

College Basketball Weekly: Friday, March 7th, 2008

BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

We're one week away from Selection Sunday as the field of 65 is soon to be announced. Who's in? Who's out? Which bubble teams have theirs burst? Here's our first 'mock bracket' ... and be sure to check back next week for our final projection....

NCAA Tournament Projections:

Charlotte Region: (East)

#1 – North Carolina (ACC)

#16 – Play-in Game: Lamar (Southland) and Alabama State (SWAC)

#8 – Oklahoma (Big 12)

#9 – Kent State (MAC)

#5 – Notre Dame (Big East)

#12 – Ohio State (Big Ten)

#4 – Xavier (Atlantic-10)

#13 – George Mason (CAA)

#6 – Pittsburgh (Big East)

#11 – UAB (C-USA)

#3 – Indiana (Big Ten)

#14 – Pacific (Big West)

#7 – USC (Pac-10)

#10 – Florida (SEC)

#2 – Kansas (Big 12)

#15 – Hampton (MEAC)

Region Analysis: There's the potential for a second round matchup of North Carolina vs. Oklahoma. The Sooners are coached by Jeff Capel, a former Duke player who hit a 40-foot shot at the buzzer in 1995 against North Carolina that sent the game into overtime and later won an ESPY Award for the College Basketball Play of the Year. George Mason, the Final Four darling from two years ago, makes a return trip to the NCAA Tournament in this mock bracket and faces an Xavier team which lost a big lead in the second round of the tournament to Natl. runner-up Ohio State a year ago. A potential regional semifinal matchup between Indiana and Kansas would be good, but even better would be Kansas vs. North Carolina where Tar Heels Head Coach Roy Williams faces the team he once coached with a spot in the Final Four at stake.

Phoenix Region: (West)

- #1 – UCLA (Pac-10)
- #16 – Loyola of Maryland (MAAC)

- #8 – West Virginia (Big East)
- #9 – St. Mary's (WCC)

- #5 – Purdue (Big Ten)
- #12 – Arizona State (Pac-10)

- #4 – Vanderbilt (SEC)
- #13 – St. Joseph's (Atlantic-10)

- #6 – Gonzaga (WCC)
- #11 – Arkansas (SEC)

- #3 – Texas (Big 12)
- #14 – Utah State (WAC)

- #7 – Clemson (ACC)
- #10 – UNLV (Mountain West)

- #2 – Georgetown (Big East)
- #15 – Wagner (Northeast)

Region Analysis: We have two teams in this bracket that made the Final Four last April in UCLA and Georgetown. Ben Howland's Bruins are almost a shoe-in at this point to earn a #1 seed, and although they had a great comeback win against Stanford earlier this week, they aren't a lock to make it back to their third straight Final Four. It may take beating the Hoyas with center Roy Hibbert or even a Texas team that has re-loaded after the departure of #2 overall draft pick Kevin Durant. Looking for a sleeper perhaps? Try Purdue, which isn't the biggest or most athletic team, but has solid outside shooters and gave Florida all they could handle in the second round of the tourney last year.

Houston Region: (South)

- #1 – Memphis (C-USA)
- #16 – UNC Asheville (Big South)

- #8 – Miami of Florida (ACC)
- #9 – South Alabama (Sun Belt)

- #5 – Washington State (Pac-10)

#12 – Illinois State (Missouri Valley)

#4 – Connecticut (Big East)

#13 – Cornell (Ivy)

#6 – Butler (Horizon)

#11 – Syracuse (Big East)

#3 – Stanford (Pac-10)

#14 – Austin Peay (Ohio Valley)

#7 – Mississippi State (SEC)

#10 – Kansas State (Big 12)

#2 – Wisconsin (Big Ten)

#15 – American (Patriot)

Region Analysis: In each of the past two seasons, John Calipari's Memphis Tigers have reached the Elite Eight, only to lose to the likes of UCLA and Ohio State. This year might be Memphis' best chance to breakthrough and finally make it to the Final Four, and possibly win a Natl. Championship. The only blemish on their record so far was a home loss to Tennessee a couple weeks ago. Challengers to them in this regional include Big Ten regular season Champion Wisconsin, Stanford and Connecticut. Don't discount the likes of Washington State, Butler or Mississippi State to make it to the Sweet 16 either. The best first round game looks to be Ricky Stansbury's Bulldogs of MSU against Kansas State, which is led by freshman and Natl. Player of the Year candidate Michael Beasley, a beast and a double-double machine.

Detroit Region: (Midwest)

#1 – Tennessee (SEC)

#16 – Albany (American East)

#8 – Oregon (Pac-10)

#9 – Texas A&M (Big 12)

#5 – Marquette (Big East)

#12 – Maryland (ACC)

#4 – Michigan State (Big Ten)

#13 – Oral Roberts (Summit)

#6 – Drake (Missouri Valley)

#11 – Baylor (Big 12)

#3 – Louisville (Big East)
#14 – Belmont (Atlantic Sun)

#7 – BYU (Mountain West)
#10 – Davidson (Southern)

#2 – Duke (ACC)
#15 – Portland State (Big Sky)

Region Analysis: It's a good possibility that Tennessee and Duke will be on a collision course to meet in the Elite Eight. The Volunteers are fast, exciting and not afraid to shoot the three-pointer. Bruce Pearl's team recently knocked off previously unbeaten and top-ranked Memphis on the road, plus this week rallied back from 16 down to defeat defending two-time Natl. Champion Florida in Gainesville. In order to claim a #1 seed, the Blue Devils are most likely going to need to beat North Carolina on Saturday night and win the ACC Tournament. Davidson, with former NBA player Del Curry's son Stephen, could give Duke a scare in the second round. Watch out for Louisville and Michigan State too as legitimate threats to make it to the Final Four.

Final Notes:

*** The big game on Saturday night in College Basketball will be #1 ranked North Carolina visiting Duke, their ACC rival that defeated them in Chapel Hill earlier this season. It'll be a matter of which wins out – UNC's inside game with Tyler Hansbrough or the outside shooting of Duke. In the end, I like the Tar Heels to come away with a hard-fought, two-point road victory thanks to clutch play in the final minutes from point guard Ty Lawson, who was out with an injury the first time these two schools met.

*** There are some other quality games besides Duke/UNC, too. In the Big East, Louisville and Georgetown will get it on and don't be surprised to see the winner receive a #2 seed for the tournament next Sunday, and possibly even sneak onto the #1 line if Memphis, UNC, Tennessee or UCLA falters (i.e. loses early in their conference tournament). On Saturday around noon, the Big South Championship will tip-off between Winthrop, which has dominated the league for years, and UNC-Asheville. Also this weekend, Florida takes on Kentucky where the loser may very well be out of the NCAA Tournament; Oregon faces Arizona on Saturday night where the loser could be in trouble; and Michigan State travels to Columbus to take on the Ohio State Buckeyes in a key game for OSU and their tourney hopes.

*** Plenty of storylines will hit us the hours before Selection Sunday. Among them are the questions of whether or not the Big East will get seven teams in the field of 65, and are conferences like the Atlantic-10, Missouri Valley and C-USA multi-bid leagues. Right now I have eight teams listed as on the bubble and they include Arkansas, UAB, Florida, Kentucky, Syracuse, Arizona, Ohio State and Virginia Tech. The three I have out are Va. Tech, Kentucky and Arizona as a surprise. Seth Greenberg's Hokies are

out right now in my mind, but I wouldn't doubt them sliding back into the field. Same goes for Kentucky and Arizona, provided they are able to beat Florida and Oregon respectively on Saturday night.