

2005 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament: National Championship
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD --- Monday, April 4th, 2005



Illinois Fighting Illini (37-1)



V. North Carolina Tar Heels (32-4)

What Wins Out: Best Team Or Best Talent?

Setting: Does Roy Williams finally win one or will Bruce Weber and company make him 0-for-5? America got the matchup they've been desiring since the start of the 2005 calendar year - Illinois vs. North Carolina. Together they've won 69 games and only lost five. Neither lost a home game during the regular season, and some would consider this an edge as far as the crowd goes for the Illini. But in Chicago (closer to the team's campus than St. Louis) they had to sweat out a victory over Arizona. If it weren't for the 15-point comeback win in overtime they would not be here. Same could easily be said for UNC, who fortunately beat Villanova by one point thanks to a crucial [incorrect] call late in the game going their way. After each cruised to victory comfortably in the second half by double-digits on Saturday, don't be surprised to see this one to go down to the wire, and possibly the last shot.



Illinois guard Deron Williams has arguably been the most dominant player on both ends of the floor in the this tourney. He contained Salim Stoudamire, stymied Francisco Garica of Louisville, and now his next task is slowing down UNC's Ray Felton.

Frontcourt: UNC wants to play above the rim in this basketball game. They've got three terrific frontcourt players, none expected to make a bigger impact than center Sean May. Beast - that's the word that describes May on the basketball court. Height plays a big part here, too. Though undersized, Rev. Roger Powell Jr. is an ideal college forward. Has a decent handle, follows missed shots and really stepped up on Saturday, scoring 20 points to dispatch Rick Pitino's Cardinals. James Augustine (6-10) had trouble with Arizona's Channing Frye (6-11). Despite being a strong figure on the interior, May is two inches shorter than Frye at 6-9. Jawad Williams is the only starting senior on the UNC frontline. He holds three inches on Powell and has to good get positioning down on the low block in order to occasionally get an open look from mid-rang distance. Heels need between 20-25 points from May to have a chance of winning. **Edge: UNC**

Backcourt: Illinois' guards have been the best in the country all season. They've been that way because no team moves better with or without the basketball than them. Their motion offense sets Luther Head or Dee Brown up for good shots on the perimeter. If they're not open then they dump it off to Augustine or Powell inside. Guy that runs it all - Deron Williams, who had nine assists despite a sub-par shooting night to help the Illini beat Louisville. How UNC defends their dribble penetration and back screening will be key to the tempo early. Tar Heels want to run up and down the floor at a somewhat frenetic pace, but they have to do it without turning the ball over. Ray Felton was amazing in the second half after turning the ball over four times in the first 20 minutes of play. Offensively the matchup might be even if you consider Rashad McCants a guard to complement Felton and Jackie Manuel. However, the defensive edge goes to Illinois as Brown gets steals, Williams shuts down anyone, and Head is rock solid. **Edge: Illinois**

Bench: Two words: Marvin Williams. Yes, the freshmen only had about four points vs. Michigan State, but has come up big in other games of great magnitude. Take the game vs. Duke (at home) for instance where he came up big down the stretch. He also went off for 20 points and 15 rebounds in the regional quarterfinals vs. Iowa State. It's not an open and shut case here concerning the bench because Illinois has some good guys, too. Jack Ingram has emerged as what Bruce Weber calls the 6th starter. Ingram can provide a good 8-10 points. Big guy Nick Smith can score a couple buckets, but tends to be a defensive liability from a lateral movement standpoint. After that, they're looking at Warren Carter and Rich McBride in about two or three minutes. UNC's go-to-guy off the bench may be M. Williams. Just remember they also have David Noel and Melvin Scott to give them some minutes if someone is in foul trouble. **Edge: UNC**



Reserve freshman power forward Marvin Williams is the x-factor for Monday's game. (AP)

Coaching: Roy Williams might have an experience edge over Bruce Weber as far as coaching in this goes, but that does not mean the Tar Heels hold the coaching edge in this one. Illinois' staff does an excellent job preparing them for any kind of defense. In addition, their motion offense can confuse UNC, especially suspect pick-and-roll defenders McCants and May. Master recruiter, though I'm not so sure that Weber, an assistant at Purdue under Gene Keady, will win the coaching battle. **Edge: Illinois**

Intangibles: Crowd advantage, team of destiny, whatever you want to call it or use an explanation for why Illinois holds the intangibles edge, is a good enough reason for me. **Edge: Illinois**

Pick: Contrary to popular belief, this game will not be decided completely in the frontcourt. I agree with the ex-Georgetown Hoyas Head Basketball Coach - John Thompson - that it's going to come down to guard play. Therefore, since my opinion of the Illinois guards is higher than that of North Carolina's, I'll stay with my November 5th preseason pick - Illinois. Illini get the nod 85-82.



Road Runner - Dee Brown is my pick for Player of the Game honors. (AP)