December, 2016

Kris Jenkins: A hero's return

Jack Styczynski
Kris Jenkins: A hero’s return

By Jack Styczynski

Four-point-seven seconds. Villanova, time to go length of the court, with Arcidiacono, three seconds at midcourt, gives it to Jenkins, for the championship... Villanova! Phenomenal! The national champions, with Jenkins hitting the winner at the buzzer!
— Jim Nantz play-by-play, April 4, 2016

Bobby Plump has nothing on Kris Jenkins.
Oh sure, his Indiana state championship-winning shot for Milan High School in 1954 might have been as dramatic as Jenkins’ was for Villanova last spring, but it’s only as well known because the movie Hoosiers was loosely based on it some 32 years later.

Furthermore, if you ask anybody who made that shot, the answer is far more likely to be Jimmy Chitwood of Hickory High, the faux character and school names in the film.

Jenkins, by contrast, needs no stylized flick. His shot made him a nationally recognized hero in real time and everyone knows his name. His life is forever changed.

Of course, the full picture of how is still to be determined as Jenkins first plays out his senior season with the Wildcats in 2016-17.

For a better idea, you might look back to five NCAA championship game shots that basketball buffs will probably agree are most comparable to that of Jenkins, and what happened to the players who made them.

Of those, only two were buzzer-beaters insofar as the opponent had no real opportunity to respond, although in neither instance did time expire with the ball traveling toward the goal, as was the case with Jenkins.

Also unlike the Jenkins jumper, both were putbacks of missed shots.

The first was by Vic Rouse in 1963, cleaning up a Les Hunter miss in overtime to give Loyola of Chicago a victory over top-ranked Cincinnati. Adding to the drama was that the Ramsblers had rallied from 15 points down in the second half to force the extra session, culminating with a Jerry Harkness basket at the end of regulation.

The second was by North Carolina State’s Lorenzo Charles 20 years later against Houston, dunking home a Dereck Whittenburg air ball and sending coach Jim Valvano into a frenzy (as opposed to ultra-composed Villanova coach Jay Wright, who merely mouthed the word “bang” as Jenkins fired and then shrugged on the way to a customary post-game handshake).

The other three legendary shots were jumpers but not buzzer beaters, and one of them was not even a game winner.

In 1982, Michael Jordan hit a clincher for North Carolina, which might be the best known of all the shots simply because of who Jordan eventually became, but must also be considered the least dramatic due to the relative eternity the opponent had to respond and what transpired in that span.

Georgetown had time to get the ball upcourt and begin a set play before Fred Brown threw an inexplicable (or possibly panicked) errant pass to James Worthy, who was out of position on the perimeter and guarding no one. And after Worthy was fouled and missed two free throws, the Hoyas had another two seconds for a potential miracle win, but a Sleepy Floyd halfcourt heave sailed harmlessly into the hands of Sam Perkins.

In 1987, Indiana’s Keith Smart hit a baseline jumper with four seconds left to beat Syracuse.

What many don’t remember is that Smart also scored a basket on his team’s previous possession and then quickly fouled a shaky free-throw shooter – Derrick Coleman – whose front-end miss put the Hoosiers in position to take the lead. And for good measure, Smart followed up his biggest shot by intercepting Coleman’s long inbounds pass, sealing the victory.

And in 2008, Mario Chalmers hit a game-tying 3-pointer with 2.1 seconds remaining to cap a nine-point Kansas comeback in the final two minutes and force overtime with Memphis, where the Jayhawks ultimately prevailed.

It was taken from nearly the same spot beyond the arc as the Jenkins shot, but in context is probably more similar to the crazy trey North Carolina’s Marcus Paige hit last April to tie the game against Villanova moments before, except there was no subsequent game winner for the opponent, so Chalmers gets the “hero” tag that Paige does not.

Assuming that Jenkins is not about to succeed Jordan as the greatest basketball player of all time, his destiny is more likely to resemble that of Rouse, Charles, Smart or Chalmers, who could all easily look back on that “one shining moment” as the most euphoric of their lives and bask in it eternally.

Chalmers is still playing professionally, and next to Jordan, has had the most post-collegiate success on the court. He won two NBA titles in Miami playing alongside LeBron James and Dwyane Wade, and although generally considered a role player, he has had some more big moments and holds the Heat single-game records for steals (9) and three-point field goals made (10).

He played for the Memphis Grizzlies last season and tore his Achilles tendon and was rumored to be close to signing a deal with an NBA team going into this season.

Coincidentally, Smart was hired as an assistant coach with the Grizzlies this summer and is also coming off a recovery after having been diagnosed with a rare form of skin cancer on his cheek last year. Like Jenkins, he returned for his senior season after becoming a hero, but Indiana lost to Richmond in the first round of the NCAA Tournament, with Smart

It’s been humbling, the whole experience. It’s definitely been something that I never imagined.”
— Villanova’s Kris Jenkins
missing a late shot that could have won the game. His professional playing career consisted of two games with the San Antonio Spurs, followed by several years bouncing between teams overseas and in American minor leagues.

Since then, he rose from assistant to head coach at his first three NBA stops in Cleveland, Golden State and Sacramento, and was most recently an assistant in Miami before taking his current job.

A few years ago when Indiana was again playing Syracuse in the NCAA Tournament, Smart spoke to current Basketball Times contributor Mike Lopresti about his championship clincher. “No matter what, for the rest of my days, I’m going to be attached to that moment,” he said.

“I would still have been the same person, but the attention you got for making a shot to win a championship probably opened doors for you, and then you had to show what you’re capable of doing.”

He told the Associated Press that same week that he thinks about the shot pretty much every day. “Probably every other day something happens,” he said. “I’ll go somewhere to eat, or when we travel, I check into the hotel and somebody sees the name tag on the bag and they’ll mention something about ‘The Shot’ then. Very seldom does a week go by without something that happens.”

The other two heroes – Charles and Rouse – are both deceased.

Charles was a bus driver when he was killed in a tragic 2011 accident en route to pick up a group for a corporate function and is buried not far from Valvano in the same cemetery. He was only a sophomore role player when he became a hero, but blossomed into a star for his final two collegiate seasons, averaging 18 ppg and earning first-team all-ACC honors in each. Interestingly, the Wolfpack didn’t even make the NCAA Tournament to defend its title in his junior season, but rebounded to reach a regional final in his senior campaign before falling to St. John’s. His pro playing career was very similar to Smart’s except that it lasted longer – 36 games with the Atlanta Hawks followed by several years bouncing between teams overseas and in American minor leagues.

After his days on the court ended, Charles became a driver back in North Carolina, sometimes transporting Tar Heels and Duke athletic teams and even wearing the gear of what would otherwise be considered his N.C. State rivals. He would share his moment of glory when folks inevitably asked, although always humbly, as he often expressed surprise that he was still discussing it decades later, including once with future president Barack Obama when he was campaigning in 2008. Part of his email address was “buzzerbeater.”

Rouse’s buzzer beater concluded his junior season. He had a strong senior campaign but dislocated his shoulder and Loyola fell to Michigan in the NCAA Tournament.

He was chosen by Cincinnati in the seventh round of the 1964 NBA draft, but his injury prompted doctors’ warnings not to play for two years, so he decided not to.