

“Countdown to March”

By Justin Pahl



A scrawny kid in a steamy Midwestern gym, the kind of old barn where the rims are soft and the floor is pocked with dead spots. His whole hometown seems to swell the stands behind the bench — his parents and siblings, his teachers and his pastor. As the pep band blasts a brassy version of "Hold On, I'm Coming" to the banner-studded rafters, they watch their son take the court and they clasp their hands to pray.

He's spent four years preparing for this game; heck, he's spent his whole life preparing for this game — ignoring the calls for dinner on the cold winter days, shooting free throws until dusk, when kitchen lights begin to flicker; all the summer camps and suicide sprints in un-air conditioned gyms, keeled forward, ready to hurl. Dreaming of this moment — the biggest game of his life, three seconds on the clock, his hometown team trailing by one.

As his teammate lines up beneath the basket to inbound the ball, the band falls silent. He can hear his sneakers on the court. He's a lanky Midwestern kid, his face so smooth you wonder if he's ever touched a razor.

The ball comes to him, settling into his hands. He squares his shoulders, the way he has a hundred thousand times on the court in his backyard. He doesn't need to see the clock. In his head, he's already begun the countdown:

Three, two, one ...



I grew up on a dead end street in a small American town. Valparaiso, northwest Indiana. Beyond the end of our road was a field of wild wheat, an abandoned home where my younger brother and I thought an old witch lived, and a swamp where our black lab would romp, chasing muskrats and birds.

When I was 7 and my brother was 5, we convinced our father to put up a basketball hoop in front of the abandoned home. It was Indiana, after all. Basketball and church were the two things every little kid had in common, and I'd learned to dribble a basketball shortly after I could walk. For years, the Fisher-Price hoop in our basement had sufficed, our brown-carpeted floor scuffed and stained from the chalk courts we drew and re-drew as they rubbed off on the soles of our feet.

Our imaginations outgrew the basement and one spring, Dad set about building us a basketball court of our own. He put up a big iron hoop and backboard, burying the pole deep into the ground and locking it in with cement. Then, while my brother and I held a tape measure, Dad spray-painted a three-point arc and free throw line on the black top.

After the court was finished, rain or shine or even snow, my brother and I could be found shooting hoops, the thwack of the ball echoing on the quiet street. One-on-one and Horse. Knock-out and Around-the-world. But our favorite game was imagining we were members of the Valparaiso University men's basketball team — the school where our father was a professor of theology (basketball and church, as I said) — playing our way through March, through the NCAA tournament.

This was as outlandish as any make-believe could be. At the time, Valpo, as the town and its teams were affectionately called by locals, was a middling team in the equally middling Mid-Continent Conference. When Nathan and I suited up, pretending we were staring down the Fab Five and Michigan or Christian Laettner and Duke (our favorite nemesis), we weren't just creating fiction; the thought of Valpo competing with these teams was science fiction.

And yet each weekend, undeterred by reality, we stormed through the early rounds of the Big Dance in minutes, readying ourselves for the David and Goliath battles of the Final Four, when tiny little Valparaiso would compete against the blue bloods, the schools we saw on SportsCenter, places that had never heard of a little Lutheran school in the middle of nowhere.

Every game came down to the final seconds, Valpo down one and needing a buzzer-beater to survive. As I brought the ball up and Nate screened imaginary defenders, my father counted:

Three, two, one.



My brother or I would set our shoulders, and like so many Indiana kids over the years, we'd let the last shot fly, imagining the town around us holding its breath, ready to lift us to their shoulders.

Photo: "Small Town Night Scene" by Dan Petreikis

Nighttime in Valparaiso, Indiana, a safe, quiet and extremely white place to live

Valparaiso is a typical Midwestern city — too big to be a small town, but too small to be a real city. A dozen miles south of Lake Michigan, Valpo began as a way station on the rail line between industrial heavyweights Chicago and Detroit. Towns like this sprung up all over the Midwest, places like LaPorte and Portage, Hammond and Hobart. They are safe, quiet and, it must be added, extremely *white* places to live. The kinds of sleepy towns where a used-car dealer

with a cable access commercial becomes a local celebrity, or where every September, there's a popcorn festival (seriously, this happens in Valparaiso).

In so many of these in-between towns, sports are a form of faith. The places of worship aren't churches, but old armories with rickety bleachers and warped floors, parched fields beneath the blazing Friday night lights, and frozen ponds carved by skates and illuminated by moonlight. In these sacred spaces, life in our anonymous homes becomes something bigger — a story in which our children and classmates and neighbors are the heroes.

If you drive around Valparaiso and stop in at places like Schoop's on Calumet, or Around the Clock on Lincolnway, you'll find faded photographs of these heroes, former basketball and football stars gazing at the camera with the vague awareness that life will never again be so easy, so good, so black and white.

Growing up in Valparaiso, life *was* easy, and good. I loved Valpo. I knew the best shortcuts when riding my bike, where you could sneak between fences or cut through a field. My brother was my best friend; the two of us could step outside and play basketball on our own street.

This last part was important, because of all the things I loved about Valpo, basketball was the thing I loved most. I loved how I could feel a perfect shot, the ball rippling the twine, in the base of my spine. I loved how my glasses fogged up when stepping into a gym on a cold winter night, the muffled sound of the pep band playing in the distance. I loved the way a crowd held its breath before a potential game winning shot, the clock ticking down in my head.

Three, two, one.

And yes, I loved going to Schoop's, getting a hamburger, and looking at all the photos of legends past, imagining myself someday being one of them, despite how short and slow I was. I couldn't imagine anything greater.



(Photo: "Valparaiso High School front" by JonRidinger)

In 1994, when I was 8 years old, Valpo was blessed with not one but two local boys who seemed destined to become photographs on the wall. That year, Bryce Drew and Tim Bishop were seniors at Valparaiso High School. Bryce, whose father, Homer, was head coach at the university, was a scrawny 6'3 point guard. He'd undergone heart surgery the previous summer, and wasn't sure he would be able to play his senior season. But not only did he play, he developed into a fearsome scorer, the best basketball player in the most rabid basketball state in the country. His jump shot was nearly mechanical in its perfection and he could score from just about anywhere inside of half court.

Tim was even more gifted. Not only could he dominate a basketball game, he was a baseball and football star, too. While coaches from Syracuse and Notre Dame came to recruit Bryce to play college basketball, scouts from New York and Chicago were trying to talk Tim into playing pro baseball right out of high school. If that didn't pan out, it was OK. Tim already had a football scholarship to Indiana University.

It wasn't hard for my brother and I to see a lot of ourselves in Tim and Bryce. Soft spoken and almost unfailingly humble, they went to church every Sunday, ate at places like Schoop's, and learned the game shooting on hoops their parents built for them. Valpo boys, through and through.

In the winter of 1994, the Valpo High Vikings started winning ... and they didn't stop. Every home game, nearly 6,000 fans filed into Viking Gym to watch Tim and Bryce play their final games on the best team in Valpo history. The five starters — Drew, Bishop, Mark Burnison, Ryan Erdelac and David Furlin — had been together since their YMCA days, and were close friends off the court. They played an appealing brand of small ball, the kind that gives false promise to those of us too short and too slow. Without a true center, they won with creativity and hustle. That, and great, unerring outside shooting.

My dad trudged my brother and I through northwest Indiana's notorious lake effect snow so we could see what the fuss was all about, so that, someday, we could say we saw Bryce and Tim play together. And so maybe we could see our future selves in them.

My father's relationship to Valparaiso was far more fraught than mine. Born in a small Wisconsin town, he was the first member of his family to graduate college — from Valpo. He was also the first member of his family to get a Ph.D., from the University of Chicago. When he settled back in Valpo to teach, he'd made *his* hometown proud, even if he himself had hoped to end up at a more prestigious school out on the East Coast.

Dad was perpetually trying to break free, for Valpo's politics were as rigid and conservative as the grid it was mapped out on; "diversity" meant living on a block with Lutherans, Methodists and Episcopalians. I still remember Dad letting me punch his ballot for Clinton in the '92 election, and the quiet glee it gave him to see his neighbors and colleagues so despondent when Bill won.

Despite that momentary joy, with each passing year, he felt his opportunities to escape passing him by. To my father, the best thing about Tim and Bryce was that they were presumably going to go on to bigger, brighter places than Valparaiso, Ind. By taking Nate and I to see them, he hoped this part of the story would rub off on us: there is a whole other world out there and it was possible to seize it.

The Vikings entered the State semifinals against East Chicago Central 25-0 and ranked No. 1 in the state. At 22-3, Central posed a serious threat to the undefeated Vikings. Like Valpo, they didn't have a true center and relied on great guard play. Like Valpo, they could shoot the lights out from behind the three-point arc.

As my brother, father and I listened to the game on the radio in our basement, where we'd once played hoops on the chalk-drawn Fischer-Price court, an Indiana barnburner unfolded. East Chicago hit tying three-pointers at the end of regulation and overtime number one; Bryce made a tying free throw at the end of overtime number two; East Chicago missed what would have been a game-winning free throw at the end overtime number three.

In the fourth overtime the Vikings trailed 82-81 with three seconds left. Though Bryce had 33 points, he'd gone ice cold. With their dream season on the line, the Vikings called on Tim Bishop. Running an inbounds play beneath their own basket, Tim curled around a screen. Falling away from the hoop, a bigger defender in his face — *three, two, one* — Tim somehow rose up on his back leg (think a smaller Dirk Nowitzki) and managed to weigh the shot perfectly, banking in the kind of basket that would cause a grown man driving down a dark, corn field-flanked road to pull over and run silent laps around his car. It was the shot that sent Valpo to State for the first time in history.

In our basement, the kind of bedlam we'd only simulated during fake NCAA tournaments broke out on our old court. All these years later, that shot is still a legend in Valparaiso. "Tim's shot" is all you need to say.

This was back when every school in Indiana, no matter its size, competed in a single tournament to be Indiana High School Basketball Champion. It was the biggest event in the state. Any team that won instantly entered state lore. For Valpo, the stakes were even higher. They were trying to become only the seventh undefeated state champion in Indiana history, and they were trying to do it their own way: with heart instead of size, with grit instead of speed.

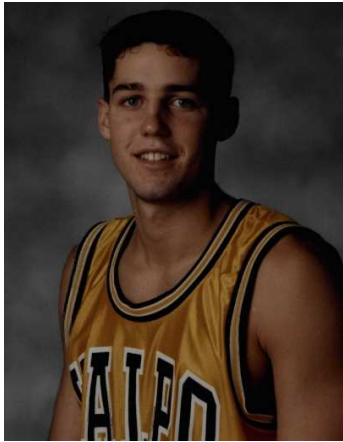
On Saturday, March 26, the Vikings played South Bend Clay for the Indiana State Basketball crown. I didn't doubt for one second that they would win. Like all kids, to me sports were simple: my team was the good guys, and everyone else was the bad guys. We had Tim and Bryce; they didn't. We were playing for history; they weren't. Of course we would win.

Valpo controlled the game from the opening tip. With 58 seconds remaining, they led by eight and the thousands of fans who had made the trip to the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis chanted and rollicked in the stands, ready to celebrate. Back in Valparaiso, I watched the game on local cable access with my father and brother. We began counting down the seconds.

Fifty seven, fifty six, fifty five ...

But then a strange thing happened. Clay, led by future college stars Lee Nailon and Jaraan Cornell, started chucking up three pointers. And they couldn't miss. Valpo, so fundamentally sound all year, missed a key free throw. At the regulation buzzer Cornell hit a desperation heave from well beyond the arc to force overtime. When Tim fouled out a minute in, the game escaped the Vikings. They lost, 93-88. Tim had scored 35 points, Bryce 29. Despite this, our best hadn't been enough; *we* hadn't been enough.

(Photo: The Sporting News)



Bryce Drew, widely expected to leave for a major program, stayed in Valpo to play for his father

A young boy's first heartbreak is so often over a sports team. The pain I felt about Tim and Bryce losing was a kind of pain that I would eventually realize was only comparable to being dumped by a girl I wanted to love. It wormed its way deep into my intestines. I couldn't stop replaying the game's most important sequences. What if Cornell's heave had been 1 inch short? What if we hadn't missed that free throw? What if Tim hadn't fouled out? How could they lose like this? Where was the storybook ending? Wasn't that how sports worked?

As spring gave way to summer, me and the rest of Valparaiso moved on from the defeat — albeit slowly.

We were helped by two surprising events. Bryce, who was widely expected to leave Valpo to play for a traditional powerhouse like Syracuse or Notre Dame, instead spurned the traditional powerhouses to play for his father, Homer, at Valparaiso University. His reasoning, we found out, was simple.

"He loves his father too much," his mother, Janet, said.

Bryce staying was a confirmation of how I felt: why would you go anywhere else in the world when you could stay here? But to folks like my father, it was an admission of defeat, or even fear. Was Bryce scared that he wasn't good enough?

The second surprise was that Tim was drafted by the New York Mets in the 57th round of the MLB amateur draft. There was no fear in his decision: he would sign and pursue a professional baseball career. He would prove what all of us yearned to prove, and what we had nearly showed in the State final: that Valpo kids were good enough to succeed out in the big, bad world.

Three, two, one ...

As a sports fan, there's no love quite like your first. The team you fall for as a kid will always have a deeper hold over you than any team you adopt later in life. Even watching this first love as an adult, you'll find yourself feeling like you've been transported back to a time when fanhood wasn't about reason or logic, but about faith, when the team you loved was an extension of *you*. When you believed that the heroes you loved, loved you back, too.



(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

For me, the Valparaiso University Crusaders became that team. Dad started taking Nate and I to games as soon as we could walk. Our mother was a nurse who worked night shifts, and basketball games were a good way to keep us occupied and let us blow off steam. Nate and I would roam the Athletics-Recreation Center, where Valpo played, feeling like kings. We'd walk along the track that circumnavigated the lower seating bowl, watching the games from every vantage.

For nearly a decade, the three of us attended almost every Valpo home game. It would have taken a natural disaster to keep us away. Even the birth of our little sister didn't do the trick. The night she was born, Dec. 12, 1992, we were there, at the ARC, as Valpo came back from a 20-point deficit to defeat Ball State in double overtime.

We attended many road games within driving distance, too, including one memorable contest against Notre Dame when Homer asked my father to perform the pregame prayer. This meant we were allowed to ride on the bus with the team, many of whom we already knew. Because Dad was a popular professor, he had many of the players in class and got us onto the court as they worked out. They'd tease us, letting Nate or I "beat them" at one-on-one.

In the fall of 1994, when Bryce Drew first suited up for Valparaiso University, both my father and I were primed to fall precipitously in love with a basketball team. The only problem was we didn't have a great team to fall in love with.

After jumping to Division 1 in 1978, the Valparaiso Crusaders had been a doormat in the Mid-Continent Conference. They'd never won a conference title, and the closest they'd come was the season before, when two other Valpo natives, Casey Schmidt and Dave Redmon, had led the Crusaders to a second-place finish.

Yet with Bryce on the roster, things suddenly changed. Valpo stormed to 20 wins and won the right to host the conference tournament. The people who had packed Viking Gym the year before were now packing the ARC.

Due to a technicality, that year's winner of the Mid-Continent Conference tournament wouldn't receive an automatic berth to the NCAAs. Still, the conference title game, against Western Illinois, would air on ESPN2, the first nationally televised game in school history. The ARC was sweaty and steaming, so crowded that it felt July even though it was only March. It was like the whole town came out to show off for the national audience. My father, brother and I were there, of course; I even briefly made the TV broadcast, shadow boxing Western Illinois' mascot, a Leatherneck.

The game was an instant classic. A three-overtime thriller, Valpo won, 88-85. Hometown kid Redmon blocked a shot at the buzzer to preserve the win and Bryce was named tournament MVP. At home with our little sister, my mother recorded the game; we've still got the tape. One year after failing in the state title game, Bryce had helped deliver us a title of a different sort.

On Selection Sunday, we all waited to see if, somehow, Valpo could steal an at-large bid to the tournament. When they didn't, we were disappointed but not surprised. But when they didn't even receive an invitation to the NIT, it seemed like a confirmation of our worst fears. No matter how hard we worked, our efforts would remain invisible to the larger world. Seniors like Redmon and Schmidt, who had struggled to make the team relevant, would go unrewarded. And this triggered a deeper fear: that the rest of the country didn't know who we were, and didn't really care to. Bryce might never leave Valparaiso after all.

Unfortunately, the fear that Valpo wasn't quite good enough was enforced by Tim Bishop. Everyone in Valpo expected him to excel the way he had in high school, when he'd almost always been the best athlete on the field. But in his first season of rookie ball, he hit .237.

Bryce improved during his sophomore year. Valpo again won the regular-season conference title and stormed into the conference tournament ready to finally clinch the first NCAA bid in school history. Once again, they were matched up with Western Illinois. This time, though, the game was on unfamiliar territory: at the Mark of the Quad Cities in Moline, Ill. Despite being five hours from Valpo, thousands of fans made the drive down for the game.

It was a Tuesday night. School on Wednesday morning could not have mattered less.

This time, the Crusaders played a remarkably easy game. By halftime, the celebration was on in the stands. My father held my brother high on his shoulders so he could get a better view. The pep band blasted the Ray Charles classic, "Hit the Road Jack." This time there was no waterfall of three-pointers to steal victory. We all stayed after the final buzzer to watch our team — especially senior small forward, Anthony Allison, a long time student of my father's — cut down the nets, don hats, and pose with the league championship trophy.



(Photo: Jed Jacobsohn/Getty Images)

On the drive back from Moline, I was too excited to sleep. I stumbled into fourth grade the next day bleary-eyed but elated.

We filled the ARC for Selection Sunday. The cheerleaders led chants, and Homer and some of the players gave speeches. Thousands of us attended, watching the proceedings on a projector screen. When CBS called our name, we didn't even care that they pronounced it Valpa-rize-o (it's Valpa-ray-so). We roared. We were the 14th seed, heading out west to play Arizona.

That week, dreams of upsets danced in my head. So what that Arizona was a nationally-ranked powerhouse playing two hours from home? We had the Mid-Con player of the year, in Allison. And more importantly, we had *Bryce*. Did Arizona have any idea what they were up against?

"Maybe, if we win, they'll finally pronounce our name right," my father joked as we settled in to watch.

Arizona, apparently, knew what they were up against. They scored the game's first seven points. Valpo turned the ball over at a prodigious rate, and couldn't buy a shot. To call it a butt-whooping would be unfair to butt-whoopings; this was a full scale basketball demolition. By halftime, we trailed 51-15. CBS switched to another game midway through the second half, a final, pointed insult to our national embarrassment. Val-who?

The 1996 season did bring one bit of good news, albeit from off the hardwood. Splitting time between rookie ball and Single-A, and only 21, Tim Bishop hit a stellar .317, and stole 23 bases. He'd proven to all of us at home that his initial struggles were a fluke. He was, we all assumed, well on his way to the majors.

Three, two, one ...

Hindsight has the tendency to clarify what really matters in a life. The passage of time is almost like farming — it separates wheat from chaff. Looking back, during Bryce's Valpo years, the country elected and then impeached a president; a war started in the Balkans; the U.S. bombed Iraq. And yet what I remember most vividly from those years are basketball memories: the stale hot dogs and melt-water Cokes my father got for free at the "Crusader Club"; Dad putting his hand on my arm to calm me down while I yelled at a ref for a missed foul; the comforting voice of Todd Ickow, the Crusaders' radio play-by-play man, while listening to road games from far-flung places like Southern Utah and Oral Roberts.

Years later, long after we'd left Valpo, my father finally talked honestly about his devotion to the team.

"It was perverse," he said. "The whole town was obsessed. When they lost, I'd toss and turn in bed, replaying the game. I was a grown man, a professional, and there I was, losing sleep over college kids playing a game." Then, he broke into a smile. "It was kind of fun though, wasn't it?"

It was, and during Bryce's junior year, it got even more fun. Despite the embarrassment of the Arizona loss, there was a lot to look forward to at the start of the season. Bryce still had two more years to develop. And he wasn't Valpo's only promising junior. Jamie Sykes had proven himself a capable backcourt mate. Although he didn't have much of a scoring touch, he was a reliable ball handler and, despite being only 5'11, a smart, fierce defender. Tony Vilcinskis was a gargantuan, 7-foot Lithuanian. Although he hadn't yet developed a soft touch around the basket, and often committed infuriating fouls, his size added real presence in the paint. Lastly, there were the twins, Bill and Bob Jenkins. Identical small forwards, they were defensive

specialists and provided athleticism off the bench. Despite playing in overwhelmingly white Valparaiso, and being led by hometown boy Bryce, the Crusaders were a diverse, international team. Sykes was an Asian-American from California. The Jenkins twins were African-American. And Vilcinskis, along with frontcourt mate Zoran Viscovic, was from Eastern Europe. If the world didn't want to acknowledge Valparaiso, basketball would bring the world to Valpo.

Building off their first tournament berth, the Crusaders won 24 games and beat Western Illinois, yet again, to clinch another appearance in the Big Dance. In place of the previous years' unbridled, naïve optimism, this year there was quiet confidence. Valpo had only lost six games all season. They were rewarded with a 12th seed and a date with Boston College. It was the day's early game, which meant I was going to be stuck at school. Thankfully, this was Indiana. Although there was no official mandate from the principal, if we hadn't been allowed to watch the game I think there would have been a student mutiny. So after lunch, those old television-on-wheel sets were rolled into every classroom at Cook's Corners Elementary School, and in-lieu of geography or algebra, we watched basketball.



(Photo: Elsa/Getty Images)

Crusaders coach Homer Drew looks on as his take takes on Boston during the 1997 NCAA tournament

As Valpo jumped out to an 11-point lead, cheers could be heard from the different classrooms. Bryce was unconscious, scoring 19 points in the first half and making six treys. Although Boston College rebounded from their slow start, by midway through the second half, Valpo still controlled the game.

With just under four minutes left, the final bell rang, ending the school day. My teacher, a stocky woman with a witch's wart on her nose, informed us that no one would be staying late to watch. A frenzy followed, the likes of which I'd never seen: hundreds of elementary school kids, decked in gold and brown, sprinting down hallways that were slick as ice, trying to get to their buses.

Out of breath, I climbed aboard Bus 22. Ms. Tucker, the benevolent driver, smiled.

"Don't worry, I've got you covered," she said, her voice gravelly from decades of cigarettes. The radio blasted through the bus, carrying forth Todd Ickow's familiar voice.

It was an excruciating bus ride. Although Valpo kept it close, Bryce missed a few late shots and Boston College pulled away in the game's final minutes. As the final seconds counted down — *ten, nine, eight* — I sprinted off the bus, not to hug my father to celebrate a victory, but to burst into tears. The very specific, deep pain in the chest I'd felt after the state final had returned. It just didn't seem fair. Fans of schools like Boston College had everything. Folks knew where they were; they'd had Doug Flutie, and their city had Larry Bird! What did we have? Bryce *Drew*? I couldn't imagine a kid in Boston caring this much about college basketball. Sure, they probably wanted to win; but we didn't just want to win — we *needed* this.

My father tried to console me. Bryce would be back for one more year. We'd hung in there. But even he couldn't hide his disappointment. Life in mid-major basketball is fickle. One wrong bounce can mean the end of a dream. In college basketball, a team usually only gets one shot. We'd just had that shot, and we'd missed.

About a month after the Boston College loss, my family went to visit our grandparents in Appleton, Wis. My brother and I were driving with our grandfather up to see some relatives in the village of Gillett. Three generations of my family had grown up amid these rolling glacial hills: my great-grandfather the dairy farmer, my grandfather the insurance agent, my father the preacher and teacher.

It was a drive I'd made dozens, perhaps hundreds of times. The scenery, farm houses nestled amongst wimpling corn fields, was, and remains, comforting to me, in that nondescript way Middle America so often is. It feels like being anywhere and nowhere, all at once. More often than not, it's the kind of scenery that lulls me into a deep, easy sleep.

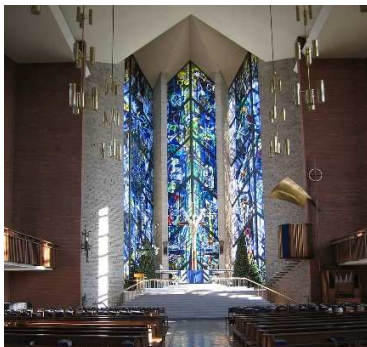
On the radio was a baseball game, early season and meaningless, like almost all games. Driving through the fields with my father and grandfather, listening to the Brewers, slowly drifting off ...

And then an interruption. A newscaster. His voice somber. A professional baseball player had been killed in a tragic accident, he informed us. A minor-leaguer.

A thought crossed my mind — how could it not? What if ...? But it seemed impossible. There are thousands of minor-league baseball players.

"He was with the New York Mets farm club in South Carolina," the announcer said. **"His name was Tim Bishop, from Valpar-rize-o, Indiana."**

The funeral was a week later, at Valparaiso University's Chapel of The Resurrection. A towering, cavernous building with vaulted ceilings and 10-story stained glass windows, it resembles a star rising from the prairie. Tim's sisters eulogized him and read poems he had written. The organist played "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." His high school basketball teammates were among his pallbearers.



(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Tim Bishop attended my childhood church, Christ Lutheran. Yet if I ever met him, I can't remember it. I only saw him play basketball a few times, and those memories are hazy now. This is probably how most people in Valparaiso knew Tim — his legend, and not him. But what he represented was so important to us. He

was one of us who happened to be *good* enough. He was going to make it, and when he did, we could tell people, "He's from Valpo. I grew up there, too."

That spring I spent endless afternoons pedaling my bike through town, long after the flags were returned to full staff and the blue-and-orange memorial ribbons had frayed away to nothing and all the placards outside the restaurants on Calumet had replaced their "Remembering Tim" messages with Early Bird Specials. Because it was the Midwest, I couldn't help tying everything up with basketball: if Valpo could lose State on a miracle heave, if Bryce could lose to a school like Boston College, if Tim Bishop could die before he made it in the world ... what hope was there for me? What had my faith in Tim and Bryce gotten me? Why did the good guys — *my* guys — continue to lose? Bryce had failed on every big stage he'd played on. And sports had taken Tim Bishop into the world and brought him back dead.

To cope, I turned to the very thing that hurt me in the first place. In Valparaiso, it's the only thing to turn to:

Basketball.

As summer waned and the wound began to heal, everyone in Valpo knew we had one more year of Bryce. After the near-miss against Boston College, expectations for the Crusaders were almost impossibly high. It was the senior year for the most successful class in school history.

Almost from the outset, though, the season seemed cursed. Bryce missed the first game of the season with a hurt hamstring. No matter, we thought, it was a warm-up affair against Bethel College, an NAIA school. The ARC was maybe half full.

And then Valpo lost, by 10.

Two days later, eighth-ranked Purdue came to the ARC. It was a date that every fan had circled, an early-season home game against a top-10 team, an opportunity to prove Valpo had grown from the Boston College loss and could compete with the country's best. The ARC was overflowing. But when the team came out for warm-ups, Bryce was wearing a suit. We never had a chance. Purdue jumped out to a big first-half lead and coasted the rest of the way. The loudest ovation of the game came at halftime, when Bryce stepped to center court. He took a microphone and apologized for being unable to play.

Bryce's first game of the season came 10 days later, against the 15th-ranked Stanford Cardinal. Tipoff was at midnight. After much begging and pleading, my mother finally agreed to let me and Nate stay awake to listen to the game with our father, sitting cross-legged on the floor, huddled around the radio in my bedroom.

Still hampered by his injury, Bryce scored 25 points in just 18 minutes. Stanford had no answer for him on defense. Unbelievably lopsided officiating gave the Cardinal an almost unfathomable 48 free throws. In the end, once again, victory over a major program proved elusive. Stanford

held on, 70-65. But those of us all the way back in Valpo who stayed up to listen felt encouraged. With Bryce back, we could compete ... but didn't we know that already?

Part of the joy of loving a mid-major basketball team is watching each individual class grow as a unit. At the upper echelon of the game, there's so much turnover between seasons that it's rare to have players who develop together, who come into their own as one. In contrast, at smaller schools like Valpo, you notice how the players build their games, which further endears you to them.

So we noticed when Bill Jenkins improved his three-point shooting between his junior and senior seasons. We noticed when Jamie got better at the free throw line. We noticed when Tony's touch around the rim softened. It proved to all of us that these guys were the kind of players we hoped they'd be — the kind of players we would be, if given the opportunity. They worked to improve their games even though they weren't playing on national television, even if most of them weren't going to have professional careers. They worked because they loved the game as much as we did.

I think, too, that we liked to believe they worked because they knew how much their wins mattered to us. They read the local papers. They talked to their professors. They could feel the air of expectation during every home game. Sure, they'd won the conference. They'd gone to the Dance. But they hadn't won a game in the NCAA tournament. It's the thing that sets mid-major programs like Valpo apart. Plenty of good basketball teams make the tournament, scare a major program, and are never heard from again. But if you can win a game ... well, that's a different story. If you win a game in the NCAA tournament, people learn how to pronounce your name right.

And yet despite Bryce finally being healthy and despite the many improvements other players had made, the team faltered for the first two months of the season. A loss at St. Louis on Jan. 26 dropped Valpo to 10-10. They already had three losses in conference play.

Then on Jan. 29, Valpo beat Northern Illinois. They wouldn't lose again for the rest of the regular season. They rolled off nine straight conference wins to clinch yet another Mid-Continent Conference regular season title, their fourth, making Valpo the most successful team in Mid-Continent Conference history.

On Feb. 25, Bryce Drew played his last basketball game in Valparaiso, Ind. Fittingly, it was against Western Illinois. I was there with my father and brother. Half the town, it seemed, crammed into the little gym. Bryce didn't send us home disappointed. He made one three-pointer ... another ... and another, nine in all, scoring 33 points. The ovation, when he finally came out, was extraordinary. We wanted him to know what his staying and choosing us had meant. We wanted him to know we loved him.

A week later, in Moline, Ill., Valpo coasted to another Mid-Con tournament championship. My father, brother, and I had made the drive down once again, and after the game, in a conference room in the bowels of the stadium, we celebrated with the team — Bryce and Homer, Jamie and Tony, Bill and Bob. My father's students, our local heroes, all of whom we were on a first-name

basis with. They'd reeled off 11 wins in a row. As each player said a few words of thanks to the fans that had made the long trek on a weeknight, they all voiced a similar refrain: this year would be different.

Five days later, at Selection Sunday, we learned our fate.

Friday, March 13. Oklahoma City. Fourth-seeded Mississippi, champions of the SEC.

Bryce would have one last chance — to prove that he was good enough to make it on the biggest stage possible; to let everyone know where Valparaiso was and how you pronounced our goddamned name.

You can find Tim's shot on YouTube if you want.

They huddle beneath the court at Mackey Arena. Tim and Bryce, sitting next to each other on the bench. Bryce is scrawny. It's jarring, all these years later, to see how young he looks. But Tim, even at that age, is a presence. On the court, he paces impatiently during stoppages. He's well built, broad in the shoulders.

They break the huddle, take to the court. They wear mesh green jerseys and shorts that, nowadays, look almost comically short and tight. The scoreboard shows the score: East Chicago Central 82, Valparaiso 81. There are 2.8 seconds left. The crowd throbs with nervous anticipation. You can feel, just through that noise, what this means.

David Furlin takes the ball beneath the hoop.

Three.

Tim curls off a screen, catches the ball on the right block.

Two.

In one motion, he rises. Two defenders collapse on him. One looks to have him blanketed so thoroughly that it seems impossible for him to get a shot off.

One.

But somehow, there it goes, kissing sweetly off the glass, rattling home. The kind of shot that's instinctive, that comes from years upon years of repetition, of knowing the exact weight of the shot, the exact spot on the board you need to hit.

"Oh my gawsh, he hit it!" the announcer squeals, his long, lilting prairie voice breaking.

On the court, Tim throws his arms in the air. He jumps up, once, with pure joy. He bends his knees, and once more, leaps as high as he can into the air. The video cuts to the Valpo crowd, a faceless horde in white. They mob one another, falling over in paroxysms of ecstasy. How can this possibly mean so much?

Again and again, he curls and catches. The clock ticks down. He shoots. The ball rattles home. The announcer's voice breaks. And then he jumps into the air, as high as he can, a small-town boy living the fantasy of small-town boys everywhere.

How many times did he imagine this moment in his driveway at home? How many times, with the day failing, his dinner getting cold, did he take the ball, and begin the countdown? Three, two, one ...

The ball settles through the basket, and he jumps into the late day's last light. He's alone, there's no one to see, no one but his father, watching from just inside the front door.

Valparaiso-Ole Miss tipped off shortly after noon. I was sitting in my sixth-grade English classroom. The television blinked silently in the corner while we — ostensibly — sat and read Gary Paulsen's "Hatchet." And yet with every Valpo basket, we cheered softly, until at last our teacher relented, told us to put our books away, and turned the volume up.

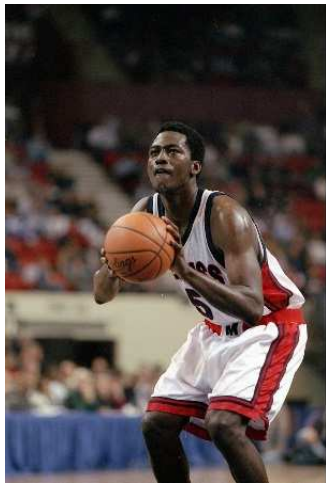
From the outset, it was clear Valpo wasn't overmatched. We jumped out to an early nine-point lead before things tightened at halftime. The second half saw the lead seesaw back and forth. As the clock began ticking down, the classroom grew quieter and quieter. Four years of dreaming would come down to whether our seniors could execute in the final four minutes.

During a timeout, I went to the bathroom. Every classroom in the school was glued to the television. As I recklessly ran to the toilet, I remember sliding on the waxed linoleum floor, nearly crashing into a row of lockers.

With two minutes left in the game, English class ended. Another mad dash in the hallways ensued as we all tried to reach our next class. Mine happened to be gym. My best friend and I ran through the halls together, panicking.

"There are no TV's in the gym," my friend cried. "What are we going to do?"

We found our teacher standing in the hallway outside the locker room, a boombox on his shoulder. He was a tall, lean, tan man, his smile brutally white. "Did you really think I'd let you guys miss the end of this game?" he said. And so 60 sixth-grade boys piled, appropriately, onto our basketball court to listen to the final minute of the most important game of our lives.



(Photo: Stephen Dunn/Getty Images)

Down two, with eight seconds left, Bryce short-armed and missed a wide open three-pointer. Ansu Sesay, the SEC player of the year, grabbed the rebound, and with four seconds left, was fouled. I think all of us — in the gym, in the town — hung our heads. It was impossible for me not to think back to that State title game four years before, about the disaster against Arizona, the close call against Boston College. And it was impossible not to think about Tim Bishop. I felt that pain coming back, the pain of heartbreak and disappointment. The pain of being a kid in a small town and realizing your best isn't good enough; of realizing that in sports, the good guys almost never win. We'd done everything right. Bryce had done everything right. And in the end, we just wouldn't be good enough.

Sesay, Todd Ickow informed us, was a 74-percent free throw shooter. He stepped to the foul line with a chance to end the game, our season, our years of dreaming. And then he missed the first free throw.

In the gym, some of us perked up.

Homer called his final timeout. After an excruciating commercial break, Sesay stepped back to the line.

He missed that one, too. Ickow held his breath while the ball was tipped.

"Valpo ball," he breathlessly informed us.

A few of us clapped or yelled.

What had been four seconds was now a mere 2.5. We were 94 feet from our basket, down by two. Anyone who knows basketball — and who knows basketball better than a 12-year-old Indiana boy? — understands the near impossibility of this situation. There's hope, of course; there's always hope. It's why we watch sports, because sometimes our faith is rewarded in the most improbable way possible.

So sure, there was still hope. But it was a fool's gold hope; winning would take something approaching a miracle. As Jamie Sykes lined up beneath his own basket to inbound the ball, I did what the whole town of Valparaiso did:

I closed my eyes and I prayed.

I can find this video on YouTube, too. Heck, you can find it a dozen times. But there's only one with Todd Ickow's call, the call I heard sitting in my middle school gymnasium with my classmates.

"Sykes, fakes, fakes ..." Ickow begins while Jamie Sykes, all 5-feet-11 inches of him, pumps his right arm, duping his 6'4 defender into the air. "A long pass ..." as Jamie lets the ball fly. "Bill Jenkins ..." as Bill leaps over two taller defenders and, in one motion, tips the ball to Bryce Drew, streaking down the sideline, just feet from his father.

"Drew, three for the wiiiiin," Ickow says, his voice drawing itself out in a plea.

We waited, opening our eyes.

"Gooooooooood!" Ickow's voice shatters. "Good! Valpo wins! Valpo wins! Valpo wins!"

In my gymnasium, in every classroom and every living room and every bar of my hometown, there was pandemonium. There were piles of bodies, hugs, high-fives.

Valpo had finally won.

In Oklahoma City, Bryce Drew did what I would do an hour later, when I finally burst in my front door: he embraced his father.

OK, my father and I might have run around the house screaming at the top of our lungs first. But we hugged, too.

Two days later, Valpo beat Florida State in overtime to advance to the Sweet 16. That week, when the team returned from Oklahoma City, ESPN and CBS and every other news outlet in America had come to Valparaiso — and they finally learned how to pronounce our name right, too.

A week later, my whole family made the trip with over 5,000 fans to St. Louis, where Valpo would play Rhode Island. Though Valpo was by far the smallest team in the Sweet 16, they sold the most tickets. The odds are you don't know how that game ended. That's because, this time, there was no miracle. Down three, with 45 seconds left, Bryce missed a three from almost the exact same spot he'd made the shot from the week before. Rhode Island made their free throws. And just like that, it was over.

We didn't want it to end. This team, this player, meant so much to us. We'd watched him for eight years. The jubilant Rhode Island fans filed out of the arena, but we couldn't bring ourselves to leave. Not yet. So we did the only thing we could think of: all 5,000 of us stood up and we cheered. For fifteen minutes, we cheered. Finally, the team came back out. They went to center court. We stood, and we cheered, our voices going hoarse, our faces weary with tears. They waved — Jamie and Tony, Bill and Bob. Bryce.

Then they disappeared down the tunnel. And were gone.



In some ways, the 1998 team was my family's last good moment in Valparaiso. Two years later, after a falling out with the university's administration, and after 42 years in the Midwest, Dad had had enough. In the summer of 2000, he moved the family to Philadelphia.

At first, I was destroyed. But with time, I adjusted to life in a bigger city. Dad's academic career flourished; my mother was able to succeed as a businesswoman. Their marriage, deeply strained by their time in Valpo, grew stronger. Encouraged by a teacher, I took up writing. While friends back in Valpo got married and settled in towns around Indiana, I left Philadelphia, too. While living in Greece and painting houses, I wrote a novel before ultimately settling in Istanbul, where I live and write — Istanbul, a city as opposite Valparaiso as humanly possible.

Time and distance has helped me to see much of what was wrong with Valparaiso — the deference to traditional beliefs, the mistrust of those outside the tight-knit community, the crushing weight of communal expectations. Of course, those were also the things that made Valpo such a comforting place to live as a boy. As I've grown up and stepped out into the world, I've seen things that would've been unimaginable to a kid who grew up worshipping Tim and Bryce. And yet one thing has remained true: out of everything I've seen, nothing has brought me more joy than that instant when Bryce's shot fell through the net against Ole Miss. In 2013, when I walked into a bar in Rhodes, Greece, and found a group of men watching Valpo play Michigan State in the NCAA tournament, I smiled, swelling with pride as I told them:

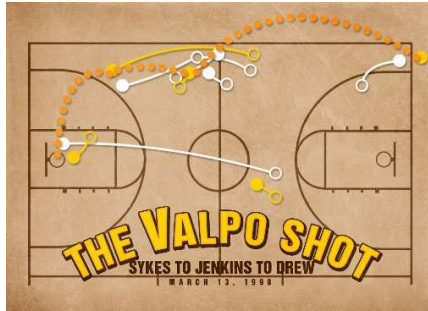
"I grew up there."

I don't want to make too big of a deal out of it — because at the end of the day, how much can a game really matter? — but Bryce's shot helped to shape me. Heck, it shaped all of us who grew up or lived in Valpo. For one shining moment, lives that were far too often filled with quiet disappointment and anonymous struggle became something bigger. When that shot fell through, and Todd Ickow screamed to the heavens with joy, it meant that we were good enough. It meant that people knew how to pronounce our hometown's name. It meant that when we told people we were from Valparaiso, people knew where that was.

The shot has become a part of NCAA tournament lore. This week, or next, you're almost guaranteed to see it, even though it happened 17 years ago. The son who made the shot is now the coach. He left and played in the NBA and then in Spain and then he came back — back to Valparaiso, which is still a place where basketball means everything. He's led his own team to

the NCAA tournament, the hallowed ground upon which small schools and towns can, for a few hours, dream of being known.

Over the next few weeks, you and I and everyone else will be bombarded by the 24-hour entertainment machine that now surrounds that hallowed ground. There will be brackets galore, advertisements from sponsors paying millions or billions for air time, and young men waiting to make the next leap and start making their own millions, all to play a game. Sports, we can admit, are too often a corporate mess. It's easy to forget why we watch in the first place.



And then, on the first Thursday or Friday of March Madness, some small school from a small place no one's ever heard of — Hampton or Bucknell or maybe even Valparaiso — will hang around with one of the blue bloods, one of the schools that reaps the benefits of all those ad dollars. More often than not, the blue bloods win. The final shot rims out.

But every once in a while, as the final seconds tick down, something unexpected happens, something sublime. And even if we've escaped those small towns, even if we felt stifled and trapped by them, we remember what it was like to fall life-or-death in love with the local team. We remember what it was like when the only hope and dream was to be the kid who hit the most famous shot in town.

If you don't believe me, take a drive through Valparaiso or some other small town this week. Somewhere on the streets, I bet you'll find an 11-year-old kid and his younger brother. They know the name of somebody like Bryce Drew, and maybe they know the name of a Tim Bishop, too.

The day is dying on them, these brothers. They're shooting hoops, of course. Their father is calling them in; dinner's ready. They keep begging for five more minutes, just five more; just one more. Finally they're out of time. They have one last shot.

The older brother passes to the younger.

Three, he calls.

The younger brother tips the ball back.

Two, he says.

The older brother catches the ball on the right wing. He plants, squares his shoulders. He's practiced his whole life for this shot.

One.

About the Author



Justin Pahl is a freelance writer living in Istanbul, Turkey. He grew up in the Midwest before moving to Philadelphia, where he studied. His non-fiction has appeared in “Philadelphia” magazine and “The Guide: Istanbul,” while fiction has been published in “The Monarch Review” and “The Fountain.” He is finishing his first novel, “How It All Ends.”