

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

The field of 65 has finally been released and quite a few things raise eyebrows. None probably more than the Washington Huskies coached by Lorenzo Romar out of the Pac-10 earning the last #1 seed. Also somewhat surprising was how the Duke win over Ga. Tech and Kentucky loss to Florida switched the ACC teams in the field. Oklahoma State may have been screwed for the second straight year. Last season it was St. Joe's that got a #1 seed, while Eddie Sutton's Cowboys had to settle for a #2.

But this time it will be a lot harder for the #2 seeded boys from the Big 12 to return to the Final Four. That's because they are in the same regional as 32-1 Illinois. OSU probably wanted to be in the Albuquerque Regional or Austin region. They are where they are and will have to deal with the circumstances. Same goes for Rick Pitino's Louisville Cardinals, who in my opinion were a solid #2 or #3 seed heading into today. Heck, a #1 was not too far out of reach with losses by Kentucky, Oklahoma State and maybe Duke. Louisville, ranked #4 in the latest ESPN/USA Today Coaches Poll, was pinned 4th in the Albuquerque region and will face Louisiana-Lafayette in the opening round.

Still, as far as the 'bubble teams' were concerned, I thought the committee did a very good job. Those left out are Notre Dame, DePaul, Maryland, Indiana, Memphis, Buffalo, St. Joe's, Miami of Ohio and a few others. If you ask me, the Irish simply lost their chance to get in with a loss to a sub-.500 Rutgers team in the Big East Tournament. Notre Dame's schedule within in the Big East was very tough, though had a non-conference slate in the 270-280 range. That and the loss to the Scarlet Knights came back to bit them in the end. Also NIT bound is Maryland, a team that lost to Clemson for the third time this season last week. John Gilchrist has been on an emotional roller-coaster, going from ACC Tournament MVP in 2004 to being benched at the end of the game after scoring just four points. Blue Demons of DePaul did some positive things out of C-USA, including handing Old Dominion one of only five losses on the campaign. Two head-to-head losses to fellow Conference USA foe UAB, the 11th seed in the Chicago Regional, was their Achilles heel.

Anyway, enough of the bubble talk and all that stuff. Here's an overview of how I see each regional:

Chicago Regional:

I'm not going to lie, last year when the tourney started I picked Illinois to win the whole thing. It ended up being my preseason pick - Connecticut - taking home the ultimate prize. Right now the Illini would seem to be the favorite, but a lot of people are talking up North Carolina and others. Bottom line is there is nobody in the country that runs as well as they do, defends, shoots the ball from so many different directions and just shares the ball unselfishly. Their road is extremely easy.

One First Round Game to Watch: In the 8-9 game between Texas and Nevada, I could see the play of sophomore Nick Fazekas, who measures in at 6-11, being the difference. If you recall it was Fazekas and company that got all the way to the Sweet 16 as a #10 seed. But they don't have Kirk Snyder and SG, Todd Okeson running the point and Trent Johnson on the sidelines. Mark Fox has done a pretty nice job with the team and Fazekas will probably be enough to get them to face Illinois. Longhorns are good and talented, yet are too inconsistent to beat a one-loss Illini squad even if they get past Nevada.

Most Overrated Team: It's really interesting because I don't see an underrated team in this regional, whereas there may be two or three underrated teams in another regional. Not to mention, there might be a regional that does not have a true overrated team like Boston College. BC is playing without a doubt like the worst #4 seed and it's why they fell from being a #1 a few weeks back to #4. Their loss to West Virginia showed how overrated they are even though the Eagles defeated the likes of UCONN and others early on. Guards are not like other top teams' guards, and rely too much on two players - Craig Smith and Jared Dudley. Don't get me wrong, Al Skinner is coaching great there. Plus, you've got to throw in the Jermaine Watson situation. Watson, a key player for the Eagles, was injured in a raid at his home. His status is important to them.

Another First Round Game to Watch: UAB vs. LSU. Blazers were fortunate to get an at-large bid after going just 21-10 overall and 10-6 in the conference. Meanwhile, the Tigers are led by sophomore forward Brandon Bass (17.1PPG 9RPG 1.6BPG). Bass is so good, one of the SEC's best in fact. He can take the inside shot and step out and shoot the long range j' as indicated by his 48% three-point shooting. Tigers, winners of seven of their last eight, will need to play real well on defense. UAB's an explosive offensive club, led by speedy point guard Squeaky Johnson. He and Mike Anderson's group were able to squeak by one of the SEC's premier defensive clubs in last year's tournament, Kentucky.

Player to Keep an Eye on: Alabama's Kennedy Winston. Winston averaged about 17.8 points per game and 6.5 rebounds per game during 2004-05. He and Chuck Davis helped the Tide roll to the Elite Eight last season. Now Winston will be accounted upon to provide an even larger scoring load with Antoine Pettway gone.

Albuquerque Regional:

No region in my opinion is more up in the air as this one. You could see a number of different teams win it and the #1 seed here - Washington - is not the most likely candidate to do so in my mind. Who do I like here? It's going to come down to Wake Forest and Louisville. Cardinals can flat out shoot the basketball from deep and may not need the dominating inside game to reach the Final Four. Wake, on the other hand, can go inside a little bit more and has an outstanding core of three-point marksmen. Taron Downey was better than good in the middle part of the season and Justin Gray is considered to be one of the five best shooting far out. Oh, and that Chris Paul guy, who cost the Deacons a #1 seed for his incident against NC State, can do it all. Shoot, pass, get steals and take it to the rim --- he's fantastic.

Weakest Regional? Quite possibly. At the top at least. Washington, Wake Forest and Gonzaga are the top three seeds, all of which have been questionable at some point in the season. From a depth perspective this is a decent to above average regional. Quality teams like UCLA, George Washington, Texas Tech, Georgia Tech and West Virginia are all capable of being a surprise team in the tournament. Contrasting styles of play, mismatches and whoever makes the best adjustments tells the story here.

Dangerous Team: Pittsburgh Panthers. Chris Taft, Chevon Troutman and Carl Krauser makes for one of the game's best trios. Those three young men know how to get it done not only because they played in the ultra competitive Big East, but also because they were here last year and lost to a good Oklahoma State ball club in the Sweet 16. Rebounding and defending - not issues at all. The Panthers are as rugged as they come on the defensive end and can collect double-digit boards from Troutman and Taft on most nights. Sure, Julius Page would be nice to have against Washington in a potential second round game. Still, they are bigger than the Huskies and Washington has struggled many times against teams like Pittsburgh. This is a guard regional so Pitt has an advantage having Krauser, a very well rounded PG, and the two big guys.

One Game to Watch: There are quite a few intriguing first round games in this regional. None more appealing to me than the George Washington - Georgia Tech game. Remember, GW has beaten big-time schools. The Colonials knocked off Maryland and Michigan State in the BB&T Classic. Carl Hobbs takes that energy and rubs it off on his players. Pops Mensah-Bonsu

Player to Keep an Eye on: Let's take two shall we? Gonzaga's Adam Morrison and Washington's Nate Robinson are two of the finest ballers around. Morrison scored 19 in the Zags' 78-75 win over Oklahoma State. Robinson, only 5-9, brings constant speed and hustle to the table. If you want to know why these teams are seeded where they are then just watch these guys play on Thursday and Friday. Do that, and you'll know why right away.

Syracuse Regional:

By far the best regional. Here you've got North Carolina, said to be the best talented/stacked team in the field, reigning champion Connecticut, Kansas, Florida, Wisconsin and Villanova. And those comprise the top six seeds. Haven't even gotten to the Iowa State's, Charlotte's or New Mexico's. Charlotte won 20 games in a league that is not easy to win 20 games in. Behind the play of Danny Granger the Lobos upended Utah to win the Mountain West Conference Tournament. Finally, Iowa State rebounded from an 0-5 start in Big 12 action to win nine of their last 11 games in the league. We know whoever wins this regional definitely means business.

Potential 2nd Round Games: As good as this region is the real stuff does not begin until the second round. We could be looking at (barring any major upsets) Wisconsin and Kansas, Charlotte vs. Connecticut and Florida taking on Villanova. Which one is the best? They are all good, but if I had to take one to watch it would be

Nova facing Billy Donovan's Gators. Florida is not the same team entering the tournament as they were last year. Main reason is the fact they've beaten Kentucky on back-to-back Sundays and how many teams in any season can say that?

Player to Keep an Eye On: Other than North Carolina's Raymond Felton, Florida point guard Anthony Roberson may be the region's best. Roberson, an All-SEC First team pick that was runner-up for conference player of the year honors, made about 90 three-pointers this season. He, Matt Walsh and David Lee give the Gators a trio trying to avenge a gut-wrenching first round loss to Manhattan in the 2004 NCAA tourney.

Sleeper Team: The Charlotte 49ers coached by Bobby Lutz are my sleeper team for the Syracuse Regional. In fact, they may be the NCAA's sleeper team when all is said and done. Charlotte has won 20+ games in each of the past two seasons, something that is worth talking about considering they play in a hard league and play some fierce teams outside the conference. Curtis Withers is really the guy that makes them tick, though there are a number of additional players that contribute. Brendan Plavich, one of the nation's most reliable outside shooters, is another one, scoring 13.7 points per game. Eddie Basden (15.2PPG 8.4RPG 3.7APG 3.2SPG) is their x-factor on both offense as well as defense. Connecticut better beware Charlotte in the second round, provided they do indeed meet.

Not as good as you may think: That leads us to those Connecticut Huskies, the defending National Champs from a year ago. However, it is clearly not the same team. Gone are Emeka Okafor and Ben Gordon, two of the NBA's best rookies this year, and point guard Taliek Brown. Sure, UCONN's turnaround game was a loss to North Carolina where sophomore Marcus Williams really started his up-climb. Connecticut reeled off eight straight after that before losing to Syracuse in the Big East Tournament semis. Rudy Gay, Denham Brown, Charlie Villanueva, Josh Boone and Rashad Anderson (whose not been completely healthy all year) are steady players that will only get better. But for right now this is a young team that has to be thinking Sweet 16 and we had a nice season. Turnovers and below average outside shooting will keep them from making it to St. Louis, mark it down.

Austin Regional:

Is it me or is this regional on the bland side? May be a weird way of putting it, but do we really want to see another Kentucky-Duke game again? Can Oklahoma, Michigan State, Cincinnati, Utah or the 8-9 game winner really come from nowhere to reach the Final Four? Not in my book. So that leaves me with one team: Syracuse. Experienced bunch, just won the whole thing two years ago and play that peculiar zone defense capable of confusing teams. If they get a lead I do not see them giving it up.

Inside-Outside: Take a closer look at the Syracuse - Vermont game. Why you ask? The inside-outside combination both look to on a nightly basis. For the Catamounts it's Taylor Coppenrath and point guard T.J. Sorrentine. Coppenrath finished fourth nationally last season in scoring at 24.1PPG and has his own inside-outside game. 'Cuse will go with the duo of Gerry McNamara and Hakim Warrick. McNamara can light it up

from downtown as he did vs. Kansas in the 2003 title game, while Warrick can be a dominating force on both ends. His long wingspan allows him to reach out and alter shots and haul in loose balls.

Couple Cinderella's: Vermont looks like one, but the two potential first round upsets some like is Old Dominion over Michigan State and Niagara (last trip - 1970) over Oklahoma. I for one see Niagara as a better possibility believe it or not. No knock on ODU, who had a marvelous season under Blaine Taylor at 28-5, but the Purple Eagles looked like a team nobody wanted to face if they were a #15. The Metro Atlantic is a strong mid-major conference..... just ask Florida when Manhattan handled them. OU was playing real well, but if the Purple Eagles neutralize Tahj Gray then the upset is completely there for Juan Mendez-led Niagara. Look for the Monarchs in the Sweet 16 next season.

Class of Coaches: What really jumps out at you is the class of coaches in the Austin Regional. Start at the top with Coach K, one of the game's best ever that probably did one of his best jobs ever in 2004-05. Then you get to Tubby Smith, a man that had all the pressure in the world to succeed, and he has, with the name Adolf Rupp etched in Kentucky fans' heads forever. Kelvin Sampson has been as good a recruiter as he has been a coach at Oklahoma, while Jim Boeheim, one of the nicest you'll ever meet, won his first ever national title in 2003. Don't let me forget about Cincinnati's Bob Huggins or Tom Izzo of Michigan State either, both of whom are firm basketball teachers.

Game Matchup: Utah and UTEP face off in the 6-11 game. The Utes, coming off a tough loss to New Mexico recently, are led by sophomore big man Andrew Bogut. He's projected to be a lottery pick in the up coming NBA Draft and has all the tools for a big man. Bogut, 7-0 245 pounds, averaged 20.3 points per game and 12.3 rebounds per contest. He also averaged just a shade under two blocks a night and led Utah to a 27-5 mark. The Miners don't come with great size, yet can win if it's a speed game. Omar Thomas' 20.4PPG shows he can score with the best of them and Filberto Rivera (7.3 assists per game) set him and others up. Again, the Miners only lose one home conference game all season and that was to Nevada, who they beat on the road on January 12th.



Cincinnati's Jason Maxiell finished with five blocks against East Tennessee State in last year's first round tournament game. (AP)