



## Reflections of a River Rat:

### Hail, hail to Michigan's compassionate victor

Juwan Howard had disgraced himself and the University of Michigan a month ago in the handshake line. He did the unthinkable for a coach, sportsman, and leader of young men. He threw a punch at an opposing coach. Then, in one sweeping, compassionate gesture last weekend, he earned back my respect.

Coincidentally, his redemption came in the national spotlight, a televised ritual, that he had seemed to debase – the handshake line, intended for opposing players and coaches to surmount animosity and congratulate their opponents' efforts.



Images of that hug have made their way around the basketball world and elevated themselves into America's pop culture. Michigan coach Juwan Howard is

filing through the handshake line when Tennessee's Kennedy Chandler approaches. The unmistakable contrast sears the moment in your memory.

Howard is a 49-year-old, 6-foot-9 retired NBA All-Star power forward with two championship rings. He had been hardened by a difficult childhood, professional sports and life's adversity when a tearful, 19-year-old freshman, just 6 feet tall and 170 pounds – still more boy than man – couldn't control his sobbing.

Howard responds by showing Chandler, and a nation, his humanity. He embraces Chandler, then disengages to offers some consoling words. When Howard realizes this young point guard remains overwrought, his long arms swallow the boy again and he hugs him to his body. In that moment, Howard transcends coaching and plays the role of father. You would think the whole scene was written and directed by Frank Capra. This was the noble side of sports.

"He said to keep my head up," Chandler said. "It's tough for me, and he knew I wanted to get the win. I know him. I've played with his son since, like, fourth grade. So I know him for a long time. He's a great coach. I love him. He told me to keep my head up and you played your heart out, that's what he told me."

Howard also won me back. In my eyes, he had descended last month to the level of a bully like Bobby Knight after he struck Wisconsin assistant coach Joe Krabbenhoft during the handshake line. Howard was upset the Badgers called timeout with 15 seconds left in a 77-63 loss at Madison. Words were exchanged, tempers flared, contact was made, and a brawl ensued among players and coaches. It was not one shining moment.

Within days of his five-game suspension, Howard apologized for embarrassing himself, family, players and beloved alma mater.

"I speak a lot about being a Michigan man and representing the University of Michigan with class and pride. I did not do that, nor did I set the right example in the right way for my student-athletes. I will learn from my mistake and this mistake will never happen again."

Fast forward to last weekend. No. 11 seed Michigan, one of the last teams to make the field of 68 due to a 17-14 record, won its second game of the NCAA Basketball Tournament. The fates returned Howard to the handshake line, where he reestablished his credibility.

"I got a chance to know Kenny back when my youngest son, Jett, and Kennedy played in AAU, and they won the LeBron James tournament in Ohio," Howard said. "So we had a relationship back then."

"Just watching his growth, I've always been impressed. We recruited him and unfortunately we weren't that lucky. But to see the output, the effort, the growth and being able to produce like that on the floor and how he led his team in a special way -- I gave him words of encouragement. It shows his emotion, that he cares. As coaches, you appreciate that."

It was clear that Howard had gone through some soul searching.

One of the first persons he called after his Wisconsin meltdown was his "big brother," former Michigan player Mark Hughes, now assistant general manager of the Los Angeles Clippers. Hughes attended the 76-68 upset in Indianapolis along with some of Howard's Fab Five teammates that lost national title games in 1992 and '93.

"It was a beautiful moment to be here and to be with guys that I've been in the trenches with ... and then to see my big brother, Mark Hughes, a guy that helped recruit me to come here to the University of Michigan," Howard said. "Mark told me back when I was in high school that my years at Michigan would be years that would mold me into a man; that if I continue to stay here and grow, I would have a lot of success and become a champion."

Before Hughes, Howard had consulted the lessons of his grandmother, Jannie Mae Howard, who took him in as a child, raised him in a rough South Side housing project in Chicago, and watched him become a member of the National Honor Society and homecoming king at Chicago Vocational High School. She died Nov. 2, 1990, just a few hours after he declared he would attend Michigan.

Howard was no stranger to adversity there. His Wolverines teammates lost the 1993 title game when teammate Chris Webber called a timeout with his team down two points. Michigan was out of timeouts, prompting a technical foul and leading to North Carolina's 77-71 victory. Later, two winning seasons were vacated by the NCAA after it was revealed that Webber accepted payments during college.

Howard stayed out of that one. He became the toughminded veteran of 18 NBA seasons who bawled his way through his introductory news conference at Michigan in May 2019.

“I said I wasn’t gonna cry,” he said that day. “I guess that never happens when you’re excited about something so special to you that means so much. Last time I had a press conference in this building was 1994. I declared that I was going to go to the NBA. Felt like I was letting down my teammates because I didn’t do what I came here to do, and that was to bring a championship to this university — a university that I care so much about. I guess you can see that now, huh?”

The punch was ugly. The hug was redeeming. I can hear the words of my late mother, Eileen: “It’s what you learn, after you know it all, that counts.”

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