

Kansas and Kentucky will overcome the obstacles

NCAA committee sets up top two teams for failure

By SUSAN SHAN
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Apparently, the NCAA Tournament Committee decided that if you are the overall No. 1 seed, you must have the hardest road to the Final Four in Indianapolis.

Poor Kansas. Their Midwest Region includes one of the hottest teams in the nation in No. 2 Ohio State. The Big Ten Tournament champions have won 7 straight and 13 out of their last 14 games, not to mention benefiting from National Player of the Year Evan Turner.

The Midwest's No. 3 team Georgetown just blitzed through the Big East Tournament, taking down the West Region's No. 1 seed Syracuse, before falling in a two-point loss to West Virginia in the championship game.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the only two teams the Jayhawks have lost to this season—Tennessee and Oklahoma State—are also in the Midwest Region.

If Kansas makes it to the Sweet 16, their opponent will most likely be No. 4 Maryland or No. 5 Michigan State. Maryland's Gary Williams and Michigan State's Tom Izzo are both future Hall of Fame coaches who have previously won national championships.

"I do believe that this is a very, very difficult region," Jayhawks coach Bill Self said in the Big 12 teleconference on Monday. "Whoever comes out of the Midwest will have earned their way to Indy. I don't think anybody can deny that."

LOPSIDED BRACKET

The committee, for all of their efforts, decided that the lowest-ranked No. 1 seed Syracuse would have the easiest route to Indianapolis in the West Region. The only potential road block to the Orange's path is No. 3 Pittsburgh, to whom Syracuse suffered the first of four losses earlier in the season.

The Panthers play typical hard-nosed, tough Big East basketball and are well-coached by Jamie Dixon. Losing DeJuan Blair, Sam Young, and LeVance Fields from last year's squad doesn't help, but the Panthers have been through the gauntlet of the nation's toughest conference and are battle-tested.

The West Region is Syracuse's to lose. Injured center Arinze Onuaku will make it back in time for the important games and the vaunted 2-3 zone will be too tough for any team in the West.

Kentucky is the No. 1 seed in the



KENTUCKY'S TIME: The Wildcats' fantastic freshmen have what it takes to win college basketball's biggest prize. CHRIS CHAMBERS/GETTY IMAGES

East Region and the second-best team in the field. As their reward, the committee gave them the second-toughest road to the Final Four, which includes No. 2 West Virginia, the Big East Tournament champions. West Virginia arguably should have been a No. 1 seed themselves.

Former No. 1-ranked Texas is the best and most dangerous No. 8 seed in the tournament and has the talent to beat anyone in the country. The only question is whether that talent can come together after weeks of freefalling.

The Longhorns set up an intriguing potential matchup with Kentucky in the second round but that game is only the first of several tough hurdles the Wildcats will have to jump over en route to Indianapolis.

No. 12 Cornell was leading Kansas for most of the game in their January matchup and only lost to the Jayhawks in the final seconds. They are one of the most underrated teams in the tournament and could cause problems with their 3-point shooting.

"Our little corner of the world is hard," Kentucky coach John Calipari told SportsIllustrated.com. All-American forward DeMarcus Cousins went so far as to say, "They are setting us up."

Even if the committee is setting up the youngest team in the tournament for failure, the most talented team in the nation won't fail to reach the Final Four. Like Calipari says, "In March,

I'll take talent over experience."

The South Region is the most widespread part of the bracket because its No. 1 seed Duke is once again highly overrated but heavily favored to reach Indianapolis.

Even with the second-easiest collection of opponents, the Blue Devils may not make it out of the first weekend.

No. 9 Louisville has been one of the many bipolar teams in the Big East this season. The Cardinals made it into the tournament with two marquee wins over Syracuse, but also shot themselves in the foot early in the season with home losses to Charlotte and Western Carolina.

Louisville is good enough to beat anyone and bad enough to lose to anyone.

Assuming Louisville gets past No. 8 California in the first round, two days later, they will meet Duke and yes, could possibly pull off the upset against the 3-point happy Blue Devils. If Louisville doesn't get it done, No. 5 Texas A&M is a good candidate for an upset special in the Sweet 16.

If the Aggies fail, the athletic and talented No. 3 Baylor Bears will finish the job. Baylor has been a good sleeper-pick all season because they have the rare combination of great guards and inside presence in college basketball.

Guard play is the single most important ingredient for NCAA Tournament success, but combine that trait with dominant interior players and

you have a Final Four team

No. 2 Villanova is overly guard-oriented and has been destroyed all season long by teams with big men who can dominate the paint. The Wildcats' lack of size translates to lack of rebounds, which equates to a loss to the Bears in the Sweet 16.

Kansas and Kentucky have been the two best teams all year with identical 32-2 records. They are the regular season and tournament champions of their respective conferences.

Both have clearly elevated themselves above everyone else in a year with what ESPN analyst Jay Bilas called "the weakest at-large field in the history of the tournament."

If there was ever a year for the top two teams to meet in the national championship game, this is it. Although the committee did them no favors with bracketing, Kansas and Kentucky are so much better than everyone else that they will play through the handicap.

When asked who he wants to play in the national championship game, Jayhawks forward Marcus Morris said, "Kentucky."

"We've been back and forth at 1 and 2. It'd just be good to go against those guys. I just feel like we've been competing every game to see who's the better team," Morris told the Kansas City Star.

Be careful, Jayhawks, you might get your wish, but on April 5, Kentucky will do what Michigan's Fab Five couldn't do—cut down the nets.

Tiger Woods announces golf return beginning with the Masters

By IAN RITZ
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Professional golf icon Tiger Woods released an official statement ending his voluntary leave of absence from the PGA tour. He is planning to play in the Masters in April.

The PGA superstar has been on a hiatus for the past four months, trying to put together his personal life, following his highly publicized infidelity scandal.

On Tuesday, he made an official statement announcing his decision to get back into the game. A press release on his Web site www.tigerwoods.com has the sports world talking about and anticipating his return.

"The Masters is where I won my first major, and I view this tournament with great respect. After a long and necessary time away from the game, I feel like I'm ready to start my season at Augusta," stated Woods in a press release.

The Masters is set to begin on April 8 at the Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia.

Most professionals view the Masters as the top PGA event in golf. This year the broadcast will feature



COMING BACK: Tiger Woods will make his return at the Masters. SAM GREENWOOD/GETTY IMAGES

unique live 3D viewing enhancements with the entire match being shot with 3D capable cameras.

"The major championships have always been a special focus in my career and, as a professional, I think Augusta is where I need to be, even though it's been awhile since I last played," said Woods.

Woods has won four green jackets at the Masters.

Mourinho triumphs over former club Chelsea

By RAHUL VAIDYANATH
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Jose Mourinho returned to Stamford Bridge in London, England, and exacted revenge on his former club Chelsea with his current club Inter Milan. Inter defeated Chelsea 1-0 to move into the quarterfinals of Champions League. Inter Milan won the tie in aggregate 3-1.

It was classic Mourinho. Rugged defending, which sometimes pushed the limits of the rulebook, accompanied by a quick counterattacking goal after a brilliant pass.

"I'm very happy because I won. I'm not very happy because they [Chelsea] lost," said Mourinho in his press conference. Chelsea's supporters and the team itself still clearly has a special place in his heart.

"Inter played a very good game," said Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti. "We were not able to play how we wanted. We could play better."

Samuel Eto'o scored the game's only goal in the 79th minute. He was picked out by a beautiful looping pass from Wesley Sneijder before firing a low accurate shot past third-string Chelsea goalie Ross Turnbull.

"We came here to attack and to score a goal. We deserved to win," said Sneijder.

Mourinho has never been one to impress with beautiful soccer. Instead, his teams have adopted a

workmanlike pragmatic approach to winning games. This outstanding result for Inter Milan was no different.

Inter rode their luck in the first half. They could have been called for a couple of penalties when tackling Chelsea attackers in their 18-yard box. But, they got away with it, and started to stifle Chelsea in the second half.

Both Maicon and Walter Samuel made courageous diving blocks to deny Chelsea shots on target.

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba received a controversial red card in the 86th minute after he apparently stomped on Thiago Motta after being tackled in the penalty box. Thiago Motta lived dangerously throughout the match, committing fouls while on a yellow card.

In the end Inter was the better team and Mourinho's game plan turned out to be perfect although Chelsea surely will feel as though another injustice has been committed against them. One only needs to remember their loss last year at the hands of Barcelona where claims for penalty kick fell on deaf ears.

Inter entered the game on the back of a disappointing 3-1 loss to Catania in Serie A last Friday but, if they had an eye on the Chelsea clash, that can now be forgiven.

Chelsea will be bitterly disappointed; however, they are still very much in the running for the Premier League and FA Cup.

LeBron, Cavs holding up well without Shaq

By KARL YU
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With the chance that star forward LeBron James could leave via free agency this summer, it could be championship or bust for the Cleveland Cavaliers this year.

With the best record in the NBA, being the first team to clinch a playoff spot, the Cavs have to be expected to win it all this year.

The team is putting up good numbers, as one would expect. At the time of print, James leads the NBA in scoring with an average of 29.9 points per game. The Cavs are second in 3-point shooting at 39.1 percent and third in team field goal percentage, making 48.7 percent of their shots.

A healthy Cavaliers team is potent and as good as any team in the East, with James complemented by trade deadline acquisition power forward Antawn Jamison, guards Mo Williams and Anthony Parker, and the aging but still useful Shaquille O'Neal.

While "The Big Aristotle" is a shadow of his Magic, Laker, or even Heat self, he was still contributing more than adequately, averaging 12 points per game, 6.7 rebounds per game and 1.2 blocks per game.

Unfortunately, O'Neal suffered a thumb injury in late February in a game against the Boston Celtics, and had surgery in early March. He will miss an estimated eight weeks.

It's a shame because Shaq was

playing arguably his best basketball of the season at the time of his injury.

Eight weeks puts O'Neal on track for a playoff return but Shaq is hoping to return before the end of the season. Shaq returned to Cleveland on Monday to begin the early stages of his rehabilitation.

Jamison missed a game against the Philadelphia 76ers last Friday due to a cyst behind his left knee and although he did return for Cleveland's 104-93 home win against the Boston Celtics this past Sunday, there is a chance his knee could cause him problems later on.

While the knee wouldn't require surgery, the Cleveland Plain Dealer reports that the cyst occasionally fills with fluid and he has experienced similar stiffness in his knee earlier in the season. The stiffness could return.

The Cavaliers are in a precarious situation with the injury to O'Neal and the chance that Jamison's knee could act up again.

NOT ALL ON THE KING'S SHOULDERS
LeBron James is a good player but can he shoulder the burden should Jamison and O'Neal perform below expectations in the postseason? If that were to be the case, this year's Cavs team would be similar to last year's team, which didn't even reach the NBA final.

But the fact of the matter is, this year's edition does have O'Neal and Jamison. The two, when healthy, justify



THE KING: It's possibly now or never for LeBron James with the Cleveland Cavaliers to win the NBA title. JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES

Cleveland's place atop the conference and make them championship contenders.

With Shaq and LeBron both healthy and in the lineup, the Cavaliers went 44-14 and James averaged 29.8 points per game.

After O'Neal suffered the thumb injury, Cleveland has gone 8-1.

The Orlando Magic and Boston

Celtics are again the immediate threats and a healthy Cleveland team can match the two while a less-than-healthy team could have troubles. However, so far the Cavs seem to be coping well without Shaq.

Injuries could derail the Cleveland Cavaliers season and that could just be the Swan Song for LeBron James as a Cavalier.

Fifty-six mile race draws nearly 16,000 skiers

By BARBRO PLOGANDER & ARON LAMM
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MORA, Sweden—An unusually snowy winter and successful Winter Olympics, especially for the skiers, has raised the interest level in skiing among Swedes. The traditional Vasaloppet, a cross-country ski race over 55.9 miles, drew almost 16,000 participants this year for their Mar. 7 event. Vasaloppet is one of the longest ski races in the world and is open to both professionals and amateurs.

Vasaloppet is named for Gustav Vasa, the 16th century king considered to be the founding father of modern Sweden. In 1521, the then young nobleman soon to be king, was involved in a rebellion against the Danish king Kristian who ruled Sweden at the time. The chronicles about his winter adventures escaping from his enemies in the western region of Dalarna, although historically dubious, are familiar to most Swedes. This legendary escape is background to Vasaloppet, "the Vasa

race," which has been held on the first Sunday in March since 1922.

The Vasaloppet is a big deal in Sweden, and many Swedes give it a try at least once in their lifetime. For serious amateur athletes, it is one quarter of the "Swedish classic," which also includes biking, long-distance swimming, and long-distance running. It is also one of the longest races for elite skiers, always drawing some of the top names in international competition.

This year, 15,702 people started this year's race and an impressive 14,934 (95 percent) actually finished. Vasaloppet is part of a 10-day race period which drew a total of 52,481 people, an increase of 20 percent over last year.

The race day temperature was a frosty -12 degrees Celsius when the record-breaking starting line-up left from Sälen for the finish line in Mora. The winner was Swede Jörgen Brink, who finished in 4 hours, 2 minutes and 59 seconds. After an exciting finish, last year's winner Daniel Tynell came in second place and Czech Stanislav Rezak in third.