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We can leave it to others to debate the bubble teams that ended up on the wrong side of the NCAA Basketball Tournament Selection Committee's ledger. When you have a limited field tournament someone's always going to get left out, which makes for a great debate. And wherever you come down on that debate, you still have to feel for the Akron Zips whose bitter loss Saturday night to the Miami Redhawks in the Mid American Conference tournament final in Cleveland left them sitting on the outside looking in for this year's tournament.

In a way, the loss was quite fitting both because of where it occurred, Cleveland and because of who it happened to, a sports team in Northeast Ohio. Though the Zips enjoy good company in that regard, they can take precious little comfort in that.

Despite the relative success of the Mid American Conference over the years in the NCAA tournament, it is still viewed as a mid-major, meaning it gets little if any respect when it comes to awarding at-large bids. As a result, it gets the one automatic bid and then screams every year how one or two other deserving teams instead found themselves relegated to the NIT. In fact, the last time the MAC had two teams in the NCAA tournament was 1999 when, guess who, the Miami (then) Redskins and Wally Szczerbiak received an at-large bid after losing to Kent State in the finals.

The fact that it was highly unlikely that the MAC would get one of the 33 at-large bids only makes what happened Saturday one of more disappointing defeats you're likely to ever see. The manner in which it occurred was stunning in its suddenness, like the bullet Leonardo DiCaprio took near the end of The Departed. With 30 seconds left and the score tied, Romeo Travis hit two free throws. The Zips, playing the kind of defense that served them well in this game and all season, forced a Redhawks miss. Junior Cedrick Middleton grabbed the rebound and was fouled with 6.6 seconds left. Middleton missed the front end of the one-and-one. Miami grabbed the rebound, the ball eventually ended up in Doug Penno's hand and he banked in the most improbable three-point shot you'll ever see just as the clock struck zero.

The celebration was momentarily short-circuited as the officials huddled with the television monitor to determine if the shot was made in time. After initially determining that the shot was timely made, Akron head coach Keith Dambrot, complained that the clock didn't immediately start as it should have following the Middleton miss. According to various reports, the clock stood still for about 1.5 seconds while the Redhawks grabbed the rebound and dribbled their way toward the improbable shot and victory. Though the officials determined that Dambrot was correct and that the clock was not properly started, what the officials next did seems logical on the surface but actually makes little sense and cost the Zips the bid to the tournament. According to an official after the game, they timed and retimed the last play from the point where the rebound of the Middleton miss until Penno's shot went through the hoop and concluded that this took six seconds. Given that there was 6.6 seconds when Middleton lined up for his free throws, the officials felt, apparently, that had the clock properly started there would have been .6 of a second left in the game. They then cleared and the Zips given one last gasp. The long inbound pass traveled out of bounds and the Zips were left to taste defeat for the second time in 10 minutes.

But if you stop to consider what the officials should have done instead of what they did, the error of the officials becomes that much more egregious. Instead of determining how long the play took, the officials should have determined how long the clock actually stood idle when it should have been moving. As noted, various reports put it at 1.5 seconds. If that is true, then Penno's shot was untimely because, according to the replay, the ball left Penno's hand with about 1.3 seconds left. In other words, Penno's shot was likely untimely by, perhaps, .2 of second. That also clearly means that the entire play took longer than 6 seconds, irrespective of what the officials claimed afterward. Thus the Penno shot should not have counted and the Zips should have been declared the winners.

Of course, there has been any amount of games the outcome of which is the result of officiating errors. Fans will quickly recall, for example, Oklahoma's loss to Oregon in football last season when the officials blew an onside kick call on the field and the replay official failed to overturn the indisputably wrong call. That mistake gave the ball back to Oregon which went on to score the winning touchdown. And while this may seem like so much sour grapes, the overarching point is that given what was at stake, the officials couldn't afford to make a mistake when it mattered most. Even more disappointing is that under the rules, the officials get the benefit of replay and still didn't get it right. These two teams were literally playing for their tournament lives and the officials blew it to the grand disappointment of another Northeast Ohio team.

The likelihood is that in the grand scheme what happened to Akron on Saturday night will matter little as neither Akron nor Miami were likely to advance very far in the tournament anyway. But the deserved victory would have matter greatly to the Akron players who worked so hard for the result and to the resurgent Akron program under Dambrot. And because the NIT has a smaller field and new selection procedures, Toledo, improbably, gets the bid despite not even making it to the tournament finals and Akron is left out in the cold there as well. Again, this may not mean much to most because it's unlikely that the Zips would have advanced very far in that tournament either. But they do miss the chance to extend their season a bit longer and get a head start on next season.

So the Zips season ends, unfortunately, with the kind of disappointment that Northeast Ohio sports fans no too well. The only consolation prize for now is that they'll have to be satisfied knowing that their loss is worthy of its own nickname—theClock--and now enjoys a permanent place next to Red Right '88, the Shot, the Drive and the Fumble in the Northeast Ohio sports hall of horrors.