



AP photo

Duke's Lance Thomas, from left, Kyle Singler, Nolan Smith and Jon Scheyer celebrate after Duke defeated Baylor 78-71 in the South Regional championship game.

# FOUR SURE

Duke is back in the Final Four for the first time since 2004

By Stephen Hawkins  
The Associated Press

**HOUSTON** — Duke is back in the Final Four, ending an unusually long absence for coach Mike Krzyzewski's team — and keeping No. 1 seeds from being shut out of the title chase.

Nolan Smith scored a career-high 29 points and the Blue Devils returned to college basketball's big event for the first time in six years by beating Baylor 78-71 on Sunday in the South Regional final, halting the Bears' charming run to college basketball redemption.

Jon Scheyer added 20 points for Duke (33-5), which became the only No. 1 seed to advance to Indianapolis and earned its

**THE MATCHUPS**

**Saturday's Final Four**

- Michigan State (28-8) vs. Butler (32-4), 6:07 p.m.
- West Virginia (31-6) vs. Duke (33-5), 8:47 p.m.

11th Final Four trip under Krzyzewski.

In the national semifinals for the first time since 2004, the Blue Devils will play East Regional champion West Virginia on Saturday night. They have won 11 of their last 12 regional finals under Krzyzewski, but haven't won a national title since 2001.

Coach K made his first Final Four with Duke in 1986 and hadn't had this long of a gap between trips.

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AP photo

Duke's Nolan Smith takes a jump shot during the second half Sunday. Smith scored a career-high 29 points to lead Indianapolis-bound Duke.

These hard-working Devils should be cheered, not reviled

**HOUSTON** — Go ahead. Hate Duke. Hate the Blue Devils with every fiber of your being.

I understand how it works. I've been around long enough to appreciate the uncontrollable instinct behind this loathing. If you live in North Carolina and you're not a true blue Dukie, then you're a true Dook detractor. And so there's no way any part of Sunday's 78-71 Elite Eight win over Baylor registered as feel-good.

Duke heading back to the Final Four for the 12th time in 25 seasons and the first time since 2004? Puke, you'll say. The Blue Devils were given a paved road to Indianapolis.



**Dan Wiederer**

Coach K's sideline snarling? It's an injustice he's allowed to behave like that.

And that stupid jumping leg-kick, fall-down trick Jon Scheyer uses to draw fouls seemingly three times every game? It has to be the cause of thousands of thrown and broken remote controls all over the Tar Heel state.

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AP photo

Duke's Lance Thomas grabs a rebound between Baylor players during the second half of the Blue Devils' 78-71 win in the South Regional championship.

## Wiederer

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Yep, it sure is easy to blast the most successful program of the past quarter-century. But if you love college basketball, if you appreciate teamwork, if you enjoy inspirational stories where hard work and unity are rewarded, there is absolutely no way you could root against these particular Blue Devils, the ones who focused and dug deep and won a high-level championship game Sunday at Reliant Stadium.

Be honest. If you put these kids in the uniforms of say Missouri or Iowa or Marquette, would there really be anything to hate? If we took Mike Krzyzewski's coaching wizardry and drive and gave it to some guy named Bill Owens and put him at the head of the bench, would you still feel your blood-pressure rising every time the Blue Devils went on a run?

The hate may be irrepressible. But with this Duke team, it's also irrational.

### Balancing act

When you stop and think about it, it's amazing the way the Blue Devils have climbed this mountain, finding new strategies and extra reserves of hustle to continue beating whatever opponent comes to challenge them.

On Sunday, they survived on willpower and confidence. Arguably the best player on the team,

## REVISITING DUKE'S THREE KEYS

### KEY NO. 1

■ **Find a way to contain LaceDarius Dunn** — Dunn led Baylor with 22 points. But as Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said, "At least he didn't get 35." All evening, the Blue Devils never allowed Baylor's leading scorer to take over the game, doing a great job of finding Dunn in transition and forcing him to miss six of his eight 3-point attempts. Kyle Singler gets a lot of the credit. Nolan Smith, Jon Scheyer and even Lance Thomas chipped in with help.

### KEY NO. 2

■ **Stay active on the boards** — Duke held a narrow 43-37 advantage in the rebounding battle. But it was the Blue Devils' effort on the offensive glass that won the game. In the second half, Duke turned 17 offensive rebounds into 20 second-chance points. Ball game.

### KEY NO. 3

■ **Remember Newton's Law** — Objects in motion tend to stay in motion. Objects at rest tend to stay at rest. Against Baylor's unique zone defense, Duke had great ball movement and even better movement from players without the ball. Big men Lance Thomas and Brian Zoubek were involved heavily in helping get the ball inside the zone and consequently Duke had one of its best 3-point shooting outings of the season, canning 11 of 23 3-point attempts. Inside the arc, the Blue Devils were just 11 for 38.

Kyle Singler, had his worst game of the season, missing all 10 of his shot attempts and scoring just one point in the game's first 39 minutes. It didn't matter.

Why not? Well, because fellow junior Nolan Smith attacked Baylor's stingy zone defense all day and poured in a career-high 29 points. Meanwhile, Jon Scheyer rediscovered his confidence, burying five 3-pointers and none bigger than the one with 2:34 left that gave Duke a 67-61 lead.

Oh, and also, Lance Thomas played relentless defense and took pride in keeping possessions alive

with his offensive rebounding; Brian Zoubek continued to prove his toughness, fighting his damndest to grab nine rebounds; and freshman Andre Dawkins came off the bench and hit a pair of important first-half 3-pointers that kept the tidal wave of overwhelming Baylor support from drowning the Blue Devils.

Once upon a time, championship wins like this were far more regular for Duke. But they've always taken hard work. And that's what made Sunday's triumph so fulfilling.

"You come to Duke and you expect to win; you

expect to go to Final Fours," senior Brian Zoubek said in a delirious locker room. "But we realized quickly as freshmen that we didn't have any seniors to show us the way and to just go along for the ride. We've had to earn this every step of the way. We got killed our first year. And it was still a learning process the next two years to get to this point. We've had to earn every single win and every single step that we've taken."

### Finding a way

Sunday's victory continued a remarkable run. And if you've spent any time around the Devils, you'd also realize it couldn't be happening to a better group of kids, a bunch that truly enjoys playing with each other and values the bond that has given them.

"For the juniors and seniors, we've grown up with each other and we've gone through so many experiences together," Singler said. "We just know each other."

In the final minutes Sunday, with the tension rising and lifelong dreams hanging in the balance, Krzyzewski sensed that aura among his kids. With 3:36 to play, Duke trailed 61-60. Yet in the final TV timeout huddle, Krzyzewski's message was calm and direct.

"You guys are fighting now," he said. "You're who you are. Just be yourselves. Keep fighting and it will work out well. You'll figure it out."

In the next 2 minutes, Smith and Scheyer hit back-to-back 3-pointers

and Thomas delivered a follow slam that broke the game open. Three veterans made three clutch plays simply because they knew they were capable.

"I've never had a group exactly like this one," Krzyzewski said.

What he's partly implying with that compliment is that these Blue Devils wouldn't have a chance to upend any of his previous three national title teams. They just don't have that level of superstar talent. But the most admirable thing about this team is that it's never really cared, either.

"We just find a way to win," Zoubek said. "It isn't very pretty a lot of the time. Obviously we're not the most athletic team. But we do the simple things well. And we find a way to make it happen."

Over 30 seasons at Duke, Krzyzewski has had his moments in which his personality has seemed holier-than-thou and he's been criticized as being disingenuous. But there was nothing but sincerity in the smile pasted across his face Sunday night, nothing but pure joy in the bear hugs he delivered to his players.

"Again, we're not a great team," Coach K said. "But we are really a good team and we have great character. And to be around that character on a day-to-day basis is so fulfilling for me."

Hate that if you wish. But you'll be missing out on the appreciation of watching a special college basketball team.

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