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Bill Frieder waited nine years for Michigan to reach the Final Four. Nine years of Big Ten wars, recruiting battles, and skirmishes with feverish fans who expected nothing less than a national championship.

Nine years of bleeding blue.

So where was Frieder when his team finally did it, finally reached the promised land of college basketball by thrashing Virginia in the Southeast Regional final at Lexington, Ky.?

Two thousand miles away, in front of a television.

"I watched it on TV like everyone else," said the man who guided the Wolverines for nearly a decade before suddenly switching jobs on the eve of the NCAA tournament.

Frieder watched the game at a condominium in Scottsdale, Ariz., where he is busy recruiting for his new team, Arizona State.

"I didn't see the whole thing," he confessed. "I left for a while to see a high school game, but I got back in time to see them cut down the nets."

The players cutting down the nets were recruited by Frieder and coached by him until March 15, when he announced he was leaving his alma mater for a sunnier spot out West. Frieder wanted to coach Michigan in the tournament, but athletic director Bo Schembechler told him to hit the road.

And so he watched on television, like the rest of us.

"I was pulling for them," he said. "They deserved to win ... It's the culmination of years of hard work and effort ... Sure it hurt a little that I couldn't be with them, but I was there in thought and spirit."

Them. Not us.

Michigan is no longer Bill Frieder's team. For the first time in 16 years, he is not a member of the coaching staff. Now the Wolverines belong to Steve Fisher and Mike Boyd, coaches hired by Frieder.

"I'm so happy for them," he said over the phone. "They were my two closest friends in Ann Arbor."

If Frieder had more friends at Michigan, he might still be there. But he never felt appreciated, never thought the faithful gave him enough credit for his six consecutive 20-win seasons, two Big Ten championships and one NIT title.

Now he's gone and Michigan is in the Final Four. Cynics suggest a connection.

"I'm sure they're going to write that back in Michigan," he said softly, a trace of bitterness in his voice. "That's one of the reasons I left. Nothing I did seemed to satisfy them."

Brooding isn't Frieder's style, though.

"If this is the worst thing that ever happens to me, I'll have a great life," he said. "I'm just thrilled for (seniors) Mark Hughes and Glen Rice because this was their last chance to make the Final Four. I'll have another chance."

Fisher, the interim coach, is being hailed for getting the Wolverines to the Final Four for the first time since 1976, when they lost the championship game to Indiana. After Michigan beat Virginia by 37 points, he was cheered by fans and hugged by Schembechler.

No one could recall Schembechler hugging Frieder.

"It will be a crime if Steve doesn't get the (head coaching) job," Frieder said. "It's appalling that it hasn't happened already. He was a loyal assistant for seven years and he's done a great job in the tournament."

Frieder said he planned to call Fisher later in the day. And what would he tell him?

"Congratulations and win the next two."

Although he will be in Seattle for the Final Four, Frieder won't be looking over Fisher's shoulder.

"This is his team now," he said. "I talked to a couple of the players the other day and it's good to stay in touch. But I've said my goodbyes and I basically want to stay out of the way. I don't want to hog the spotlight. The focus should be on the team."

Michigan plays Illinois in the Kingdome Saturday. Somewhere in the stands, Frieder will be rooting for the team that once was his.

"I'll be bleeding blue," he said.

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