

Basketball Weekly – BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

College Hoops – Friday, January 21st, 2004

The top ranked team in the country remained undefeated on Thursday at the Illinois Fighting Illini held off visiting Iowa 73-68 in overtime. Iowa played smothering defense and did not let their opponent get clear shots from the perimeter off nor did they let Illinois get out in the open court as Bruce Weber would have liked. What Steve Alford's club in was turnovers as the Hawkeyes committed a plethora of them, 20+ in fact. Westmont, Illinois native Pierre Pierce has averaged well over 20PPG in Big 10 play and had 22 against the conference's best squad. "They killed us on the board tonight," said Pierce. Had they not the game might have gone to the inspired road team. **Tuesday night Illinois will get their next test as they take on the Wisconsin Badgers, who have won 38 straight games at home.** Something is bound to happen and if Wisconsin needs any advice on beating a #1 team - they should contact ESPN analyst Mr. Digger Phelps (393-197), who won seven games vs. top ranked teams at Notre Dame.

I guess Illinois, a team that had won 16 of their first 18 home games by double-figures, was due for a game too close to call. Consider how many tight games the other three undefeated teams - Kansas, Duke and Boston College - have played. The Jayhawks' season opener vs. Vermont, which they won 68-61 back on November 19th, was not the only close affair they've had. KU, which did not play their road game of the season until January 9th when Kentucky lost to them 65-59, beat South Carolina, Georgia Tech, Texas A&M and Iowa State all by five points or less. Now that Wayne Simien is back under the basket - the Jayhawks should perform even better in the low and high post. J.R. Giddens is an extremely talented player that needs to get going and hopefully it won't take till tournament time for him to hit a groove. The Longhorns recently ruled P.J. Tucker, a key ingredient in their team's upset of Oklahoma State, academically ineligible for the rest of the 2005 season, and dazzling freshman LaMarcus Aldridge is out indefinitely. Having that said, Texas has a decent shot of handing Bill Self's team loss numero uno.

BC, like Illinois, survived this week without suffering their first loss of the season. Villanova outscored the Eagles 42-37 in the second half, but could not stop Jared Dudley and his 36 points. The duo of Dudley and Craig Smith are combining for 35.1PPG and 15.6RPG for the 15-0 Eagles. A loss is in store for them if you ask me as they're at Providence and All-Conference performer Ryan Gomes next Wednesday, plus face 12-3 Notre Dame coached by Mike Brey on February 8th. Speaking of the Big East and Notre Dame, let's stay there and talk about Jim Boeheim's Syracuse Orange basketball team. Two seasons removed from a National Championship, Boeheim and company are going to make a fine run come March. A couple weeks back, Syracuse came back to beat the Fighting Irish, holding Chris Thomas to just one made bucket. Billy Edelin played the role of 'thief,' stripping the Notre Dame ball handlers seven times. Many forget that Edelin was not healthy last year and was a vital part of the team's title run as a freshman two years ago. In that game Boeheim got his 300th career Big East win as his squad beat ND behind 22 from Gerry McNamara.

That now leads up to the Atlantic Coast Conference where the Duke Blue Devils appear to be the team to beat..... but **NOT SO FAST MY FRIEND** as Lee Corso says. Coach K and company play at Florida State, Maryland, @ Wake Forest and vs. Georgia Tech in four of their next five games. It is conceivable that the Blue Devils go 2-2 or even 1-3 (not that likely though) in those conference games without even playing North Carolina once. UNC surprisingly struggled against Wake Forest away from the Dean Dome last Saturday. But will get to them, Wake and Florida State coached by Leonard Hamilton in one moment. Duke's guards have traditionally gotten credit over the years. You back to Bobby Hurley and even before that. Jason Williams came along, Corey Maggette was a promising young player, but for the most part most of Duke's successful college players do not become stars in the NBA (see Christian Laettner, while Grant Hill and Elton Brand to a degree are the exceptions). William Avery and Chris Duhon are some of the latest point guards to come through under guidance from Coach K also. Anyhow, J.J. Redick and Danny Ewing get most of the pub at Cameron, however, Shelden Williams is the real beast on the interior. He sets the tone, boxes out for a huge percentage of the rebounds, scores on the low block and rejects whatever goes up under the hoop. Foul trouble has occasionally become a problem in the past for him and if they are to get by some of the best in the conference like Sean May at UNC --- he needs to be the leader.

Meanwhile, North Carolina seems like the best team in the country when Rashad McCants is controlled emotionally and the Heels are scoring baskets off assists. They weren't able to do it vs. Wake, who fell at Florida State just three days after the milestone victory. Leonard Hamilton's done an outstanding job there bringing in some fine players through recruiting and teaching them the simple fundamentals of basketball. Von Wafer was big in the win over WF, scoring 30 points, most coming in the first half.

Florida State's wins over Top 10 ACC teams at home

January 2005	#3 Wake Forest	91-83 (OT)
January 2004	#7 Wake Forest	75-70
January 2004	#7 North Carolina	90-81 (OT)
February 2003	#5 Duke	75-70
January 2002	#1 Duke	77-76

SUPER STAT OF THE WEEK: Wake Forest made an NCAA record 50 consecutive free-throws before Taron Downey, an 85.7% shooter from the charity stripe that drilled a 3-pointer to tie the FSU game, missed one. The Demon Deacons impressively went 32-32 on the line against Roy Williams' Tar Heels. Along with the great outside shooting of Downey and Justin Gray, and the floor leadership by sophomore PG Chris Paul, Wake looks like one of the two best teams along with UNC in the conference. It all came to a crashing, disappointing end when the 'Noles beat them in front of their home crowd on Tuesday.

Three games recently caught my eye in some of the smaller conferences. DePaul defeated the #25 team Marquette yesterday. Marquette came into the matchup out-rebounding foes by 9.2RPG --- best in C-USA. Quemont Greer and company do not let teams push them around on the boards and they've done a nice job without Andre Brown

inside. Brother Drake Diener (DePaul) and Travis Diener are near the best in the conference in scoring and could meet down the road again in the National Basketball Association provided they continue to improve upon their overall skills.

In the Mountain West this weekend there are two games that should be somewhat interesting. Air Force takes on BYU, while New Mexico plays Andrew Bogut and the Utah Utes. Utah's done so well without Rick Majerus and you have to applaud their coaching staff moving on after Majerus. Right now I like Utah more than any other MWC team, including Colorado State, who Utah beat 75-52 four days ago. UTEP beat Nevada in what was a thrilling 'extra fun' game on the ESPN family of networks. And George Washington's loss to UMASS struck me for some unknown reason as a surprise W'.

Vermont's scoring duo of Taylor Coppenrath and T.J. Sorrentine scores over 44PPG and helped the Catamounts defeat Boston U (allowing under 56PPG in AEC plays before their loss to Vermont) to get an edge in their respective conference. Another mid-major making some noise is Wichita State, who got off to the best start ever in school history (10-1). The Missouri Valley is a very good basketball conference and Southern Illinois might be the class of it as they won 13 of their first 16 games this season (currently 15-3; 6-0)

THE OTHER STAT OF THE WEEK: Illinois is 73-3 in their last 76 contests at Assembly Hall. Illinois has not lost at home since January 10th, 2004 when Gene Keady's Purdue Boilermakers went in there and beat them.

Games to Watch This Weekend:

Kansas @ Villanova - Nova, coming off a close loss to BC, hosts a tough low post team.
Wake Forest @ Cincinnati - #18 Bearcats will have hands full w/ dynamic Chris Paul.
Duke @ Florida State - Blue Devils now begin the difficult part of their ACC schedule.
Tennessee @ Louisville - Vols (10-7) have kept Miss. St. and Florida under 60 in wins.
Stanford @ USC - I would not put a win past USC, who's facing a weaker Stanford team.
Temple @ Xavier - Big time Atlantic-10 matchup that may favor the visiting Owls.
Memphis @ UAB - At 10-8 Memphis, shooting only 39.7%, really needs this one.
Wisconsin @ Michigan - Rebounding will be key as these two Big 10 schools square off.
Texas @ Oklahoma - Junior forward Taj Gray has been huge for OU, averaging 14 and 8.
Charlotte @ Marquette - Each team is coming off a conference loss.
Pittsburgh @ Connecticut - Take the Panthers behind Carl Karuser & Chevon Troutman.



Vermont shooting sensation Taylor Coppenrath enters Saturday as second leading scorer in America at 24.9PPG. Only St. Peter's Keydren Clark averages more on a nightly basis than Mr. Coppenrath.

*** Due to time restraints - my NBA Weekly article will be posted next week here on www.matthewhatfield.com.