



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – NCAA Men’s Basketball National Championship

**Ambassador Bleich’s Remarks at
the NCAA Men’s Basketball National Championship
Dickson Tradies Club, Canberra**

(As prepared – April 9, 2013)

I’m delighted to welcome everyone here today.

Thank you to our co-hosts from ACT Basketball, especially Tony Jackson and Megan Salic. I’m particularly pleased that my fellow American, Camantae Griffin, from the Gunners has joined us, as well as (hopefully) future LSU player Darcy Malone. Darcy, I’m looking forward to seeing you Finally, thanks to Pat McNeil from Public Affairs at the U.S. Embassy for helping get this event off the ground. If there is a ball or a puck involved, Pat is there.

One of the greatest connections between the U.S. and Australia is sports. One of the reasons President Obama likes Australia so much is our shared love of basketball. The President has some serious game. You may have heard that he plays in some friendly pickup games at the White House. Well, that’s true except for the friendly part. There is no respect given to rank on that court. On at least one occasion the President has come away with a bloody lip, which at our age is an embarrassing thing to have to explain. But his Cabinet has some good players in it, including Attorney General Eric Holder, our Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, and of course Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Secretary Duncan played professionally here in Australia for the Melbourne Eastside Spectres, the Launceston Ocelots, and the Devonport Warriors. So, for those of you who are coming up on retiring from professional ball down here, we’re looking forward to having some of you serve in our Cabinet.

I unfortunately have the basketball skills of a wrestler. The closest I came to playing in the White House pick-up game was after I won the White House bowling competition. The President apparently heard about at a meeting the next morning and asked a colleague – “So does Bleich have any game?” Apparently, he was told that I should stick to bowling.

But let me get back to March Madness. Every year, about 180 young Australians get scholarships to play NCAA basketball at colleges and universities in the United States. Australians have played regularly in the NCAA basketball tournaments since Luc Longley proved how much talent there was here back in the early ‘90s. This year, there were 17 Australian men in the tournament. Albany, in New York, has three Australians on the team. There are four on the St. Mary’s team out of California. St. Mary’s



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – NCAA Men’s Basketball National Championship

consistently fields teams with a heavy AIS influence – including standout Matt Dellavedova. There were two Aussies on the New Mexico team, as well. In a result that surprised everyone, #3 seed New Mexico was soundly defeated by my own alma mater, Harvard – a #14 seed – in the first round. I think that proves that New Mexico needs a few more Aussies for next year.

Surprise results like that are part of what makes March Madness and college basketball so exciting. Anything can happen. It’s the possibility that this year – and we’ve definitely seen it this year – that David will defeat Goliath. This year 15th ranked FGCU – a school that no one had even heard of – made it to the sweet 16, confirms that the mighty can fall, and the little guys can prevail, and that a season’s quest can turn on the random spin of a ball at the buzzer.

So March Madness brings back all the things that made us love sports in the first place. Most of the players in the tournament won’t go pro or make a living from basketball. They are there for the love of the game. For the loyalty they feel to their schools and teammates. It’s about teamwork and the fact that no one can win alone. Every member of a championship team needs to contribute to make them champions.

And, when it is all over, no matter how hard fought the game, it ends with hugs, handshakes, and words of congratulations. And tears (but mostly from the punters who bet on the wrong team). So have fun, don’t let us know that you’re gambling, and enjoy the game!