

2005 NCAA Tournament Preview: March Madness - Road to the Final Four! BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Syracuse Regional:



#1 North Carolina Tar Heels: Is this finally Roy Williams' year? From a talent perspective it's been said many times that nobody comes close, not even Illinois. However, unlike the Illini, UNC has trouble getting all that talent to mesh in certain spots. And when the game is one the line at the end who's going to take the **big** shot? You've got so many options that it could be a too many options dilemma.

#16 Play In Game - Oakland & Alabama A&M: Their National Championship is essentially Tuesday night. No secret that winner gets beat bad by UNC on Friday.

Inside the Matchup: Oakland, coached by Greg Kampe, is the only team with a losing record in the tourney at 12-18. They got here with Pierre Dukes' trey that shocked Oral Roberts. Alabama A&M knows that many of the underdogs in the play-in game have won. So their defense will be ready to fight them off..... just not UNC. **Pick: Winner does not matter --- UNC will have the most lopsided first round victory.**



#8 Minnesota Golden Gophers: Improvement is the word that fits both of these programs. Minnesota had an even larger improvement, going from 12-18 last year (3-13) to 21-10 overall. Amazingly, that is without current Utah Jazz rookie Kris Humphries (21.7PPG 10.1RPG his freshman season), the Big Ten Freshman of the Year last season. Gophers have looked to junior college transfer guard Vincent Grier and 7-0 262 pound senior center Jeff Hagen for direction.



#9 Iowa State Cyclones: Sophomores Curtis Vinson and Will Blalock are big reasons why Iowa State has gone 9-2 in their last 11 Big 12 games after a miserable 0-5 start in the conference. The two combine for just over 30 points per game and Stinson (over 1,000 career points) is capable of locking down the other team's best wing scorer.

Inside the Matchup: Wayne Morgan and Dan Monson are two coaches very few people outside Big 12 and Big Ten country have heard of. They will be very well known if they can win this game and then go on to stun North Carolina. This is a game where Minnesota could really use Humphries. Hagen has improved big time, going from being a minimal scorer to major player in what they want to do on offense. **Pick: Still, we like the ISU zone defense. They are able to play a variation of zone defenses to disrupt another squad's system. Watch, Vinson will make plays, get steals and be the game MVP.**



#5 Villanova Wildcats: I'm of the opinion that nobody outside UNC and Illinois has a better starting five than Villanova's of Curtis Sumpter, Allan Ray, Mike Nardi, Jason Fraser and Randy Foye (All-Third Team league choice and Big East steals leader). Does that mean Nova is bound for a run to win it all? Not necessarily.



#12 New Mexico Lobos: The last time the New Mexico Lobos won a regular season title in the conference it was 1994 when they were apart of the Western Athletic Conference. Now with the Mountain West, Ritchie McKay's team nearly did it this year, though will make their first NCAA appearance since 1999 after knocking off Utah in the MW tourney final. Must be physical, yet deliberately stay out of foul trouble.

Inside the Matchup: Watch freshman backup point guard Kyle Lowry, fourth in the Villanova guard rotation. Says Len Elmore, an ex-Maryland Terp and ESPN college basketball analyst, "[Lowry] is a no nonsense guy." Don't see New Mexico bringing someone off their bench like that to off-set what he brings to the table. Danny Granger has to have what I call an all-world performance. Granger, whose 18+ points and 8+ rebounds for the second straight year in a row has New Mexico where they are, can play either the small forward or power forward position. All that matters is that the Bradley transfer gets his points, get his rebounds and somehow gets his team a win. **Pick: Sorry Danny and company; I like the Villanova Wildcats to win here and possibly go on to make it to the Sweet 16 vs. North Carolina.**



Villanova's Curtis Sumpter, a junior that can step out and shoot the perimeter shot, averages 16.2 points and 7.4 rebounds per game. (AP)



#4 Florida Gators: Last year Florida came into this thing with low expectations and got embarrassed by the Luis Flores-led Manhattan Jaspers, 75-60. And HC Billy Donovan does not want to get out-coached by Bobby Gonzalez, or in this case Tim O'Shea. Exceptional perimeter defender and freshman Corey Brewer is really the

guy giving them that spark in short minutes. Not the team you want to play off two wins over SEC favorite Kentucky.



#13 Ohio Bobcats: Enormous transition. The Ohio Bobcats have made one after a 10-19 season in 2003-04 that they'd like to forget for good. Now they can since they're in the tourney, sporting a mark of 21-10 and title as MAC champs. Ohio played in a MAC conference that could've easily gotten two teams into the field of 65. They're just glad to be in and see what they can do.

Inside the Matchup: Really doubtful Ohio can find three guys that will zoom in defensively and stop the Gators potent trio of point guard Anthony Roberson, David Lee (13.3PPG 8.8RPG) and Matt Walsh (43% three-point shooter). All can score upwards of 15 points on any particular night and put Ohio in a tough spot. To get them out of it, it will have to be minimal scorers Jeremy Fears (10.9PPG), Leon Williams (11.3PPG 8.2RPG) and Sonny Troutman. **Pick: Florida does their opponent 15 points better.**



#6 Wisconsin Badgers: Alando Tucker is the x-factor for the Wisconsin Badgers. Like Michigan State, Wisconsin has had to make do with weaker play at the point guard position this year. Devin Harris, a lottery pick in the '04 NBA Draft, put the Badgers over the top vs. Illinois in last March's Big Ten conference title game on selection Sunday. They'll need Tucker, who drilled the game-winning 3' vs. Iowa on Saturday, to play out of his life to return to the second round.



#11 Northern Iowa Panthers: Many questioned, on the day after selection Sunday, whether the committee made the right choice taking a third team from the Missouri Valley conference over a second MAC team say like Buffalo. Northern Iowa did beat out the Bulls of Buffalo, whose RPI was in the 30's. Ben Jacobson and Erik Crawford (together accounting for about 31PPG) should get looks from the perimeter.

Inside the Matchup: Post play. That's what will put an end to the Northern Iowa basketball 2004-05 campaign. They don't have it, and Wisconsin can go to Mike Wilkinson (14.8PPG 7.3RPG), a slick post operator under/around the cylinder. If anyone has been a mini disappointment for No. Iowa it has been senior guard Chris Foster. His scoring and rebounding numbers from a year ago have nearly been cut in half. **Pick: Like Wisconsin to prevail and play in what should be an entertaining second round game between them and the Kansas Jayhawks.**



#3 Kansas Jayhawks: Wayne Simien - Preseason National Player of the Year candidate. J.R. Giddens - potential first round NBA draft pick coming out as a sophomore. Aaron Miles (7.3APG in 2003-04) - proven point guard that has been tested in big game situations. Lastly, Keith Langford - the other senior who plays tough and can defend just about any wing player out there. Langford is down and so is Kansas, losers of five of their past eight games. KU started the season 14-0, but it all came crashing down at Villanova, where they received a brutal 83-62 spanking on January 22nd. If the Jayhawks can put together some kind of win streak, say a simple two-game one, they will potentially get another crack at Nova or Roy Williams' UNC Tar Heels.



#14 Bucknell Bison: Bucknell plays that slow type of game that will rock or lull you to sleep. Can you blame them, though? It worked extremely well, helping them record a 22-9 record and beating Holy Cross in what actually was a very good Patriot League title game. They have three scorers that average 12 points per game... just not over the 13PPG benchmark. Their goal is to limit the number of flash plays from Bill Self's team through the course of this contest. Not an easy task when you have the personnel Bucknell has.

Inside the Matchup: Kansas will coast to victory in this one and the Bison, their fans and everyone associated with the program probably know that. But that should not keep them from trying to make it competitive and interesting. **Pick: Bucknell got a chance? No. Of all the #14 seeds I think Bucknell has the least chance of pulling the shocker. Expect J.R. Giddens to really turn the light switch on and play his best the next couple weeks.**



#7 Charlotte 49ers: Sleeper team? You betcha. Bobby Lutz' 49ers have Sweet 16 talent and hunger. For much of the season Charlotte was the second best bunch in C-USA only behind Rick Pitino's Louisville Cardinals. Having lost to Texas Tech in the opening round one year ago will help them motivation wise, too.



#10 NC State Wolfpack: Herb Sendek is not having his name thrown around for job opening like Bobby Lutz is when the words Tennessee and Virginia come up. Could it benefit NC State in this one? Maybe, and that's what they have to hang their hat on coming in. That and the fact they've been able to beat Wake Forest, a #2 seed.

Inside the Matchup: State better know where Eddie Basden, Curtis Withers (17.5PPG 8.4RPG) and Brendan Plavich are at all times. 49ers are a dangerous group of kids that can turn it up on offense or defense. Word versatility kind of fits them. Inconsistent and

enigmatic are two that have been labeled on the Wolfpack, who have mediocre in ACC play. And many need to realize this Charlotte team does so many things better than a number of the teams NC State has lost to. It's up to Hodge to produce a marvelous scoring output. **Pick: Three all-league caliber players are better than one. Sorry Elian Evtimov (9.2PPG) and Engin Atsur, but I do not see you guys matching Basden, Withers. Plavich and Charlotte.**



#2 Connecticut Huskies: It's no longer the team led by Emeka Okafor and Ben Gordon, the two standout juniors that helped the Huskies win it all in April of 2004 over the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets and Paul Hewitt. Both Gordon and Okafor declared for the NBA Draft, were the third and second picks respectively and are prime Rookie of the Year candidates. Even more impressive about UCONN is Jim Calhoun has gotten the youngsters to play hard from the start and win eight straight without Rashad Anderson, prior to falling to Jim Boeheim's Syracuse team on Friday night.



#15 Central Florida Golden Knights: Very balanced team on offense with Joshua Peppers and Gary Johnson the top scorers; both average slightly over 13 points per game. UCF is a fairly good basketball team and had nice control of an Atlantic Sun conference that appeared to be up in the air when the Knights were 19-8 (11-7). They went on to win their final five and will try to extend their season vs. UCONN.

Inside the Matchup: Boy would Connecticut love to have UCF's Johnson for the tourney run? That's what is missing from this team besides the experience of Okafor and Gordon - three-point shooting. Denham Brown has picked it up as of late and Marcus Williams is playing steady at the point playing in the shadows of former PG Taliek Brown. However, this Connecticut team turns the ball over more than the one that won it all in '04. If they're to get to the Sweet 16 or beyond those turnovers will have to be limited. **Pick: Connecticut in one of the closer (13-19 points) 15-2 games.**

Austin Regional:



#1 Duke Blue Devils: Not your usual Coach K squad, Duke somehow, some way got through all their ACC tests to grab this seed. Point guard Chris Duhon's heart and resiliency has been something sorely missed, especially playing in arguably the best conference in America. Now it's up to the trio of J.J. Redick, Shelden Williams Danny Ewing to get them to the Final Four for the second straight season.



#16 Delaware State Hornets: Delaware State finished up 14-4 on MEAC play by defeating Hampton on Saturday, 55-53. They overcame a 25-21 half-time

deficit and won thanks in large part to the play of Jahsha Bluntt (14.1PPG) and Terrence Hunter (11.9PPG). They combined for 31 points, but don't expect that vs. Duke.

Inside the Matchup: Depth questions and the injury to Sean Dockery, backup point guard, are things that might stop them from returning to the Final Four. They are coached too well and are too disciplined to lose to Delaware State, a very flamboyant and streaky basketball team. Staying close going into half-time would be an accomplishment for them. **Pick: Remember how Duke beat Alabama State last season, Winthrop years back and all those other #16 seeds? Same result.**



#8 Stanford Cardinal: Trent Johnson, former HC of Nevada, replaced Mike Montgomery in the off-season. Johnson does not have a lot of depth or much to work with after Dan Grunfeld, son of Ernie, tore a knee ligament. No Josh Childress, current Atlanta Hawks rookie, either. The recruiting class is fairly bare, too. Second chance opportunities is something they want to get better at since they shoot a good amount of long range jump shots.



#9 Mississippi State Bulldogs: Mississippi State is a strange team in the sense they could be one-and-done or be a legit Final Four contender. It all depends on the play of preseason Natl. POY candidate Lawrence Roberts and his supporting cast. Of course, being a #9 seed did not help things. Getting past Stanford is goal #1.

Inside the Matchup: Rick Stansbury's Bulldgos would love to have Timmy Bowers back so they can put to rest the 8-8 record over their last 16 matches. Roberts simply does not look like the same guy that helped them get out to an excellent 14-2 start. That means Shane Power, Gary Ervin, Winsome Frazier (12.2PPG) and Ontario Harper need to provide more on each end of the floor for Mississippi State to see Duke in the next round. Seven-foot-tall junior center Marcus Campbell also must give them more than six points and five measly boards. **Pick: It's definitely another one of those coin flips. If Roberts was doing more at this time in the season I would take Mississippi State in a heartbeat. But he, nephew of ESPN/ABC's Robin Roberts, looks like a different player than the one putting up 17 and 11. Chris Hernandez gets Stanford the win.**



#5 Michigan State Spartans: Tom Izzo's Spartans were anticipated to be Final Four material coming into last season, though were eliminated in the first round. This season it's been Illinois that has done them one better, otherwise they would be the Big 10's top choice to make it there. Mateen Cleaves and Magic Johnson were the two point guards during their last two National Championship runs. Nothing against the young man, but is Chris Hill really on that level? MSU does have trouble closing games out and if they don't finish the deal in this one then Old Dominion will pull the upset.



#12 Old Dominion Monarchs: What a season for Blaine Taylor and the Old Dominion Monarchs: 28-5 overall and champions of the Colonial Athletic Association; making their first trip to the NCAA's since 1997. ODU has about five guys in Kiah Thomas, Valdas Vayslius, Isaiah Hunter, Arnaud Dahi and Alex Loughton that average roughly between 8-13 points per game. Loughton, a native of Perth, Australia, is considered the 'go-to-guy,' and can score in the 20-30 range if need be. One more integral piece to the Old Dominion puzzle is point guard Drew Williamson, who was in the top three in the CAA in assists and steals. He's like the quarterback on the court.

Inside the Matchup: Both teams possess balance on offense and are coached well. The Monarchs ranked in the top ten in scoring defense for a good part of the season and commit just 12 turnovers a contest. Another words they don't beat themselves. **Pick: Like MSU to win by about 6-9 points for a few reasons. Number one, Paul Davis can match what Loughton does. Secondly, ODU's weak non-conference slate will catch up with them here against a national contender like the Spartans. And lastly, the Monarchs two biggest problems going into the CAA Tournament were three-point shooting, which they have improved on, and lack of tourney experience.**



#4 Syracuse Orange: Jim Boeheim won his first ever National Championship two years ago and would probably be going for a third straight had Carmelo Anthony remained at Syracuse. But that's the easy decision a then freshman is going to make when he takes a team expected to be nothing more than an NIT threat and carry them to a title. Syracuse will be in the Final Four for the second time in three years if someone else can help out the inside-outside combo of Gerry McNamara and Hakim Warrick. Best candidates are a slew of youngsters and senior Josh Pace (10.9PPG).



#13 Vermont Catamounts: Taylor Coppenrath and T.J. Sorrentine could be playing their last game together. Coppenrath averaged 25.3PPG, 8.9RPG and shot well over 50% the past couple seasons. Sorrentine, the floor leader that dishes out about five assists each time out, adds another 19 points to the cause. He's approaching 350 netted three-pointers with the Catamounts (20th in the RPI), an amazing number to say the least. If Vermont is to lose, Tom Brennan, the Head Coach, will be done.

Inside the Matchup: Both teams have superior inside-outside games, but only one can have the superior combination on this night. Having that said, the in-between game can be the difference. Look for Syracuse to try and establish that once they get a lead so that they can build it up to three, or a five possession advantage. Vermont will play them

tough, no question about that, and they know it's their coach's last game. **Pick: Syracuse will win, however, they will not win by a whole lot. Orange by 8-10Pts.**



Tom Brennan has 315 career coaching victories. Brennan will either get 316 vs. Syracuse or see his career come to an end as he will retire following Vermont's final game.



#6 Utah Utes: Everyone is raving about Andrew Bogut and deservedly so. Bogut, a seven-foot Aussie, is the reason many believe Utah is a cinch to make it to the Sweet 16. Remember, Rick Majerus no longer coaches this team. It's up to first-year man Ray Giacoletti to implement a good game plan for their goals to be achieved.



#11 UTEP Miners: Billy Gillespie is doing wonders with the Texas A&M program. So is the guy following him - Doc Sadler. Sadler shattered the old mark of 18 wins by a first-year UTEP Head Coach. Right now his Miners team is 27-7 entering the tournament and he thinks very highly of his team's top scorer, Omar Thomas. "I don't know that Omar Thomas has ever had a bad day in his life," said Sadler.

Inside the Matchup: Sadler will also be quick to let you know that Thomas is the all-time leading scorer in junior college basketball history. He's a better than adequate rebounder and defender, and plays off guard Filberto Rivera. The senior Rivera went from averaging 4.8 assists per game last season to 7.2 in 04-05. Also joining them in double-figures scoring wise is junior swingman Jason Williams (11+PPG for the second consecutive year). How bad does Utah need another player to help out Bogut? Not that bad since they can use their size to possibly offset UTEP's speed and quick decision making. Watch the Utes' Tim Drisdorn - his play and Bryant Markson's play will be

important. **Pick: Utah, but they may need a Bogut buzzer-beater or key shot late to pull it out.**



#3 Oklahoma Sooners: Remember this name: Tahj Gray. He's a 6-8 235 pound junior that lays it all on the court every night. He will play with a fire and compete every game the rest of the way for OU. Could be just one game or a number if the Sooners in fact can be this year's 'sleeper' if you want to call them one.



#14 Niagara Purple Eagles: There are two major candidates, outside of the #9, #10, #11 and #12 seeds, capable of pulling the first round upset. Winthrop is one of them and the other in my book is Niagara. The Purple Eagles are probably a better overall team if you were to rate them offensively alone compared to Oklahoma. Defensively, the answer is no. With an RPI of about 83, don't mock this basketball team.

Inside the Matchup: Remember this name: Juan Mendez. Most wonderful basketball player nobody has ever heard of just look at his numbers: 23.6PPG; 10.5RPG and 61 shot blocks. Mendez, who will definitely be drafted sometime in the '05 draft, also has 20 double-doubles to his credit, including 17 in his past 19 ball games. Alvin Cruz and David Brooks are two other Metro players that will find ways to score. Kevin Bookout and Drew Lavender might have to outplay them for OU to hold on. **Pick: You got two names to remember with this game - Mendez and Gray. And I'm going to go with my most bold, biggest first round upset of the tournament. Take Niagara to win this game outright.**



#7 Cincinnati Bearcats: That Kenyon Martin and DerMarr Johnson Cincinnati team was better than this one. However, do not sleep on the Bearcats. A rather healthy non-conference slate and intense coaching from Bob Huggins could push them, a team that last missed the tourney in 1991, into the second round and beyond.



#10 Iowa Hawkeyes: Always puzzling how Iowa has so much success in basketball and football when they are supposed to be average right? The dismissal of Pierre Pierce may be the disparity between an Iowa win vs. Cincinnati and a loss. No Pierce means Greg Brunner, Adam Haluska, Jeff Horner (14.1PPG 4.5RPG 5.6APG) and the rest of the gang must set the tone early for the Hawkeyes, who began the season 12-1.

Inside the Matchup: Iowa's bench is not as good as Cincinnati's when you look at it on paper. Obviously, games are not played on paper and you have to give Iowa a fighting chance just for the sake of discussion and due to the fact they went from 4-9 in the Big 10 to winning their last three conference contests. And if you want to match starters for

starters, then look at the Bearcats best three. Jason Maxiell has 82 blocks in the middle, Eric Hicks is the double-double garbage guy and Nick Williams or James White can be the third contributor/option. **Pick: Huggins gets the best of Steve Alford here; wins 78-69.**



#2 Kentucky Wildcats: Freshman point guard Rajon Rondo is one of the best kept secrets in college basketball on one of the youngest, yet most talented teams around. Last year was supposed to be their year, but UAB put an end to Kentucky in the second round. Senior Chuck Hayes, Kelenna Azubuike and Western Kentucky transfer guard Patrick Sparks are Tubby Smith's big three in crunch time.



#15 Eastern Kentucky Colonels: It's awesome for Kentucky fans baby! Two schools from the state playing each other for a chance to play in the next round. Although, everyone knows what the outcome will surely be. Travis Ford was a member of the '93 Final Four Kentucky team. Ford, in his fifth year as coach, will look to junior Matt Witt (6.4APG) to make the Colonels' first trip to the dance since 1979 a happy one.

Inside the Matchup: "[Their] defense is superb," says ESPN analyst and former Utah Head Coach Rick Majerus regarding the Kentucky Wildcats. But many, including myself, believe this team could fall before reaching the Final Four as they did last year. For Kentucky to really breeze by Eastern Kentucky and get to the Elite Eight they will need to go inside more to Chuck Hayes. Don't get three-point happy or it will give Ford's team confidence to take them down to the wire. **Pick: Wildcats roll big time by about 25-30 points.**