

## **Basketball Weekly – BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**

### **College Hoops – Friday, January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005**

Have we seen some great games in College Basketball lately or what? The much anticipated heavyweight Big Ten bout between Wisconsin, coming in with an NCAA best 38-game home winning streak, and the #1 team in the land, Illinois (now 20-0), turned out to be a dandy. The Fighting Illini played it down to the wire for the second Tuesday in a row only this time the game did not go into overtime and it was not on their floor. Coming in Head Coach Bruce Weber sported an overall record of 45-7 at Illinois, while Bo Ryan had won 81 of 112 games with the Wisconsin Badgers. Turnovers was the key stat in last week's win over the Hawkeyes. This time the determining statistic in my opinion was free-throws. Final score read 75-65 Illinois due to Brown zooming in defensively, Augustine finishing a furious second half run with some dunks and Deron Williams distributing the ball like a true NBA point guard. And it read 75-65 because of the Illini's 75% foul shooting, which dwarfed Wisconsin on this night. They got the much needed jump shooting contribution from big man Jack Ingram off the bench, were able to contain Mike Wilkinson (compared to the Pacers' Austin Croshere by his coach) in the second half, comeback from a deficit and win in a hostile environment. What else is there to ask from this ball club except can they be the first to go unscathed through the regular season and postseason since the Indiana Hoosiers did it in the 1970's? Fans in Champaign hope so, because a UNLV scenario is not one the people want.

As good as the marquee ESPN game on Tuesday was.... The Maryland-Duke ACC showdown may have been even better the subsequent evening. First off, J.J. Redick is **NOT** an All-American type player no matter what the experts try to feed into your heads. I've watched this sharp shooting young man time and time again struggle when the pressure is on, when the game is on the line and when every droplet of sweat that hits the floor can be heard (okay not exactly --- but just follow me here). Redick is very good, not great, for about 35 minutes. However, in those last five minutes he starts trying to do too much or on some nights not enough. A junior, who scored 15.9PPG as a sophomore, has a bright future ahead of him. Let's just not try to put him in the pantheon of great Duke players such as Christian Laettner, Shane Battier, Elton Brand, Bobby Hurley and Grant Hill okay? He more fits the category of someone like a Trajan Langdon, Mike Dunleavy, Phil Henderson or maybe even (although it's a stretch) a Danny Ferry.

Now that's off my chest, let me break down this game excluding the poor execution of Redick and others for Duke late. I thought just one player played an entire game of solid basketball for the Blue Devils and that was Shelden Williams --- one of the country's most underrated big men if you ask me. Sure, Lee Melchionni has made great strides the last couple weeks and freshman DeMarcus Nelson looks like a fine down the road. But you know what? Maryland showed up Wednesday. Gary Williams deserves a rousing hand for what he got this team to do without D.J. Strawberry. Nik Caner-Medley played an awesome game, John Gilchrist settled on being option #2, and Ekene Ibekwe and Will Bowers did some good things inside. Despite suffering a home loss to NC State, the Terps can be a dangerous team come ACC tourney time just like they were last year.

Two, well three, games really stood out on Wednesday night. The one that stood out the least of the three was Michigan-Michigan State. Tom Izzo's Spartans tune up game before the big one next week with Illinois was not that bad. Michigan did shoot the ball better from the field and three-point distance which is the one thing Tommy Amaker can look back and be proud about. Nevertheless, MSU won it 64-53 due to a super second half start led by Maurice Ager, who finished with a team best 18 points and six rebounds. Out west Washington played at Arizona and lost it 91-82. Huskies are an offensive oriented team like their top opponent in the PAC 10, the Arizona Wildcats. Nothing surprising I took away from this game as Zona did what they were suppose to --- protect their home court. Game of the night was without a doubt another ACC battle between Wake Forest, who followed up a win over North Carolina by losing to Florida State on the road, and Georgia Tech, a team that played Connecticut in the National Championship last season and recently lost a disappointing game to new ACC school Virginia Tech. Eric Williams was the star for the Demon Deacons; scoring 27 points and bringing down 12 rebounds. Though, it was Jarrett Jack and Will Bynum, guards for the Yellow Jackets, delivering the loss to Wake by combining for 53 of the team's 102 in an overtime W'. **Bottom Line with the ACC is this: They are all going to beat up on each other. When it's all said and done I think UNC will be the best, Wake the second best and Ga. Tech over Duke for the honors of third best team in the conference when all is consummated.**

**1952: Last season marked the first since 1952 that the Illinois Fighting Illini won the regular season conference crown outright.**

Passing Thoughts:

\*\*\* Expect Oklahoma State (25) and Air Force (22) to keep their home court winning streaks in tact with matches vs. Kansas State and San Diego State on the horizon. Following behind them in that category are SE Louisiana (20) and both Gonzaga and the Southern Illinois Solukis with 19 straight at home.

\*\*\* Virginia Tech's fast conference start (11-6; 4-2) is startling to say the least. The Hokies beat NC State on January 19<sup>th</sup> by a score of 72-71 and followed it up three days later with a huge road upset of Georgia Tech, 70-69. Expect it all to come to a screeching halt when they to Duke on Saturday; @ Miami on February 2<sup>nd</sup> and host Wake Forest February 5<sup>th</sup>.

\*\*\* Margin of victory is a big thing in NCAA basketball and just take a look at the top five (in order) going into Tuesday night: Louisville, North Carolina, Duke, Oklahoma State and Illinois. You can just about bet your bottom dollar that all five of them will be #4 seeds or better when selection Sunday rolls around.

\*\*\* Talk about getting your shot to get major national recognition; Minnesota plays Illinois on Saturday. The Gophers, who have won 13 of their first 18 games in 2004-05, are one of the biggest improvements from last year (finished 12-18 overall in 03-04). We saw the smallest number of Big 10 teams make the tourney in 2003-04 in about 20 years

so if Minnesota continues to play well like they are it's a given the Gophers get an NIT bid, if not a ticket to the big dance.

\*\*\* If someone told you that one of the ten best defensive teams in the country would be Kentucky you would not be surprised. However, what is surprising is that the only other two loss team in the top 15 in scoring defense is Old Dominion University. The Monarchs, coached by former Stanford assistant Blaine Taylor, got their 18<sup>th</sup> victory on the season Wednesday when they knocked off UNC Wilmington. One more two loss team cracks the top 25 in scoring defense --- that would be the Oklahoma Sooners.

### **Buzzer Beaters: Weekend Selections by yours truly**

Syracuse @ Pittsburgh - For the second week in a row I like Pitt behind Mr. Troutman.

Texas @ Kansas - No P.J. Tucker or LaMarcus Aldridge means #13 loses on the road.

Georgetown @ Boston College - BC will be able to grit another close one out.

Oklahoma @ Iowa State - Sooners, ranked 15<sup>th</sup> in the country, could be upended here.

Houston @ Cincinnati - Remember, Tom Penders' Cougars did beat Louisville earlier.

ODU @ VCU - Will be one of the Monarchs' hardest fought Colonial games this season.

Mississippi State @ LSU - Lawrence Roberts goes off for 28 & 12 in a road victory.

Xavier @ St. Joseph's - In front of the home crowd, St. Joe's gets revenge for last year.

Nebraska @ Texas Tech - Motion offense does the trick for Bob Knight's Red Raiders.

Butler @ Illinois Chicago - No pick between the game feature dangerous March teams.

Georgia Tech @ Maryland - Each coming off a big win... I like the Terps at home.

Connecticut @ Notre Dame - Another tough call should see the Huskies come out on top.

UCLA @ USC - Bruins are a team I'm real high on for 2005-06 so we like them.



**Gerry McNamara and Syracuse came back from a double-digit deficit earlier this week to beat Rutgers, 86-84. The win gave Jim Boheim's team a 20-1 record heading into Saturday night's game at Pittsburgh.**