

Opinion: What March means to me and a tribute to the biggest SU fan I'll ever know

I've always hated questions that start with "What's your favorite [blank]?"

It applies to movies, music, colors, food, you name it — except for when it comes to my favorite time of year — March. More specifically, March Madness.

If you are reading this, I preface that this is not a piece with strong journalist integrity, but rather an entry from the heart. I hope Syracuse fans will be able to resonate with it.

Part of me thinks my love for March is just something that runs in my blood. My late grandfather set the tone as I was growing up. Because of this, it's no surprise that the decisions I've made in my life, and the goals I have set for my future all tie back to college basketball.

He lived and breathed Syracuse hoops. Over his 77 years on this earth, his die-hard fandom took him to all corners of the country.



My Grandfather captured on the sidelines during a National Broadcast of a Syracuse Basketball game.

My grandfather's name was G. William Ryan, but everyone called him Bill or "Banker." It was a nickname, formulated not through creativity, but through suitability. He served as the president of a bank in the town I grew up in for 43 years. He was a veteran, a husband, a father, a banker. But to my cousins and I, that was Bepa.

His relationship with Syracuse Basketball dates back to long before I was around. He sat in the historic seats of Manley Field House— when the Big East was in its prime. My grandmother only remembers being in the South Campus venue once, but she has no doubt he made it there more than that.

It wasn't until the Carrier Dome opened in 1980 that his blood truly started flowing Orange. On Nov. 29, 1980, he was amongst the crowd of 15,685 people who rushed through the air-lock doors in the Teflon-topped stadium. He sat in section 112, row J, seats 10 and 11. And those would be the same seats he sat in for the next 38 years.

They weren't the best seats in the house, more so suited for football, located right on the corner of the end zone. But he loved them. They were in a place where people would congregate before the game and at halftime. There's a concession stand right behind him, but if you ask me, I think the real draw is that all of the people he met over the years knew that's where he sat.

His love for the Orange validated trips to New York City every March since 1983. And before that, he traveled to different schools that handed off the responsibility of hosting the Big East tournament. He made the trip to Madison Square Garden every year until Syracuse left the conference in 2013. His eyes paid witness to some of the most memorable games in Syracuse history. He was there when Georgetown's Michael Graham threw a punch at Syracuse's Andre Hawkins in '84. Graham was thrown out, then wasn't— and then Jim Boeheim threw a chair in the post-game press conference. He was there when Pearl Washington and Patrick Ewing exchanged elbows in the '85 Semifinals. He was there to see what would have been a game-winning Pearl layup if it wasn't for St. John's Walter Berry in 1986. Fast forward a couple of decades, he was there for all three hours and 46 minutes of SU v. UCONN in 2009 – a game that would extend through six overtimes.

He was never one to sit around, he was all about the experience. He was in attendance at every single Final Four Syracuse made in the Jim Boeheim era. In 1987 he traveled to New Orleans, where Syracuse lost to Indiana in the Championship game. In 1996, the Final Four was played in East Rutherford, and he was there when 'Cuse lost to Kentucky in the Championship game.

I do not doubt that April 7, 2003, was one of the best days of his life, outside of the days that each of his four children was born of course. He made the trip back to New Orleans to see the Orange secure their first and only national championship. He was in Atlanta in 2013, when Syracuse lost to Michigan in the semifinals, and he was in Houston when the Orange lost in the Semifinals to North Carolina in 2016.

His commitment to his team was one of the biggest inspirations of my childhood. He had an obsession, but those who went to games with him shared that he never showed much emotion. No matter the final score, he never was pissed off, and after a big win, it was just another day. His loyalty was routine and unwavering.

It molded how I would approach being a fan but of a different team.

Tyler Hansbrough played for the University of North Carolina from 2005-2009. I was 8 years old when he graduated, and I loved him.

I urge you to imagine the look on my Grandpa's face the first time he saw me in Tar Heel blue.

One year, he came back from one of his many basketball-oriented travels and was so excited to tell me about the moment that he shook Hansbrough's hand in the hotel elevator. From there on out, no one would ever be able to convince me that my Grandpa wasn't one of the coolest people in the world.



My Grandfather and the Syracuse University cheer team.

I don't remember how Bepa came to accept my love for UNC, but he came around. At the end of the day, I think he was just happy it wasn't Georgetown.

My Grandpa's love for Syracuse opened his life up to so many incredible opportunities. He went to the Bahamas twice to see the Orange in the Battle 4 Atlantis. He once traveled with the team on a charter to North Carolina, to see the Orange play UNC.

During that same trip, on an off day for the Orange, he and his friends made the drive to Durham and snuck into Cameron Indoor. A construction worker let them in. Knowing full well they were not allowed to be there, they wandered around, making their way to the court and even the press box. It wasn't until well into their self-lead tour that they ran into an assistant coach. He is now the head coach of Duke Basketball. Jon Scheyer caught them coming out of the locker room, each one of them dressed head to toe in Orange. He saw that they found their way back out. At the end of the day, Bepa always lived life by his own rules.



My Grandfather and his friends sneaking into Cameron Indoor.

In 2016, he was honored by Jim Boeheim as a part of a fundraising event for Tyburn Academy in Auburn. While I didn't get to attend the event personally, out of it came one of my family's most treasured photos. It shows him sitting next to a man, who over the years, developed into a great friend. I have never seen anyone smile so wide.



My Grandfather and the man who he grew to call a friend, longtime SU Men's Basketball Coach Jim Boeheim.

In my family, Selection Sunday is a holiday. Equivalent to Thanksgiving and Christmas, we all gather as the bracket is revealed on national television. It's a tradition that my grandpa would be happy to know outlived him.

As the years go on, our Selection Sunday tradition evolves. It's more than just the night that I sit on my grandparent's floor in anticipation. My dream of playing a part in it feels increasingly within reach by the day. I want to play a role in helping people to love the sport as deeply as my grandfather did. As deeply as I do.

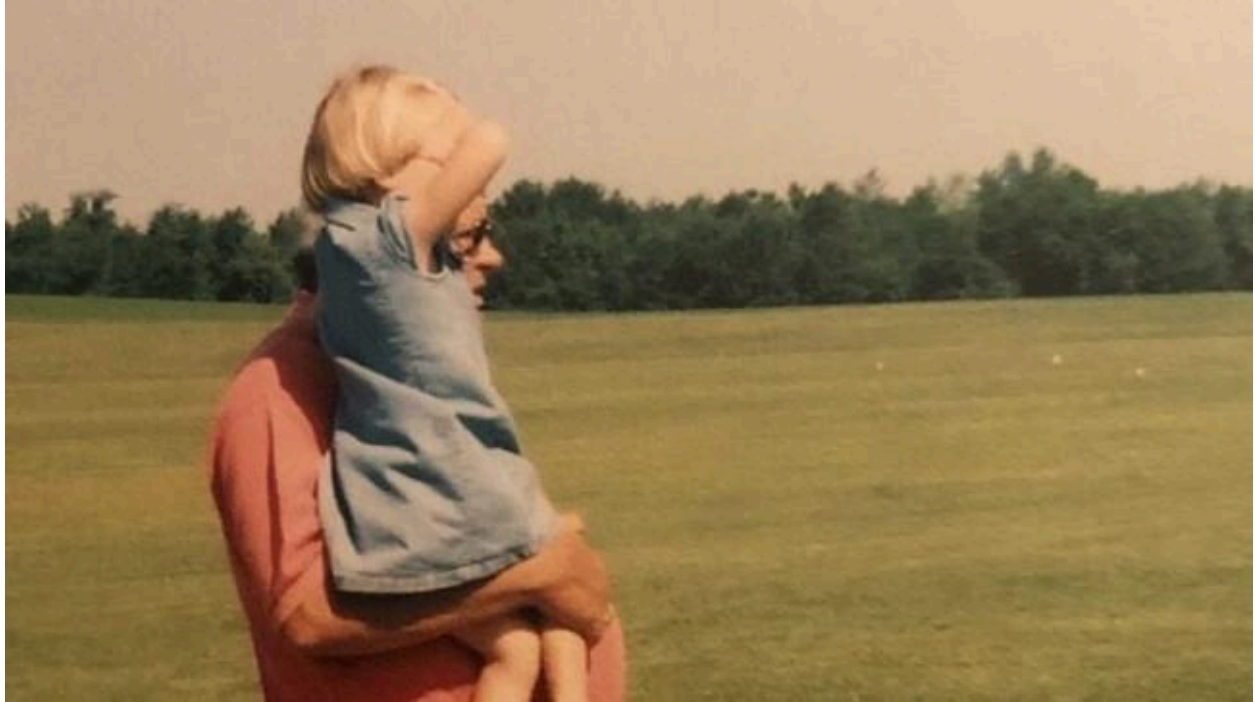


My cousins and I, gathered for our families tradition of watching Selection Sunday together.

Bepa died on August 23, 2018. He continued to work until he reached a point where it was no longer possible, just days before his death.

That's the kind of hard work he instilled in me, and all of his grandchildren. The kind of hard work I will put in to reach my dreams.

He touched so many lives, close to home and far from it. He always ran into someone he knew everywhere he went, no matter the city or state. At his calling hours, the line to pay respects went blocks and blocks down the street from the funeral home. On that day, I shook so many hands and heard so many renditions of what he meant to people.



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My family held onto his season tickets for three more years until my cousin graduated from Syracuse University. He was so proud to know that his blood attended the school he held so dear.

When I'm at the now JMA Wireless Dome, I find my eyes drawn to section 112, row J, seats 10 and 11.

I wonder who sits there now. I wonder how they came to love Syracuse Basketball. I wonder if they bring binoculars to each game like he did, so as not to miss a detail. I wonder if anyone will ever again love Syracuse Basketball like he did.

I wouldn't be chasing this dream if it wasn't for him.