

It Had to Go In

A narrative retelling of yet another Duke-UConn March moment

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By the time Braylon Mullins launched a 35-foot three pointer at the last gasp of UConn's Elite Eight matchup against Duke, it was impossible to even comprehend how the game even reached this point of tension.

Duke and Connecticut had met several times in the NCAA tournament prior to Sunday's East regional final. Duke had won twice, including a 1990 Elite Eight game that ended in Christian Laettner's second most famous buzzer beater, denying Jim Calhoun his first Final Four. UConn won the next two: once in the 1999 National Championship game, and once more in the 2004 Final Four. Coming into Sunday, the series was 2-2. All square for the fifth installment, a momentous rubber match in the nation's capital.

This year's East region was loaded. Historic programs (Michigan State, UCLA, Kansas) and fiery coaches (Rick Pitino, Tom Izzo, Mick Cronin, Bill Self). The basketball Gods, in their cosmic glory, knew what had to happen. Even through the gauntlet of titanic programs, it just had to be this way. It had to be Duke and it had to be UConn. It had to be Hurley and Scheyer. It had to be one game with a trip to the Final Four on the line. It just had to be.

It is hard to describe the cinematography of this matchup without sounding hyperbolic, but then again, March is hyperbolic. Everything about this tournament is glorified and larger than life. This year's tournament officially has an all time moment to match.

The first half is not close. Cameron Boozer is phenomenal. He is composed, calm, and most importantly, unstoppable. His brother Cayden is dishing out passes and hitting shots like he has been starting the entire year. Their retired NBA veteran father Carlos Boozer watches from the stands.

Tarris Reed Jr. is the lone bright spot for the Huskies. He has a magnificent touch and everlasting defensive presence. Even through UConn's defensive struggles that

eventually led to a 15 point halftime deficit, it could have been closer to 30 without Tarris Reed Jr.

Halftime. A breath for all involved. For Duke, a chance to rest and regroup after a near perfect first half. A chance to re-assess their game plan and make sure their ducks are in a row. 20 minutes from Indianapolis. 20 minutes from a second straight Final Four. 20 minutes from taking down the one team that continues to have their number when it matters most.

For UConn, a chance at inner redemption. They were second best in the first half. Out worked and out played. Halftime was a chance for UConn fans to regain hope, if it was able to be found.

The comeback is a slow burn. The lead gets as high as 19 points. For a while, it is touch and go. UConn scores a few, and Duke answers. UConn misses, and Duke capitalizes. UConn scores a few more, and Duke misses. The lead is healthy enough for a while. Duke was the better team all season long and the better team up to that point. However, UConn has the experience. The championship DNA. The coach who has been there before. They have the advantage— all they have to do is execute.

Tarris Reed Jr. is the focal point. His post moves are relentless, his work ethic even more so. Reed is a defensive stalwart on Cameron Boozer. When Boozer is not scoring, others are forced to make plays. Sometimes, they made plays. Other times, they didn't.

The slow burn begins to burn a little quicker, and so does the clock. It is seven points, then it's five. The clock continues to tick. Then it is four points. 50 seconds left. Alex Karaban has been quiet. He is the leader and the captain, but he has not scored much. All he needs is an opening. Curling off a screen and separating himself from the defense, he steps three paces behind the arc. He catches a Silas Demary Jr. chest pass and lets it fly.

If you watch UConn basketball, you recognize this shot. It is the patented Alex Karaban three ball, soaring off his hands with that unique delivery. If you watch UConn basketball, you know this shot is going in. Even through the three point struggles all game— UConn as a team had hit just three by this point in the game— you just know this one is going to fall. The captain brings it to within one point.

What Duke has in their corner is the ever reliable Cameron Boozer. With under 40 seconds left, they give the ball to their big man, their main man. That patented baby hook that has worked all season. The back down, the spin, the shoulder bump, and the golden touch. It is the reason he was a walking double double. It is the reason he will be

the National Player of the Year. Duke needed their man, and they got him. UConn needed their man— the question was, who would it be?

72-69, Duke leads. 27.2 seconds remain. UConn calls their last timeout. They draw up a play in the huddle. They look calm and cool. They inbound the ball and immediately burn a whopping 17 seconds. Screens, dribbles, cuts and passes all lead to nothing. With time winding down, Silas Demary Jr. spots an opening and tries to blow by Cameron Boozer. Boozer, who is now noticeably decorated with a welt under his right eye from a first half elbow, fouls the Georgia transfer. 10 seconds. Two shots. Three point game.

Demary's first shot falls achingly off the side of the rim. It looks good, but looks aren't enough in March. Now, the pressure is on for the second shot. Demary needs to hit it to give UConn a fighter's chance. It is why they brought him in through the transfer portal. It is why he is in this situation. He buries it.

Two point game, 10 seconds flat. Duke does not need to move the ball. They can inbound the ball safely and attempt to run out the clock. They don't need a basket, they don't even need to try. Inbound the ball and protect the rock. Let UConn foul you and hit your free throws. Game over, Final Four bound. Simple as that.

Dame Sarr to Cameron Boozer off the inbound. Boozer with a quick bounce pass back to Sarr on the baseline. Sarr to a waiting Cayden Boozer near midcourt. Cayden Boozer turns to see four people in front of him. Two of them are in Duke white, Isaiah Evans and Patrick Ngnoba. They are waiting in the UConn half for an outlet pass.

In their way stand Silas Demary Jr. and young Braylon Mullins. The guards are preparing to trap and steal, not foul. UConn's game plan is clear. They are not fouling, and they are not surrendering. They are betting on their Final Four future. They need to steal this ball from Boozer. If they let this ball over their heads, their season is over.

Demary and Mullins see Boozer begin to rise. He is looking to find one of his teammates to ice the game. Demary and Mullins jump to meet the ball in mid air. Demary gets a hand on it, the same hand that missed a vital free throw just moments earlier. The ball halts in mid air as the arena stands still. For perhaps the last time in both Duke and UConn's seasons, the basketball is up for grabs.

It falls lovingly on the midcourt March Madness logo just in front of Braylon Mullins, who somehow has the presence of mind to wait for it to fall out of the frontcourt to avoid a backcourt violation. Whether he even thought about this is irrelevant; in March, you get the benefit of the doubt.

Mullins said postgame that his first instinct was to find someone who had made a three in the game. He sees the captain— where else would this ball go? He has not exactly been a world beater, but Alex Karaban is trustworthy. Mullins, the young freshman stud who may only spend one season in Storrs before heading off to the NBA, finds a reliable veteran to give the ball to.

Karaban turns just past midcourt to see Cameron Boozer. Karaban is four or five paces behind the three point line. It would be an insanely tough shot over the fast approaching Boozer. Karaban sees the clock ticking— just four seconds until their season is over. He realizes it can't be him.

And so it is Mullins. Braylon Mullins, the former Mr. Basketball of Indiana, the top 25 recruit, the future NBA sharpshooter, approaches Karaban. He finds himself 35 feet from the basket, just in line with the "N-E-S-S" of the March Madness midcourt logo. Karaban pitches it back to the freshman like a quarterback shoveling a snap to his full back in the red zone. There is intention in this pass— "when I give it to you, let it fly."

Mullins sets his feet and looks up at the hoop. The clock above the backboard reads just under two seconds. There is no more time— it is time for Braylon Mullins to shoot the basketball. He flies up in the air, above his defender Isaiah Evans, who inexplicably has his hands down below his chest. No contest from any Duke defender within five feet. They give the young buck with unlimited range a free shot at history.

Braylon Mullins releases the ball. There are gut feelings in sports all the time, and this is no different. We see this ball flying. We watch it leave Mullins' hands en route to the hoop. As soon as it is released, there is a feeling in the air. Washington, D.C. holds its breath, but even they know the outcome. The ball looks on line. The ball looks smooth. It spins majestically. Both benches watch in awe. For UConn, a last gasp at a third title in four years. For Duke, a chance to redeem themselves for last year's Final Four collapse.

You just knew it had to go in. *It had to.* It had to be Duke vs. UConn, it had to be in the tournament, and it had to be epic. *The ball had to go in.*

The ball goes in. It is the swish heard 'round the world. The sound it makes echoes through the arena, putting an exclamation point on this tremendous game. The net ripples perfectly, a video game shot. It is what Braylon may have dreamed of not long ago in his Indiana driveway— the driveway that sits 25 miles from Indianapolis,

where Braylon has just sent his team to play for a national championship. Mullins wanted to go home, and he decided to bring a few Huskies with him.

The agony on the Duke bench is palpable. During the action, Jon Scheyer was instructing his team to move the ball down the court, and to his shock, Cayden Boozer's pass did not have enough juice. Once the ball was corralled by UConn, there was no more shock— it seemed Scheyer knew what was to come next. He knew just like the rest of us. He shouted for his defense to put hands up, but it was too late. The ball was suspended in mid air, and so was Duke's season. Jon Scheyer's blank stare at the flying ball told us all we needed to know. It was obvious where this ball was going.

It had to go in. Duke's full court, Grant Hill pass effort with 0.4 seconds on the clock was knocked away by who else: Alex Karaban. The clock strikes zeros. Ball game.

The story had to go this way. The script was written in the first half. Duke jumped out to a lead, and suddenly, the stage was set. The Blue Devils and Huskies had put on Shakespearian theatre many times before. Christian Laettner broke Husky hearts, but it did not feel like this. Khalid El-Amin shocked the world, but it did not feel like this.

The young Braylon Mullins, a homecoming Indiana kid, put the program on his shoulders. Alex Karaban gave him the ball and put his trust in Mullins. Tarris Reed Jr. put the team on his back when it felt like the team was about to break. Silas Demary Jr. and Solo Ball put the team in position to win— Solo's and-1 and Demary's two three pointers late in the game set up the comeback. Dan Hurley put his heart, soul, blood, sweat, and tears into his team. He believed in his boys. His celebration would not be contained. Amongst the mob scene on UConn's bench, Hurley's suit hung loosely off his right shoulder, as tired and worn out as he was after this legendary performance.

It was Duke and UConn. It was the NCAA tournament. It had to go this way. The magic would not allow it to go any other way. The month of March would not let the calendar turn to April without one more shining moment. This is the only way the story could go.

By the time Braylon Mullins launched a 35-foot three pointer at the last gasp of UConn's Elite Eight matchup vs. Duke, there was only one outcome. We all knew how this story had to go.

It is March. The shot goes up. It had to go in.