

“The Game of the Century”

by **Scott Sosebee**

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(June 10, 2022) Texas is much more known for its college football teams and athletes than it is for any other sport. Football reigns supreme in our state, of that there is little doubt, but the sport that comes the closest to rivaling football in the number of bona fide stars from Texas is basketball. Legends such as Clyde Drexler, Nancy Lieberman-Cline, Tamika Catchings, Larry Johnson, K.C. Jones, and Shaquille O’Neal are from Texas or have Texas connections. Texas was also the home of what may have been the most important college basketball game ever played because it changed the sport and opened it up to a much wider national audience, a gateway to the spectacle that is “March Madness” today. When the University of Houston and the UCLA Bruins played each other in a “made-for-television” wonder in 1968, it was dubbed the “Game of the Century” by a slavering media.

The elements were all in place for the game to be played on January 20, 1968. The venue was Houston’s Astrodome, then known as the “Eighth Wonder of the World,” an engineering marvel that was the world’s first “domed stadium” and probably the most famous sports and event site in the world. It was the home of the Houston Astros and the Houston Oilers, but it was much more than that. It had already hosted a president, more than twenty astronauts returning from space, rock concerts, rodeos, and even a demolition derby just a week before the scheduled basketball game. The two teams each sported the appropriate narratives. UCLA, ranked #1 in the nation was coached by the legendary John Wooden, they were in the midst of a 47 game winning streak, and had won three of the previous four National Championships (they would go on to win an astounding six more in a row, and seven of the next eight for ten in a span of twelve years), and had perhaps the greatest college basketball player ever on their roster, Lew Alcindor, who would, of course, change his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar when he converted to Islam in 1971.

If UCLA was the “establishment,” then the University of Houston Cougars were the upstarts. Young, brash coach Guy V. Lewis had built a powerhouse at UH by recruiting nationally and playing an up-tempo game, one that critics—ones who worshipped Wooden’s very structured game plans—derisively dubbed “street ball.” They were led by Elvin Hayes, a powerful 6’9” star that Lewis got from tiny Rayville Louisiana in the northeastern part of the state. UCLA and Houston were the two best teams in the nation, and Alcindor and Hayes were considered the #1 and #2 players in the game as well.

Guy Lewis had been on a mission to build the Cougars into a national powerhouse for years. The native East Texan—he was born in Arp—came to UH in 1956. The Cougars were in those days almost an afterthought when it came to Texas college athletics, although both Lewis and football coach Bill Yeoman had begun to build strong teams, primarily by being one of the first schools in the state to begin to recruit African American athletes. Still, the “establishment” considered them “substandard.” Darrel Royal once derisively referred to it as “Cougar High” before a football game between the two teams in 1968—a game that ended in a surprising 20-20 tie—and although UH had sought to join the Southwest Conference for over a decade, they were not accepted until 1976.

The lack of a conference affiliation made UH an “independent,” which Lewis used to his advantage in building his basketball program. The status allowed him to arrange games with top national teams, such as UCLA. Scheduled at first to be played on the UH campus, Lewis thought that he could use the game as a showcase for his program. He wanted the game to be played in the new Astrodome—it had only opened in 1965—and he wanted it to be on national television in primetime. There, he encountered a problem. While Harris County Judge Roy Holfeinz the father of the Astrodome, agreed, no television network wanted to broadcast the game because college basketball did not garner ratings in those days. That did not bother a young television entrepreneur, Eddie Einhorn. He thought college basketball was on the verge of becoming a phenomenon, so he paid \$27,000 for the right to syndicate the game through TV Sports Inc. He convinced more than eighty national broadcast stations to cancel their regular programming and show the game. It would become a hit.

The game itself also had some barriers, principally the health of UCLA star Alcindor. The Bruins had played the University of California a week before the game, and he had his eye severely scratched. It caused him great pain and double-vision, and he had missed the game before entirely. Wooden was non-committal about whether or not he would play. The other problem was the venue. The Astrodome was principally designed for football and baseball and configuring it for a basketball game was a problem. They had to borrow a basketball court and then figure out how to install it in the Dome. Most of the seats were far, far

away from the court as well, which did not bother Einhorn because the “audience” would come from television.

The game itself lived up to its billing. Alcindor played, but he was ineffective, scoring just 18 points. However, UCLA was a strong team, and the game was a back-and-forth affair. Hayes was the star, scoring 39 points, including two free throws with 28 seconds left that secured a 71-69 UH victory. It was a hit on television as well. Twenty million viewers watched, the largest audience for a college basketball game ever. It would also be a catalyst to what would become “March Madness.” UCLA and UH would face off once again in the NCAA Final Four. UCLA, this time with a healthy Alcindor, got their revenge and beat the Cougars in the semi-final and went on to win another National Championship. But, more people tuned in to watch UCLA and UH in the semi-final than watched the final between UCLA and North Carolina. TV execs took notice, and college basketball became a “must-see” for the rest of the decade. A huge part of that was the appeal of the “Game of the Century.”

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