

JOHN
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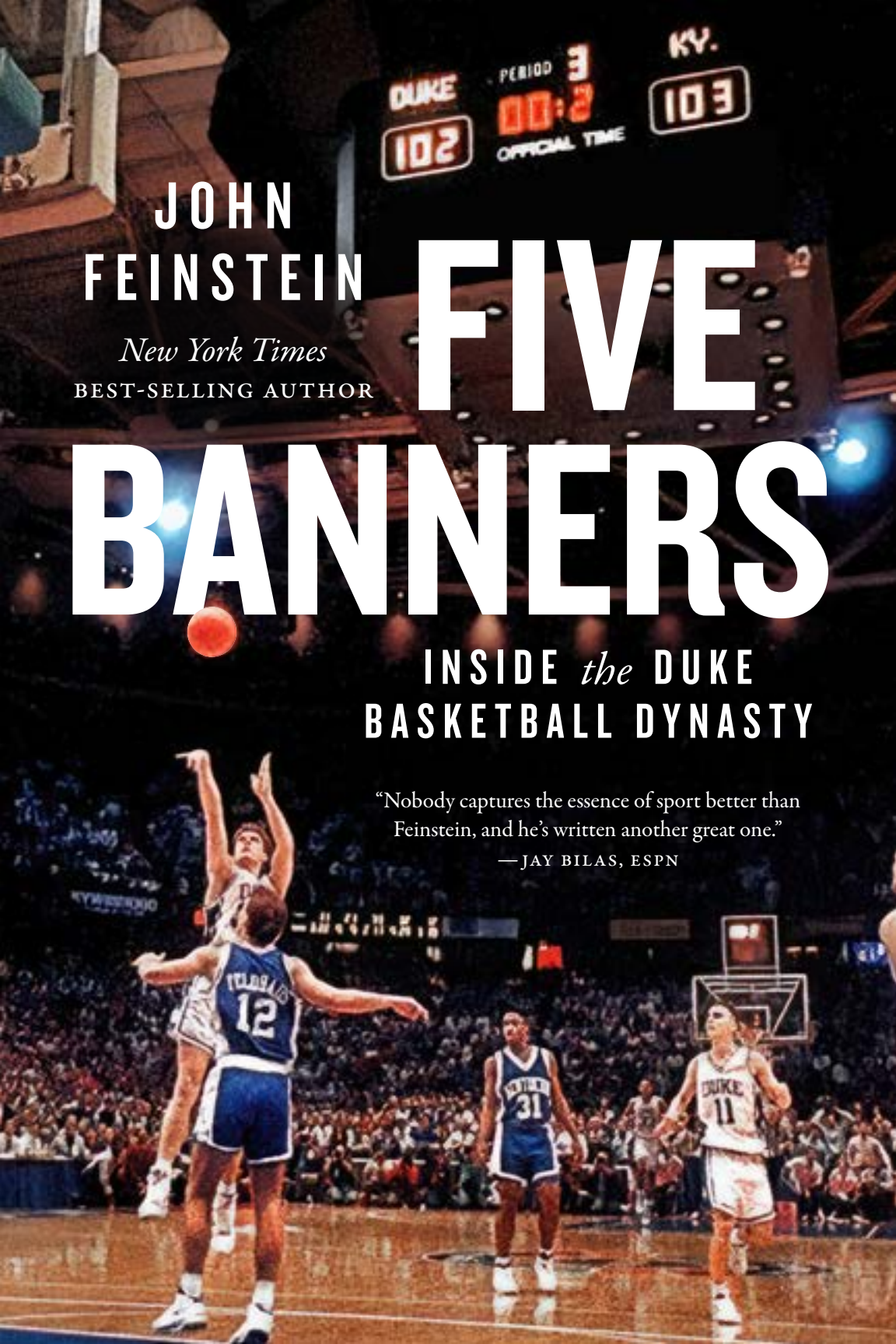
FIVE

BANNERS

INSIDE *the* DUKE
BASKETBALL DYNASTY

"Nobody captures the essence of sport better than
Feinstein, and he's written another great one."

—JAY BILAS, ESPN



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JOHN
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INSIDE *the*
DUKE BASKETBALL
DYNASTY

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DUKE

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Cover art: Duke's Christian Laettner releases his game-winning shot
against Kentucky as the clock expires in overtime of the NCAA East
Regional finals in the Spectrum in Philadelphia, March 28, 1992.
(Photo by Chuck Liddy/The Herald-Sun)

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FOR THE DUKE BASKETBALL CLASS OF 1986,
THE CLASS THAT HAD FAITH IN
MIKE KRZYZEWSKI BEFORE, AS HE PUT IT,

“there was reason to have faith in me”

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Acknowledgments

I want to thank, first and foremost, my agent, Andrew Blauner, and Duke University Press director Dean Smith (no, not that Dean Smith) for coming up with the idea to have me write a book about Duke Basketball to celebrate the school's 100th anniversary. I can honestly say it was a joy ride.

I'd also like to thank Mike Krzyzewski, not only for winning those five titles but also for helping me track down many of the key players from his teams. Of course, the really hard work was done by his executive assistant, Gerry Brown, who gathered the contact information and passed it on to me. I'm very grateful to both of them.

Getting the players to respond to my various emails and texts was the critical next step, and most were quite willing to talk. I knew most of the older ones—heck, I've known Grant Hill since he was sixteen—and their memories were quite vivid. I suspect that many of the younger players had no clue who I was, but they still responded when I dropped Coach K's name. I only wish that tactic worked as well with my children.

Being a long-ago (1977) Duke graduate helped me appreciate how remarkable Krzyzewski's forty-two-year run truly was in the pantheon of college basketball. During my undergraduate years, Duke was 50–56 overall and 9–42 in Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) play. Once Mike got the program going, there were few winters in which he didn't win ten or more conference games—not to mention making the NCAA Tournament thirty-eight times in his last thirty-nine full seasons (there was no tournament in 2020 because of COVID-19) and reaching thirteen Final Fours, five of which ended with hanging a banner.

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Thanks, as always, to family and friends—notably my longtime pal Keith Drum, who is very much a part of this book; and my three children, Danny, Brigid, and Jane, all of whom have heard more about Duke Basketball in their lives than you can possibly imagine.

—*John Feinstein*

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS wishes to recognize the life and accomplishments of photojournalist Chuck Liddy (1954–2024). Thank you for being a champion.

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X • ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Introduction

It was basketball that first brought me to Duke University fifty years ago. It is basketball that still brings me back.

When I visited Duke as a high school senior in February 1973, my dad and I went to see Duke play second-ranked Maryland in Cameron Indoor Stadium. Duke wasn't very good—the team was en route to a 12–14 record—but that day the Blue Devils played superbly. Senior guard Gary Melchionni scored 39 points, and Duke pulled the upset. The building rocked with noise, and in the final minutes the Duke students sang the “Amen Chorus,” which had become Maryland's end-of-game victory song.

As we left the building, I turned to my dad, who desperately wanted me to go to Yale—he was an adjunct faculty member there at the time—and said, “Dad, I'm sorry, but if I get in here, I'm going here.”

I got in. I'm not sure my dad ever completely forgave me.

Never, though, did I imagine the ride that Duke Basketball would take me on when I made the decision to become a Duke student. Ten days after I arrived as a freshman in the fall of 1973, the men's basketball team had no coach. Bucky Waters, who had already been told his contract would not be renewed after his fifth season, resigned to become a fundraiser for the Duke hospital.

Athletic Director Carl James attempted to hire Adolph Rupp—yes, Adolph Rupp, the legendary University of Kentucky coach who had been forced into retirement by the school in 1972 because he had made the mistake of turning seventy. Rupp had won four national championships, the last one in 1958. He had also coached in college basketball's most important

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and famous game: the 1966 NCAA championship game, when his all-white Kentucky team lost to a Texas Western team that started five Black players. Books were written and movies were made about that game. Rupp never reached another Final Four.

James scheduled a press conference for October 18, three days after the official start of basketball practice, to introduce Rupp. But Rupp's farm director died suddenly, and Rupp told James that he couldn't leave his farm. James instead promoted Neill McGeachy, Waters's number-one assistant, and gave him a one-year contract.

The Blue Devils went 10–16 that season, the worst record in school history, and James informed McGeachy that he wouldn't be asked back as coach only minutes after the historic “eight-points-in-17-seconds” loss to North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Somehow Duke, leading by eight points with those 17 seconds left—at a time when there was no three-point shot—managed to lose in overtime that Saturday afternoon to Dean Smith's vaunted Tar Heels.

Bill Foster was hired to rebuild the program—and he did. But it took him four years. My last three years as an undergrad, while I was covering the team for Duke's student newspaper, the *Chronicle*, Duke was 40–40 overall and 7–32 in ACC play (including three first-round losses in the ACC Tournament), meaning my four-year record was 50–56 and 9–42.

When I repeat those numbers to people today, they don't believe me. Duke won more than thirty games *fifteen* times during Mike Krzyzewski's forty-two years as coach. From 1984 until Krzyzewski's retirement in 2022, Duke failed to win at least twenty games on only three occasions.

Duke last in the ACC? People would say to me—get real.

Back then, it was very real.

In 1978, when I was a night police reporter at the *Washington Post*, Foster turned it around completely. Duke went 27–7, won the ACC Tournament for the first time since 1966, and reached the national championship game.

I had convinced George Solomon, the sports editor of the *Post*, to let me cover the Final Four in St. Louis *if* Duke got that far. As a result, I was sitting in Foster's Friday press conference the day before the Blue Devils were to play Notre Dame in the semifinals. Someone asked him how his team had gone from last in the ACC a year earlier to the Final Four.

Foster, who had one of the greatest dry senses of humor I've ever encountered, looked right at me and said, "Well, John Feinstein graduated."

Everyone in the massive interview room began looking around, wondering who the hell John Feinstein might be. Only Ken Denlinger, the *Washington Post's* great sports columnist (who had given me the floor of his hotel room as a place to sleep), had any clue what I looked like. He was the entire list.

The real answer to the reporter's question was, of course, that Duke had added two superb freshmen, Gene Banks and Kenny Dennard, to a lineup that included junior guard Jim Spanarkel and sophomore center Mike Gminski, and *that* was the reason for the team's remarkable turnaround.

Duke beat Notre Dame 90–86 the next afternoon—in those blessed and long-gone days when the Final Four semifinals were played in the afternoon—and finally lost to Kentucky 94–88 in the championship game.

The only player who graduated from that team was walk-on guard Bruce Bell (now a judge in Kentucky), but all sorts of off-court issues prevented that group from reaching those heights again—although the 1980 team did reach the Elite Eight after beating Kentucky on Kentucky's home court in the Sweet Sixteen.

By then, Foster, feeling unappreciated, had left to become the coach at South Carolina. Athletic Director Tom Butters began a search for a successor that landed on an unknown coach named Mike Krzyzewski, who had just finished going 9–17 at Army in his fifth season at his alma mater.

It was Steve Vacendak, Butters's newly hired number-two man, who had brought Krzyzewski to Butters's attention. Vacendak had been a great player for Duke on two Final Four teams in the 1960s. While living in Annapolis, Maryland, he had gone to watch a Krzyzewski-coached Army team play archrival Navy.

"Because my high school coach was friends with Bob Knight, Mike let me hang out with his team all day," Vacendak said. "I was blown away. He wasn't yet thirty and yet he sounded to me like a guy who'd been doing it for twenty years when he talked to his players. And his team could really guard."

Which is why Vacendak brought Krzyzewski up to Butters, who had told him he wanted someone who could really coach defense.

Butters had never heard the name. “What was his record this season?” he asked.

“It was 9–17,” Vacendak said.

“*What?*” Butters said. “Are you trying to get me fired?”

Vacendak finally talked Butters into giving Krzyzewski an interview. He was impressed enough to give him a second interview. And a third. Still, he couldn’t pull the trigger.

“What are you thinking?” Vacendak said after the third interview.

“I’m thinking he’s the next great coach,” Butters said. “But how can I hire a guy who was just 9–17 at Army?”

“If he’s the next great coach,” Vacendak answered, “how can you *not* hire him?”

Butters paused a moment. Then he said, “Go out to the airport and bring him back.”

Vacendak found Krzyzewski waiting in line for his flight back to New York. “You need to come back,” he said. “Tom has one more question to ask.”

“What the hell can he possibly ask me?” Krzyzewski said. “He’s interviewed me *three* times!”

“Just trust me,” Vacendak said.

When Krzyzewski walked into Butters’s office again, still steaming, he repeated what he had said to Vacendak.

“There’s one question I haven’t asked you,” Butters said.

“*What?*”

“Will you take the job?”

Krzyzewski calmed down quickly. “What?” he said again, in an entirely different tone. And then: “Of course I’ll take the job.”

The rest is history—complicated history, but history nonetheless.

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