. “Not a lot of people expected us to be there and then we were there and we had a chance to win. It was such heartbreak to be in the position that we were in and to know that we had an opportunity to go into that next game.”

In the second half, the Badgers led by six at 6:17, by five at 3:48 and by two with 16 seconds remaining. “And to have it basically taken away from us,” Kaminsky said of Aaron Harrison’s game-winning 3-pointer with six seconds left, “it was just kind of devastating.”

Instead of Wisconsin, it was Kentucky that went on to play for the national championship. Although Ben Brust was the only senior in the



lineup, Evan Anderson and Zach Bohannon played support roles on the scout team. And they were hurting. “You could see the hurt in their eyes,” said Bronson Koenig, who scored 11 points in the first half against Kentucky. “And you could hear it in their voices.”

It was genuine, too, the hurt, the pain. “It was something that I don’t want to experience again, that’s for sure,” said Dujie Dukan. “But it showed what type of team we were in the sense that everybody was so depressed and upset and just sad that the season had come to a close. Everything we had worked so hard for — during the offseason and season — had come to a close.”

It was all very hard to reconcile for Josh Gasser. “It was definitely the hardest thing I’ve been through,” he said. “In the NCAA tournament, the farther you go, the harder it is to lose; the more it hurts because you’re getting closer and closer each time to the ultimate goal. And we were one or two plays away from having a chance to play for the national title, so it was really hard to take.”

But it’s not hard to see how it could be used for motivation.

“It definitely fueled us this year,” Gasser said.

• • • •

**JOSH GASSER:**

**“We were one or two plays away from having a chance to play for the national title, so it was really hard to take. It definitely fueled us this year.”**

**A**fter the Badgers left Dallas and returned to Madison, Dukan was back on the court shooting the following Monday morning. Others took a much-needed break. “The loss definitely hurt and everything,” Koenig said, “but I was taking some time off for my mind and body; I was so exhausted.”

Koenig stayed away from basketball for a couple of weeks; Kaminsky for a couple of days. “With the grind of the season, everything kind of weighs on you,” Kaminsky said, “and towards the end of the season, you’re happy to take a couple of days off and spend them at home with your family.”

Gasser, who was sidelined the entire 2012-13 season after knee surgery, was ordered to get off his feet. “Everyone was telling me to do that,” he said. “And I definitely needed two weeks to





regroup, especially after my injury. It had been a long season for me and I had to play through a lot.”

Meanwhile, Koenig had first heard mentions of “hopefully” getting back to the Final Four in the locker room following the loss. “I thought that was an obvious goal that we had set for ourselves,” he said. “We really didn’t have to talk that much about it. We kind of knew what we wanted to do.”

Kaminsky acknowledged Tuesday that he couldn’t get the Kentucky game out of his head right away; he couldn’t stop thinking about it. “For me it was the first couple of weeks after the game,” he said. “It replayed over in my head, over and over again.”

That’s why everybody needed their space, Gasser noted.

“We just needed time on our own to be on our own,” he said. “To do our own thing.”

Added Dukan, “Everyone went to the gym on their own and after that we started calling each other and going to the gym together. And it would be like, ‘Next year, it’s our time, we’re doing it.’ This summer was when we brought it all together and talked about it as a team. We set our goals.”

Kaminsky recalled the players rallying around the same theme with the help of some prodding from the team’s strength coach, Erik Helland. “We talked about what we wanted to accomplish; Erik does a lot of that with us,” Kaminsky said. “We’re a product of our habits. And we talked about what we can do to get our-

selves back (to the Final Four) knowing that we had the talent to do so.”

When UW coach Bo Ryan became aware of their goals, he didn’t discourage them. “I told them I would go along with ‘em. I would patrol the sidelines, I’m with you,” he related. “But I don’t ever put that on teams, ‘Hey, you’ve got to do this or you’re not fulfilling anything...’”

Ryan is too smart for that. So are his players, from Frank the Tank to Captain America.

But before they could Make ‘Em Believe, they had to believe.

“You just want to make each other believe first,” Gasser confirmed. “I think everyone thought we could get back to the Final Four and thought we could win a championship. But I







don't know if anyone truly believed it (outside the team). We truly believed that we could do it and that's actually all that matters, just us in the locker room; we set our goals, no one else has an influence on it, just us."

Did Gasser believe? "I did, I did, I believed it every year," he said. "But this year, especially, I truly, 100 percent believed we could make it back to the Final Four. And I truly believe now that we can win it all. The mind works in crazy ways. But if you set your mind to something and you truly believe it, and you actually have that confidence, then you can do some crazy things."

Nobody is crazier — a charming, playful crazy — than Kaminsky. "I believed all along, and that comes from Trae," he said of fellow senior Traevon Jackson. "He's the kind of person that makes us all believe in these things because he knows the mindset that we have to have going into the tournament."

It's one of the impressive things about this team. And there are many to choose from.

*Chemistry.*

"I've been a part of some great teams, on and off the court, that's what makes Wisconsin basketball so special in my opinion," Gasser said. "But this team, I think, is on the top of any list. It's not even close and that's translated to the court."

"We love hanging out with each other. Throughout all the ups and downs of the season, the one thing that has stayed constant has been our relationship off the court. That has translated into success."

*Resiliency.*

"It's just our will," said Kaminsky. "If you look at games where we're down or we're not playing well, we'll click at one point or we'll come out in the second half and really take over the game."

*Resolve.*

"No matter who we're playing," Koenig said, "we stay patient, we play our game and we get back into it. We may not be playing our best basketball but we still find ways to win."

*Purpose with a punch line.*



**“WE HAVE THE ABILITY TO BALANCE FOCUS AND FUN,” DUKAN SAID. “WE’RE A GOOFY GROUP THAT LIKES TO HAVE FUN OFF THE COURT. BUT ONCE WE STEP ON THE COURT, IT’S ALL BUSINESS AND EVERYONE IS READY TO GO.”**

“We have the ability to balance focus and fun,” Dukan said. “We’re a goofy group that likes to have fun off the court. But once we step on the court, it’s all business and everyone is ready to go because we know what’s at stake and what we want to accomplish.”

Ryan kidded that this team would make for an interesting reality-based television show, the proceeds of which, 15 percent, he would gladly put towards scholarships and meals. Consider the source. Surely, he was joking. And don’t call me Shirley. Where do you think they get it from?

“It’s amazing they can do what they do,” Ryan said, “and still when it comes to practice, it’s ‘I’m going to kick your butt, I want you to try to kick mine. I’m going to get yours (best shot) and compete hard and then go into the locker room and argue again about who’s the best video game player.’”

Ryan’s one-liners are older than some of his drills. But he enjoys being around such goofballs. “It’s like being a kid again,” he said. Yet they’re all business when they have to be. “When we get on the floor or we do anything basketball-wise. I never have to worry about them. They can separate.”

What has been most flattering to Ryan has



DAVID STLUKA

been the reaction to his players.

“You wouldn’t believe things that are coming back to us on how these young men have represented the university,” he said, listing the most common refrains. “‘Boy, they actually are having fun, they’re students, they’re taking care of business, they’re playing competitive basketball.’”

“It’s like, ‘Aren’t you lucky?’ and I’m like, ‘Yeah, I am.’”

“I’ve got a good bunch here,” Ryan continued, “and I haven’t had a bad bunch, ever. It’s just this group, because of how well they’ve played, they’ve garnered more attention therefore, more people see — with social media and everything else — who these guys really are.”

*Perspective and passion.*



“We like playing basketball,” Dekker said. “We’re not going to get too hyped up (for Kentucky). It’s just another game. It’s just in a bigger gym. Once you get on the court, it’s the same basketball. We just gotta do our thing.

“We have prepared so much for this, starting in June; we knew what we wanted to do, we put in the work and now it shouldn’t be anything different. We don’t have to change anything. We’ve just got to be ourselves.”

*Experience.*

“We’ve been exposed to it,” Gasser said of the Final Four atmosphere, “so we know what to expect; we’re not going to be thrown in the dark or anything. The best thing you can do is to try and have some fun with it and enjoy the experience.

“We basically spent a whole afternoon going from interview to interview (in Arlington) and they were driving us around the stadium in golf carts. It was just crazy. It’s a different atmosphere, a different type of game. We even had security guards on our floor. Having that experi-

ence will help us.”

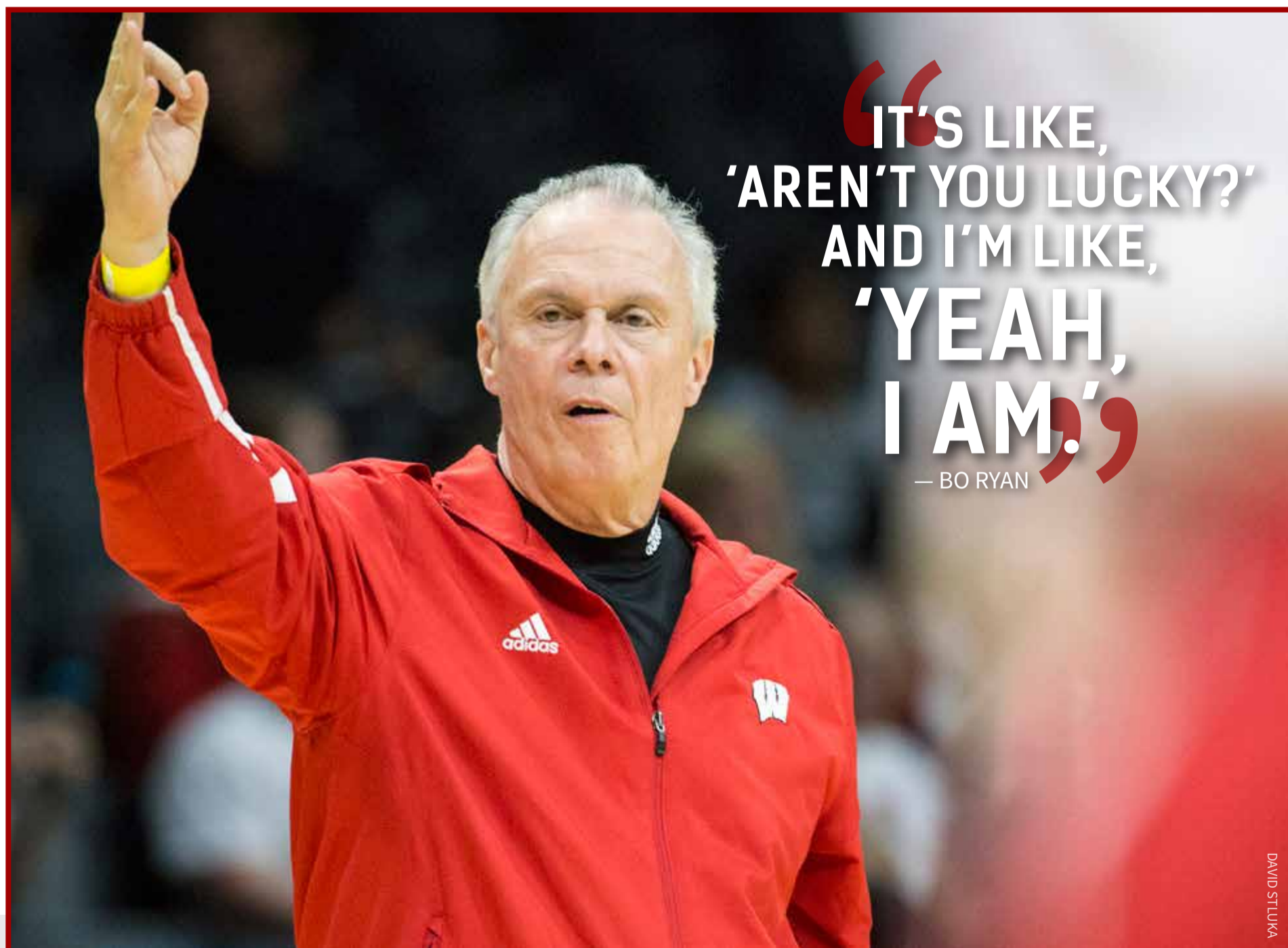
What Ryan experienced that first practice at Jerry’s World was not pleasant. “It’s like being outdoors in some big canyon,” he said. “I had these certain drills that I do and I watch body language and interaction of play and then we started doing some possessions ...”

At which point he had seen enough and he ordered up some “lines” for the players; full-out sprints from boundary to boundary. “We did 16 lines,” he said. “You have to do it under 60 seconds and you gotta sprint. Nobody hesitated.”

That’s because they knew why they were being penalized.

“They knew we were throwing the ball way, we’re air-balling shots, we looked like we had never practiced before,” he said. “They blew their lungs out, meaning they sprinted, and I always feel they enjoy it when they can do that. Then they were ready to practice. Then we practiced.”

*Players.*



“IT’S LIKE,  
‘AREN’T YOU LUCKY?’  
AND I’M LIKE,  
‘YEAH,  
I AM.’”  
— BO RYAN





DAVID STLUKA

“Let me just tell you,” said Arizona coach Sean Miller, “Sam Dekker and Frank Kaminsky, they’re really good. And their offense is the No. 1 offense in the nation ...

“When Sam Dekker does what he did (scored 27 without missing a shot in the second half) and when he does that with Kaminsky (who scored 29) maybe Kentucky is the school that can beat them. But I’m telling you, I don’t know if there is another out there when they’re clicking with that one-two punch. By the way, Nigel Hayes is pretty good and he’ll keep you honest making a 3 as well.”

Upon further review, redoing the math, Miller advanced the storyline on Wisconsin having good players by suggesting, “Frank Kaminsky and Sam Dekker, I know they’re pros. And I don’t mean that like Sam should leave. I’m just telling you he’s a great player and everybody in the Big Ten knows it and we know it. And Nigel Hayes is great, too. They have that one-two-three punch.”

*Ryan.*

“Bo Ryan is a tremendous coach,” Miller said.

That would be the consensus opinion of the other Final Four coaches. But in sharing plati-


tudes with his coaching staff — Greg Gard, Gary Close and Lamont Paris — he also avoided answering a question on the strength of the coaching field by demurring in the form of a question, “Did I bring ‘em down?”

*Motivation.*

Make ‘Em Believe.

“It’s the perception of the program,” Koenig said. “I think we’ve been underappreciated and underestimated in the past. Hopefully we’re doing a good job making them believe we’re an elite program. Every game has been a stepping stone and another opportunity to get better.”

“We kind of wanted to prove that last year wasn’t a fluke, that we weren’t there (the Final Four) by accident, that we are a good basketball team,” said Dukan. “I think we’ve done a great job of going game by game this season and proving that.”

“We wanted to make them believe we have what it takes to win championships,” Zak Showalter said. “To lose a tough game like that (to Kentucky), you’ve got a taste for what it feels like to be the big stage and it drove guys to get back. But we’re not satisfied; we haven’t made them believe yet.” 





# For determined Badgers, Final Four was only option

Wisconsin's mission to 'Make 'Em Believe' marches on to Indianapolis

BY MIKE LUCAS • [UWBADGERS.COM](http://UWBADGERS.COM)

There was the Sam Dekker drive-and-score that started out beyond the circle and wound up at the rim with Arizona's Stanley Johnson picking up his fifth personal foul. That was followed later by the high-arc Dekker 3-pointer over the outstretched arm of Rondae Hollis-Jefferson whose muscular shoulders drooped when the ball whistled through the net, triggering a flashback to Dekker's game-winning triple that lifted Sheboygan Lutheran to a state championship.

"That was cold-blooded; I can tell you that," said Wisconsin coach Bo Ryan.

But of all the shots that Dekker made here Saturday in Wisconsin's 85-78 victory over Arizona — and he didn't miss in the second half, going 6-of-6 from the field, 5-of-5 from beyond the arc and 3-of-3 from the free throw line — Dekker felt like the closing seconds of the first half were most critical to his "confidence" and

what the Badgers were subsequently able to do over the final 20 minutes in securing their second trip to the Final Four in as many seasons at the expense of the Wildcats.

With 1.5 seconds left before halftime, Dekker attacked off the dribble and drew a foul on Hollis-Jefferson, one of the top defenders in the Pac-12. That let Dekker know that he could get his shot off the bounce; that let the Wildcats know they had to be careful on their closeouts. Arizona had the momentum, making 10 of its last 13 shots before Dekker's free throws cut their lead from five to three, making it a one possession game at halftime; same as last season in the Elite Eight when the Badgers trailed by three in Anaheim.

"That cut the lead a little bit so that helped us a lot," said UW sophomore guard Bronson Koenig. "And it gave us a little momentum and confidence to go into the second half and make



a run. We've been down at half before and we knew that we had some runs in us."

The Badgers opened the second half with a flurry of 3-point possessions despite losing Nigel Hayes to a third personal foul 25 seconds into the half. Frank Kaminsky and Dekker knocked down 3-point shots and Kaminsky executed an old-fashioned three-point play, a basket and one. That put a third foul on Kaleb Tarczewski, which forced him to the bench. Kaminsky then completed an 11-1 run with a couple of free throws after being fouled by Hollis-Jefferson, who was now also saddled with three personals.

"We just had to regress back to our mean," theorized Nigel Hayes when asked to explain a 55-point second half during which the Badgers had one fewer miss from the field (15-of-19) than the free throw line (15-of-20). "We shoot the ball particularly well from the arc and from the field in general. We have a lot of guys on our team who are very capable of knocking down 3s."

That includes Hayes, who had two of Wisconsin's 10 triples in the second half.

"Our guys stepped up and made them, some tough shots, too," said UW assistant coach Gary Close, who's generally responsible for tweaking shooting techniques, i.e. the Shot Doctor. But on making 10-of-12 shots from beyond the arc, he confessed, "That tops it. There's nothing close, not in the environment that we were in and with the importance of the game and the defensive team that we played against. The shot selection had something to do with it; the talent does as well."

Expanding on that thought, Close added, "We've got some talented players that really performed on the big stage. It's an unselfish team, it's a skilled team, it's a team that is willing to make the extra pass and a team that doesn't panic when the shot clock starts winding down. Instead, it's like, 'Alright, we're going to get something here.' You can be open but you've got to be able to make it."

And once you make one, Dekker said, "You feel like you can do anything when you have the confidence. I got some looks, I was able to step





into them and knock them down.”

Contagious would be the word, cliché but true. “It seemed like everybody was hitting 3s,” said Koenig, “and we just fed off each other’s energy. I did the best I could to get into the lane and kick it out to the guys. I told them, ‘Just spot up’ and that’s what they did and their shots were going in.”

They were going in and now the Badgers are going back — back to the Final Four.

“We definitely expected this,” said senior guard Traevon Jackson, who returned to action during the regional weekend after missing 18 games

because of a foot injury. “We talked about it all year; our goal was Indy (Indianapolis, the site of the Final Four) from the beginning of the year. We knew once we got there (last year) what it would take to get back. There was never any doubt; we never lost our belief.”

They talked about it. But they didn’t brag about it. “They set their goals unbelievably high and they were never bashful about it in terms of what they wanted to accomplish; they just took it one step at a time,” said UW associate head coach Greg Gard. “They were not bashful, but it was not in an inappropriate way. They’ve done it

the right way. This group was on a mission.”

Because of their returning personnel, the Badgers were among the pre-season favorites, which promoted Hayes to say, “We had to make them believe what they were saying about us was true.” That was seconded by assistant coach Lamont Paris, who said, “There was a lot of hype and there were a lot of people who probably didn’t think this team would be as good. But this is not a flash in the pan.”

Senior Duje Dukan agreed and put the spotlight on the team’s overall mindset. “We came into it as the hunter (not the hunted),” he said. “We wanted to go out and prove that we were a good basketball team and I think we did that each and every night. But we still have games left to be played.”



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— GREG GARD

DAVID STLUKA



Starting with Saturday's rematch with Kentucky in the national semifinals at Lucas Oil Stadium.

"The biggest thing is just to be able to play with these guys for another week," said Josh Gasser. "I wasn't ready for the season to end (against Arizona) or my career to be over. I just love playing with this team. It's good to get back to the Final Four. We did some good things last year and we wanted to make everyone believe that we could do it again, and do even bigger things."

Kaminsky may have framed it best after Saturday's win: "You come back to school for moments like this," he said, "to share it with your teammates, your friends, the people you've been with the last four years of your life, very significant people that are going to be in the rest of your life as well. A moment like this is the most memorable moment of our lives."

In a corner of the Los Angeles Lakers locker room, which was on loan to the Badgers, Koenig

was savoring the moment, along with his teammates. Dekker had mentioned how Ryan had recruited him with these moments in mind. "I know Coach said to me, 'We want to get to Final Fours and we want to bring championships to Wisconsin,'" Dekker related. "And now we're one step closer."

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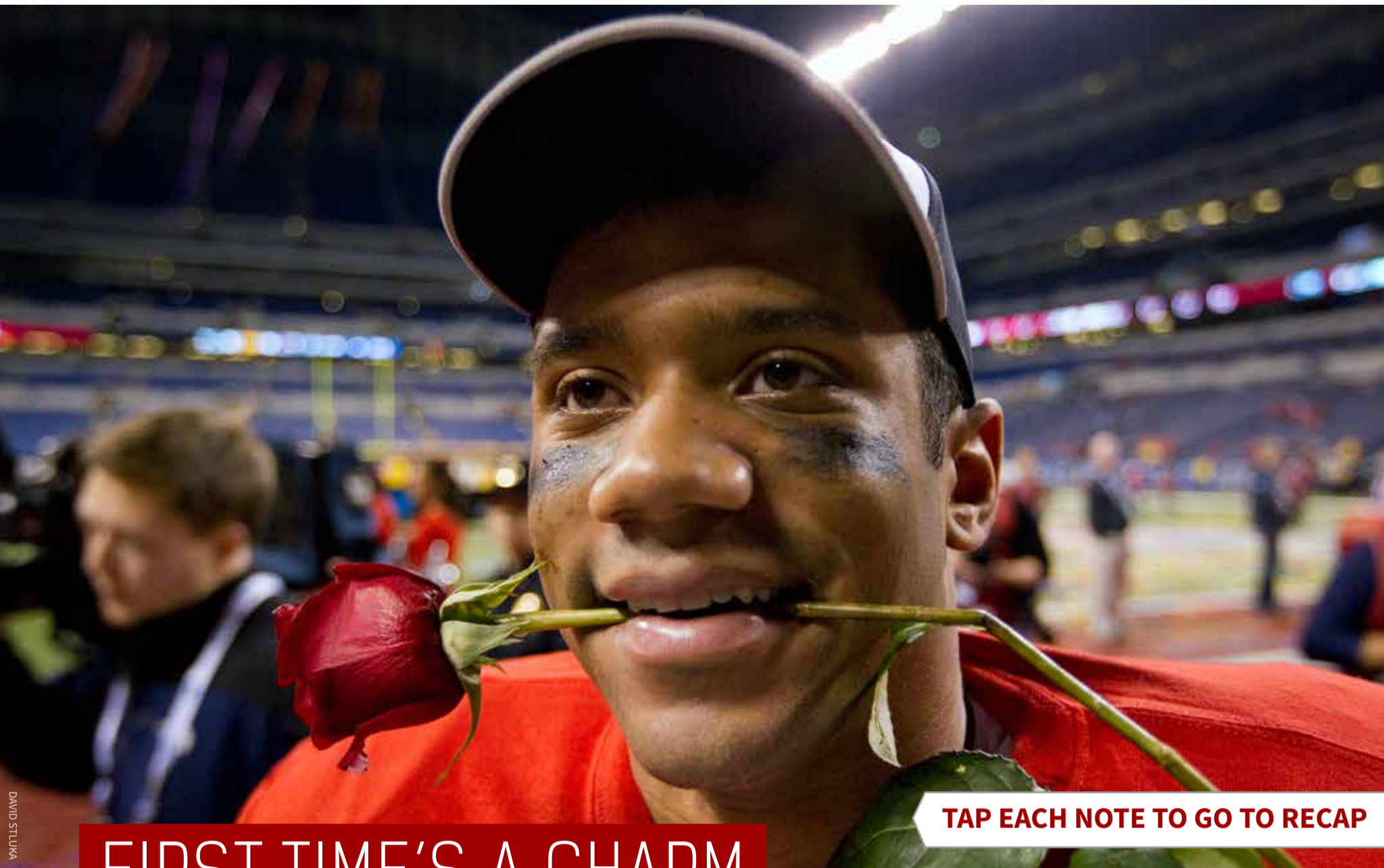
What was Dekker's response to Ryan's ambitious recruiting pitch? "I said, 'Let's do it,'" he remembered. "I don't see why we couldn't. Last year a lot of times we said, 'Why not us?' And now this year it's trying to make them believe

again. And I think we've done it pretty well so far."

That left Koenig to ponder his own recruitment. "During the recruiting process, people would always remind me of how Wisconsin doesn't do well in the (NCAA) tournament," he said. "But I just wanted to come here and help change that. Credit goes to my teammates. It's all kind of surreal." **W**







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## FIRST TIME'S A CHARM

**DECEMBER 3, 2011:** Heisman finalist Montee Ball scored four touchdowns and Russell Wilson threw for three scores as UW rallied past Michigan State in the fourth quarter for a 42-39 win in the inaugural Big Ten Football Championship Game at Lucas Oil Stadium.

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### TOURNAMENT TITLE

**MARCH 16, 2008:**

Behind Most Outstanding Player Marcus Landry, the Badgers completed a sweep of the Big Ten regular-season and tournament titles with a 61-48 win over Illinois at Conseco Fieldhouse.



### FINALLY, FINAL FOUR

**APRIL 1, 2000:**

Wisconsin made its return to the Final Four after a nearly 60-year absence but came up on the losing end of a defensive struggle with top-seeded Michigan State at the RCA Dome, 53-41.



### RUNAWAY REPEAT

**DECEMBER 1, 2012:**

Montee Ball, Melvin Gordon and James White combined for 527 rushing yards and eight touchdowns as UW blitzed Nebraska, 70-31, in the second Big Ten Football Championship Game.