

SPORTS EDITOR: DAVE BOEHLER

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QUOTE OF THE WEEK

"You've got to take the initiative and play your game. In a decisive set, confidence is the difference."
- Chris Evert

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Trip of a lifetime



Dave
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THE REVIEW
SPORTS EDITOR



"It was an unbelievable atmosphere."

- Travis Downs

Travis Downs joked that he and friend Aaron Martell both returned home from New Orleans as somewhat of losers.

The Plymouth residents attended the Final Four over the weekend and Martell's beloved Blue Devils lost to Downs' favorite, North Carolina, on Saturday. On Monday, those same Tar Heels fell to Kansas in the NCAA championship game.

"It was an unbelievable atmosphere," Downs said. "To be at that (Duke-UNC) game, I mean we've watched many of those rivalry games on the TV at home together. But to be there in person, and especially having the outcome for me, obviously it was great.

"It was tough being close to a good friend that was next to me, so I had a hard time celebrating as much. But I did give it to him a little bit the next day. I let the wounds heal a little bit."

The two even drove straight home Tuesday, and at last check, there wasn't anything close to a fight, either.

"Thankfully, both of us aren't the type of people that are going to needle each other to the point of it just being obnoxious or rude," Martell said. "We'll needle and needle, and then laugh around it. It's been good."

How it all began

Downs attended Potosi High School and fell in love with North Carolina around the same time.

Martell was attending Peshtigo when Duke became a favorite. In fact, he still has fond memories when the Blue Devils halted UNLV's 44-game winning streak in the 1991 national semifinal game.

"I remember running around

GOOD FRIENDS Travis Downs (left) and Aaron Martell were able to attend the NCAA Final Four in New Orleans over the weekend. - Submitted photo

the block yelling, Duke won! Duke won!' as my high school friends were making fun of me," Martell said.

Martell did not do the same thing, however, when the Blue Devils defeated Wisconsin seven years ago for the championship.

"I'm a big-time Badgers fan," he said. "But I knew it was going to be a win-win, because if Wisconsin lost and Duke won, I still won in my mind. But Badgers are first."

Duke is not too far behind though.

Martell's wife even surprised him on Christmas with tickets to attend a Blue Devils game in early January, but he came down with COVID-19 and was unable to.

He made up for it by decid-



ing to go with Downs to witness their teams play each other in the Final Four.

"Once we knew it was Duke-North Carolina, it was, 'how do we make this happen,'" Martell said.

"We've always wanted to do a Duke-North Carolina game. And then a Duke-North Carolina game in the Final Four, the first time in NCAA tournament history that they faced each other?"

So they bought tickets and off they went.

They made a pit stop in Memphis (food was great, hotel was not) and eventually went to their first NCAA Tournament game in person.

Final score: North Carolina 81, Duke 77.

"The energy was just amaz-

ing," Martell said. "But toward the end, I was pretty quiet. I was taking it all in and realized it's over. Coach K is walking off the court for the last time. And our arch-nemesis was the one who took them out. I was sitting and being quiet.

"But by the next morning at the golf course, I was able to talk about it a little bit more. So that helped."

Besides hitting the links, the two toured Bourbon Street, the city's riverwalk and the rest of the Final Four festivities.

"Just taking in what New Orleans is," Martell said.

How it all ended

Martell even admits - albeit sheepishly - he was hoping the Tar Heels would beat Kansas on Monday.

"At least if one of us could come away with a national championship," he said.

But somehow, the Jayhawks overcame the largest halftime deficit in a title game (15) to beat North Carolina.

"There's the needle," Downs quipped.

Not even eight hours later, they on their way home.

No hotels this time, but they did have to drive through a tornado warning in Mississippi.

"It was a little wild to start the trip," said Martell on Tuesday morning. "But I think it should be smooth sailing and the temperatures will just be dropping."

Smooth sailing, especially for Downs because his team beat his friend's team.

"It would've been hard not to gloat the whole way carrying the championship back home to Plymouth," he said. "But knowing that I had that over Aaron helped a little bit."

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