

Robert's Rant: Baylor played with nothing to lose

By Robert Belardi **OPINION**

In Monday night's NCAA men's national title game, you could tell one team competed as if they had nothing to lose.

The truth is, they didn't. The top seeded Baylor Bears (27-2) went up against the undefeated Gonzaga Bulldogs (31-0) on Monday night in a game where everyone was anxious to see if the Zags could become the eighth undefeated NCAA team to win it all.

Both schools did have one thing in common: they were both looking for their first school title.

The Bears came out flying with a 23-8 run to start things off. It was as if the Zags were winded by a swift punch to the side of the head. They've been used to dominating teams. Monday night was surely not the case.

The Bears shot 43 per cent from beyond the arc on the night. Bears guard Jared Butler came out with an insurmountable amount of confidence finishing with 22 points. The whole group did, while Gonzaga looked apprehensive and timid.

The Zags coughed up the ball 14 times and gave up 16 offensive rebounds. This team who normally look explosive on every given night with Aurora native Andrew Nembhard and Jalen Suggs leading the way looking bewildered when trying to set something up.

It's quite fascinating to see how a mentality takes a turn for the worst. When it's all on the line the pressure is on. I wanted to see Nembhard win the trophy. Since moving to the Zags, it was expected Nembhard would have had to sit out for the year. Just before the beginning of the season, he appealed the decision and was approved to play in this year's competition.

And what a difference he made on the court. Suggs loves how competitive he is and how good of a player he is to work with. He is surely one of the most underrated guards out there right now.

And simultaneously there is another story. The Baylor Bears basketball program was a mess in the early 2000s and since hiring Scott Drew back in August of 2003. Seeing where it is today, it's quite special. Drew sat in the driver seat and steered this franchise in the right direction.

The Bears haven't had anything to lose. They only had everything to gain. Watching Monday night's game was hard. The Zags had the potential of being one of the greatest NCAA teams to play in the tournament. But now, they will forever be remembered as the team that came close to having it all, losing to the Bears 86-70.

And that is perfectly okay. They shouldn't feel that way. It was an incredible year and going undefeated is a mental turbulence within itself.

It was an amazing championship in front of fans in the stands. Thankfully there was an NCAA season to begin with this year. Even though the Zags will be remembered as one of the teams that 'could have been'. They became the third undefeated team to lose in the finals. But that's not what we should remember. We should remember how good this team was while it lasts.

Because when players are drafted it will slowly evaporate into a distant memory.

Unfortunately, that is something nobody wants to lose.