

**2005 NCAA Tournament: Final Four Preview**  
**BY MATTHEW HATFIELD --- Wednesday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005**

**Saturday: #1 Illinois (36-1) V. #4 Louisville (33-4)**

**Augustine and Powell could be the difference inside for the mighty Illini**

Tell me how Louisville got a #4 seed again? All the Cardinals did was go 29-4 leading up to the NCAA Tournament, win both the Conference-USA regular season and tournament crowns, and outscore their last four opponents by a margin of 12.5PPG. A little misleading is that last stat if you did not watch every juicy, tense, exhilarating moment of the Cardinals' game vs. West Virginia. The Mountaineers jumped out to a 20-point lead before watching Rick Pitino's team turn up the aggression and win it in overtime. There is a difference between Louisiana-Lafayette, Washington, Georgia Tech and West Virginia compared to the Fighting Illini.

Illinois never, and I mean never, quits on a game. It was most evident last Saturday night as they came back from the dead, down 15 with four minutes to play, to also force OT and win it, 90-89. What was most startling in that game, aside from the fact Lute Olson and co. went away from Channing Frye and Salim Stoudamire, was that Arizona did not shoot a free-throw approximately the last eight minutes of the game. Scratch that, it was embarrassing if you're an Arizona fan. You've got to be able to hold the ball and get to the line vs. Illinois, otherwise they are going to steal it from you, lay it in, and play hard-nosed, in-your-face defense.



**Louisville's Francisco Garcia has looked to the tragic death of his younger brother, Hector Lopez, as inspiration for him this season. Whether his team wins or not on Saturday, Garcia can be proud of his accomplishments on the court. He's likely headed for the pros next year so he can support his family.**

People talk about the Illini three-guard attack of Deron Williams, Dee Brown and Luther Head. Rightfully so, too, as we saw first hand how good they can be when the pressure is on them to win or go home. All do certain things well. Brown is a cross between the road-runner and the energizer bunny. No, not the Easter bunny, although that rabbit came a day early for him and his teammates. He's the energy guy that can come up big in the clutch in addition to making quick steals and generating fastbreak opportunities. Williams, debatably the top pro prospect of the three, is the most complete decision maker in college basketball today. Probably not the player that will score 25-30 per game, but this kid can shoot when set and makes the game look so easy. Then you've got Head - my choice for Player of the Year next to Utah's Andrew Bogut - believe it or

not, is the best overall shooter and defender of the trio. When he stays away from fouling he can also finish at the rim when the shot is not there for him off those baseline screens.

What does Louisville need to do to win this game? Let the Illinois guards get theirs and guys like Francisco Garcia (23Pts. vs. Washington), Larry O'Bannon and Taquan Dean (7-17 from three-point land against West Virginia) can come close to matching them. It then is up to Louisville to rebound the basketball. Really, to be honest with you, it makes me shake my head when I hear analysts say on television that Arizona has been an underrated defensive team all year long or Louisville rebounds the ball exceptionally well. Not true at all. Everybody was harping about how C-USA's best does not have that true point guard or the dominant post presence that will go up and get them ten boards, plus the 15-18 points. And Jay Bilas, who I enjoy watching and is clearly one of the brightest in the business, how 'underrated' you think Zona's defense is now after their collapse of monumental proportions? Back to the rebounding thing, though. **Louisville has out-rebounded their opponents by a combined 63-33 the last two ball games.** They'll need to follow their shot most importantly against a suspect defensive rebounding team.

I still believe you've got to run that pick-and-pop game if you want to beat Illinois. Many liked the idea of employing a 1-3-1 zone defense vs. them and see how that pans out. Pitino likes to pressure teams in the backcourt. Look for the Illini to use their speed and instinctive guard play to break the presses thrown at them. Could come down to whether or not Ellis Myles, Otis George, and Juan Diego Palacios can collect the proper amount of rebounds and fouls - to control James Augustine and Roger Powell.

**Pick: Illinois by 4-6 points. Make no mistake about it, Louisville CAN win this whole thing. No misprint, one preseason publication had them winning it all (Athlon Sports) and they clearly have the playmakers to score late in games. In this day in age where the three-point shot is the 'great equalizer,' you've got to get out on open shooters. Bruce Weber does an excellent job of drawing up plays for his guards on the perimeter. That's where the Cards must settle on a defense and dictate the tempo offensively in order to get the victory here.**



**The last couple of weeks have been a 'blur' as Illinois Head Coach Bruce Weber has so keenly put it on interviews throughout the week. Blur or not, the Illini better bring their 'A' game if they want to be playing opposite Michigan State or North Carolina in the title game Monday.**

**Saturday: #1 North Carolina (31-4) V. #5 Michigan State (26-6)**

**With four Final Four appearances in the last seven years, you've got believe Michigan State has one edge in the coaching department vs. title-less Roy Williams**

Can you imagine how popular Tom Izzo would be at a North Carolina, UCLA, Kansas or Kentucky if he was the Head Coach of any of those teams? Izzo, making his fourth Final Four appearance in the past seven seasons, says it's not about the coaches, but the players. He's right to a certain degree because players make plays and coaches coach. Wow! It was hard for me to come up with that one, right? Anyhow, MSU has a senior oriented class that wants it badly like the NBA-bound UNC squad.

Athlete-for-athlete, speed-for-speed, the Spartans matchup okay vs. the Tar Heels. Problem is okay will not beat North Carolina on Saturday night. Villanova played much better than okay and came up short (on what was a horrible traveling call at the end of that particular game). Wisconsin knotted the game up at 41-all entering half-time and took a 49-44 lead. They watched it wither away as Carolina got their transition attack going full throttle, scoring 14 of the game's next 16 points. So if you're North Carolina you obviously want to run right? Not so fast, or in this case, too fast because the Big Ten's best free-throw shooting team (3<sup>rd</sup> in the nation I believe) force turnovers off steals that generate points in the open court. An occasional Paul Davis block will lead to further easy points for the underdogs. UNC does not get back defensively a heck of a lot better either.



**UNC power forward Jawad Williams (AP)**

We know college basketball is a game of runs. Izzo is going to have a case of the runs if his team fails to answer a UNC run with one of their own. So far so good as MSU became the first team ever to eliminate Duke and Kentucky in the same NCAA Tournament. Their parts are interchangeable, meaning practically anyone can come in and the same success can be achieved since most of the team has gathered tourney experience. Maurice Ager, Kelvin Torbert and Shannon Brown altogether can cancel out what Rashad McCants does, especially if the UNC star gets frustrated. Roy might think about using the 1-3-1 zone he went to sparingly in last Friday's Villanova game. The thinking behind it would be we can have May use good leverage and body control to keep

Davis off the foul line, and by reading the passing lanes well the Spartans could struggle to make crisp cuts to the hoop, which in-turn sometimes results in free-throw attempts.

Personally, one of the key matchups in my opinion will be Jawad Williams vs. Alan Anderson. A more than likely wing player if he was to make the next step to the NBA, Anderson, a 220 pound senior, can put the ball on the floor more than Jawad. It's questionable whether he can be more explosive to the rack, though, than one Marvin Williams, a freshman that will get the majority of the minutes at the power forward spots coming off the bench. However, when Anderson gets the chance against the more experienced, yet less talented Williams he needs to exploit it fully. NC's best two matchups look like Raymond Felton vs. freshman Drew Neitzel, and Sean May going up against Paul Davis. May and Davis both should get put up double-double numbers, but it's when they pile up the statistics that matters most. Felton may not be the precise decision maker that Deron Williams of Illinois is. That being said, Carolina certainly is a different team without Felton as indicated when they lost to Santa Clara in the season opener, a game he did not participate in. Bottom line: North Carolina is a not a half-court team, but can really beat you up and down the floor with their athleticism and talented quick finishers. It'll be intriguing to see if Izzo challenges them with an up-tempo style. Last key according to my crystal ball will be whether or not Magic Johnson's alma mater can get offensive rebounds. It helped them enormously vs. Duke and it certainly can give them an upper hand since neither team shoots lights out from the perimeter with great consistency.

**Pick: UNC by two points. I think Michigan State has the least chance of the four to win it all. Having that said, between the two underdogs, if I had to pick one I would not hesitate to take Izzo's bunch for the simple fact they are playing a North Carolina basketball team that is mentally fragile. By that I mean sometimes the Tar Heels dwell on their mistakes and fail to execute to their abilities when tested/and or trailing in the half-court. Also, the Heels don't play the championship level defense that Illinois does. That could plague them here or on Monday night.**



**Michigan State Head Basketball Coach Tom Izzo (above)**