

By Bill Glavin

The Long Courtship

Six years in the making, the 1996 final four featured a standout performance by Rutgers-off the court.

It was only December, but all the pressure of the Final Four "was already upon the officials gathered in a conference room at the Brendan Byrne Arena—soon to be rechristened the Continental Airlines Arena. For years, the people in this room—representatives of the NCAA, the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, and Rutgers—had been meeting each month to plan the 1996 edition of college basketball's premiere event—the NCAA Division I men's basketball championship. Four months remained until March Madness reached its climax, but already there was evidence that it would be one of the most coveted tickets in sports history. "It's mind-boggling," asserted Kevin MacConnell, assistant director of athletics for Rutgers. "Scalpers get-

ting thousands of dollars for a mediocre seat."

A key player in the planning of the tournament, MacConnell was among those from Rutgers who played an integral part in luring the Final Four to the Meadowlands Sports Complex and convincing the NCAA to select the University as the host institution for the six-day event. In that role, Rutgers provided staffers who helped plan game management, marketing and promotion, and media relations. Rutgers also hosted the 35th annual National Association of Basketball Coaches (NABC) All-Star Game at the 9,000-seat Rutgers Athletic Center (the RAC) and recruited 100 alumni volunteers to serve as escorts, greeters, and gofers; to man information booths; and to assist coaches at youth clinics.

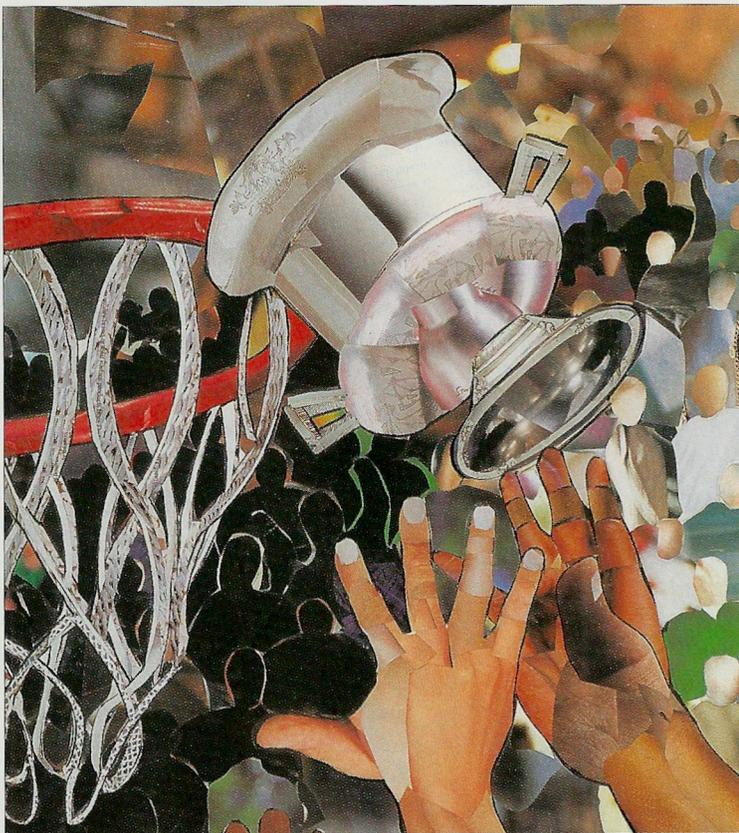
In exchange for these services, Rutgers' name was in front of the public in a major way: in the media and on tickets, advance materials, and game banners. "For us, hosting the Final Four wasn't about money," says Fred Gruninger, the director of athletics for Rutgers and another member of the Final Four planning team. The University, says Gruninger, netted only a \$75,000 honorarium. "It was about all the intangibles you get from involvement in college basketball's premier event."

At subsequent meetings, he and MacConnell helped put the final stamp on the array of activities that surrounded the games: team practices; coaches' clinics; the NABC All-Star Game at the RAC; a staged salute to the Final Four at Radio City Music Hall in New York; the annual dinner convention of the

The role of host for the Final Four tournament seems to fit Rutgers this year. After all, it is the 20th anniversary of the Scarlet Knights' only court appearance in the Division I championship series.

NABC at the New York Hilton Hotel; the four-day Fan Jam at the New York Coliseum involving basketball enthusiasts of all ages; and hospitality receptions for dignitaries from NCAA member institutions and other VIPs.

"For every person who attended the games, three others drove or flew into the area to take part in other activities," says Bob Jennings, director of human resources for the New Jersey Sports



and Exposition Authority (NJSEA), the agency that runs the Meadowlands. "Business executives, fans, and other people numbering in the thousands routinely attend a Final Four."

Rutgers' efforts to win the host designation can be traced to the late David "Sonny" Werblin (RC'31), a legendary figure in the sports world. Werblin, the first chairman of NJSEA, hired Les Unger (RC'52), the assistant director of public relations at Rutgers, to manage public affairs at the Meadowlands in 1976—the year the Scarlet Knights went to the Final Four in men's basketball. Werblin forged a strong alliance between NJSEA and the University; Unger, who worked for 22 years at Rutgers with Gruninger, strengthened that alliance. It was therefore not a coincidence that the Rutgers football team played in the first collegiate event ever held at Giants Stadium, the 1983 Garden State Bowl; nor that the first collegiate basketball event at the Byrne Arena pitted Rutgers men's and women's teams against those of UCLA; nor that Giants Stadium has been the site of many Rutgers home games.

So in 1984, with the Byrne Arena set to house the first- and second-round preliminaries to the Eastern Regional Finals, NCAA officials looked for a member institution to serve as host. Despite the fact that Seton Hall University was closer in proximity and would soon play its home games in the arena, they turned to Rutgers. "Rutgers was the state university, was larger than Seton Hall, and had already established a relationship with the Meadowlands people," explains Unger. Two years after successfully hosting the preliminaries, Rutgers was tapped to host the Eastern Regional Finals and performed without a hitch.

In the ensuing years, seven regionals held at the Byrne Arena were hosted by Rutgers. All of the organization and planning of the regionals funneled through MacConnell in the role of tournament manager and Gruninger as tournament director. "Our comfort level with Rutgers was a major factor; we knew they had quality people on their staff," says William R. Hancock, director of the NCAA Division I men's basketball championship. "They had shown over the years that they understood what it

took to put on a Final Four."

Experienced with the regionals, the Meadowlands and Rutgers were now ready for the next level. As did 15 other groups, they placed a bid with the NCAA to hold one of the Final Four tournaments scheduled between 1994 and 1997. In July 1989, the NCAA invited four of the 16 bidders to make their case personally, at the Jack Nicholas Golf Resort in Trevor City, Michigan; among the successful petitioners was the Meadowlands group.

A regional contingent that included Gruninger, Unger, NJSEA president and chief executive officer Robert Mulcahy III, New York City Convention Bureau chair Marshall Murdaugh, and broadcaster Bill Raftery made formal presentations and courted committee members. On the line were millions of dollars in economic benefits for the region: The group was determined to make the best pitch it could. The *coup de grace* was a 10-minute videotape extolling the virtues of the Meadowlands and Manhattan. Footage included a shot of former president Richard Nixon sitting comfortably in the stands at a past regional game and testimonials from Duke University coach Mike Krzyzewski and Duke star Danny Ferry.

A month later the NCAA announced that the 1996 Final Four had been awarded to New York City, but that New Jersey—specifically—the Meadowlands—would be the site for the games. For the first time since 1981, when the games were played at the Spectrum in Philadelphia, the East would host the Final Four. Some observers close to the selection process were surprised at the committee's decision; seating capacity in the Byrne Arena was only 18,500—low, compared, for example, to the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis, which seats 38,000 and is the site for next year's Final Four. In fact, the year after the committee gave the nod for '96 to the New York metropolitan region, the NCAA changed the minimum seating capacity for Final Four arenas; in the future, bidders must guarantee space for 30,000 spectators.

The small size of the Byrne Arena, coupled with the throng of corporate executives, alumni donors, high-ranking public officials, and media in the New York/New Jersey market put tickets

and press credentials for the 1996 tournament games at a premium. In early 1995 more than 91,000 entries were received for a ticket drawing that awarded only 1,000 seats reserved for the public. Controversy surrounded the allotment of tickets as early as this past February, when some state Democratic officials accused the NJSEA of hoarding tickets for Republicans and business associates. The NCAA's Hancock says that this ticket quagmire occurs in many cities that hold the tournament and that the NCAA does its best to make the event accessible. "Because there are so few tickets awarded to the games," he says, "all the other Final Four activities sponsored by the NCAA are partially put on to involve the local community."

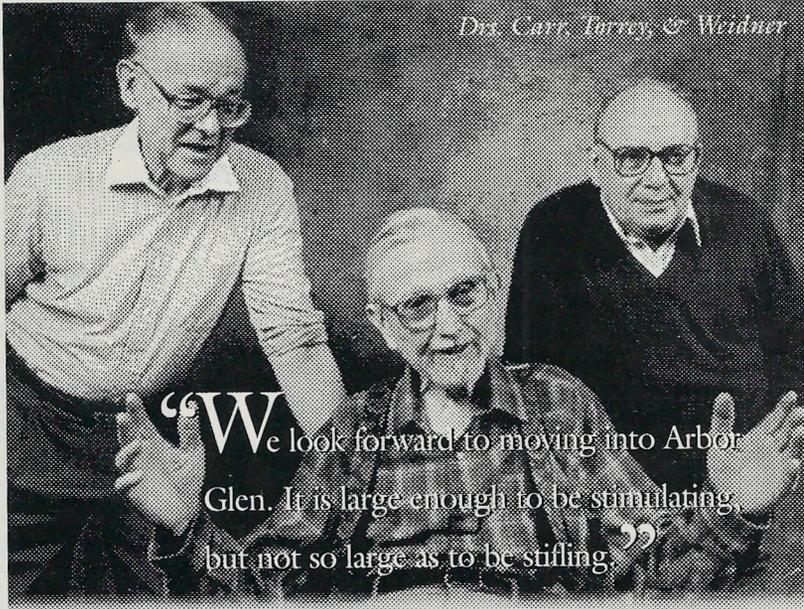
Soon after the 1996 Final Four was awarded, a Meadowlands Organizing Committee (MOC)—composed of representatives of the NJSEA and Rutgers—was formed to organize and administer all facets of the event: media operations, hospitality, lodging, transportation, and decorations. MOC also began a quest to raise \$1.5 million from corporate sponsors to help the NCAA offset expenses. From Rutgers, President Francis L. Lawrence was named one of three general chairs of the committee; Gruninger and MacConnell were appointed to the executive committee; and Peter Kowalski, director of sports information, was selected co-chair of media relations for the games. "We've gone to Final Fours over the last several years to learn how other cities handle all the planning and hoopla that surrounds the games," says Gruninger. "In the regionals, the NCAA mostly leaves it to the host school to run things. At the Final Four, however, about a dozen NCAA staff people come in about two weeks before and really get involved."

Recruited to assist the MOC and the NCAA staff were 1,100 trained volunteers chosen from 1,600 applicants. Among those who participated were 100 Rutgers alumni—about half of whom belong to a Scarlet Knights basketball booster group called the Court Club. For their work, volunteers were allowed to keep their uniforms—a jacket, golf shirt, and cap—but could not enter the games. The Rutgers Pep Band, which played at several open-house recruitment days and training sessions in the

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Meadowlands, received rave reviews from the NJSEA's Jennings: "One of the more enjoyable activities was interacting with the Pep Band. They couldn't have been more cooperative and were tremendous goodwill ambassadors for Rutgers."

In mid-1993, MacConnell and Kowalski took two-week hiatuses from Rutgers to work full time on the Final Four. MacConnell was involved in scheduling practices, providing and maintaining equipment, and staffing locker room and media entrances. "Kevin helped with many of the unforeseen problems that inevitably occur: overbooked hotels, routes to the arena that are suddenly blocked by construction, people putting up their own banners or marketing unauthorized merchandise," says Hancock. He himself rolled up his shirt-sleeves to perform many crucial tasks that the fan at home would never dream necessary—visiting the control room at the Lincoln Tunnel to help formulate a traffic-congestion plan, for example.

Before Kowalski even set foot on Meadowlands soil, he had to review an NCAA media guidelines manual that was more than an inch thick. The manual, he says, demonstrates the detail that goes into planning each Final Four. It covered everything from media credentials and the placement of reporters, broadcasters, photographers, and cameramen to the staffing of pressrooms and the requirements for telephones, FAX machines, and photocopiers. Before the games, Kowalski helped make sure the equipment was in place and functioning and that seats were properly designated for the media. During the games, he was busy preparing press and interview rooms, ushering photographers, reporters, and broadcasters to their locations, and escorting coaches and players to postgame press conferences.

Back in his office at the RAC, Kowalski says that the six days of the Final Four were worth everyone of the six years that went into planning it. "I was told to expect the unexpected and to do anything the NCAA asked," reflects Kowalski. "I expected it to be stressful, but going in I knew that it was going to be the kind of once-in-a-lifetime experience that I'd never forget." 0

Hill Glovin is the senior editor of Rutgers Magazine.