



From the book, The Men of March: A Season Inside the Lives of College Basketball Coaches by Brian Curtis. New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003.

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In the game against Michigan State, which was nationally televised by CBS, analyst Billy Packer criticized Williams for his lethargic play, saying at one point he was "sleepwalking" and at another, "he is playing like a dog." The criticism was mounting. A week earlier, before the Ohio State game, Williams and Self talked for almost two hours about the captain's attitude and future. The coach determined that Williams' mind was not on the NBA and the future, something he had feared. It was a matter of getting Williams motivated every night from the tip.

Self had tried various motivational tools throughout the season with his team, from singling out players, to encouraging more fun practices to having a team mea culpa. Nothing seemed to work. When the Illini did win, it didn't seem to be the result of a team effort. If he couldn't get the team going, maybe someone else could. Not another coach, but a brain doctor.

Motivational speaker Jim Cremins (sic) paid a visit to the team the day after the Michigan State loss. He had worked with Self's team at Tulsa, and had been successful with other teams around the country. Former Tulsa coach Tubby Smith had brought him in to Kentucky and Self wanted the team to hear a different perspective. Cremins (sic) talked about how the brain worked, how to stay positive, and how to get things done regardless of who got credit, for close to 90 minutes. The coaches learned as much as the players. "It wasn't so much what he said," Self reflected, "but it came from a different source shedding some light on things we may have already talked about." The next day in practice, Self noticed a changed attitude from his team."

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After he had brought in the motivational speaker to talk to his team following the Michigan State loss at home, Self noticed that his boys seemed to have an awakening. Things were not perfect and there still was work to do, but the ensuing three games showed promise. On the road at Michigan, the game was crucial for Illinois. After trailing by 13 in the first half, Illinois played inspired and aggressive ball behind an impressive effort by Lucas Johnson, who had now returned to the lineup fulltime. Johnson scored seven straight points in a five-minute stretch and Illinois went on to beat the Wolverines 68-60 behind Brian Cook's 19 points. (Self was concerned about Cook because an intimate article concerning his estranged father was printed in Sports Illustrated two days prior to the Michigan game and the coach didn't know how Cook was going to take it. For his part, the player said it was a "relief" to have it all come out.) Down the stretch, the Illini went on a 11-3 run to put the game away. After the season was complete, Self instinctively pointed to the first half Michigan comeback as the defining moment in the Illini Season.

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It was a remarkable turnaround for Illinois, who at one point the season looked shaky to even play in the postseason. That is why it is a marathon, not a sprint."

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Most coaches will tell you that over a long season, to win a championship you need to be good and lucky. The Illini were both. They were able to turn their season around, win their last eight games, and defend their conference title.

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