

Inside Scoop™

by Mel Greenberg

March Madness Begins

And so as March comes in like a lion, it also comes in with --- madness.

It's that time. Since we are at the front of the month, let's see what lies ahead into Selection Sunday, March 14, when the NCAA tournament draw will air.

We start with the conference tourneys, which is the road to reach the 64-team path to New Orleans.

All but one of the 31 conferences will have playoffs to determine which team gets to the NCAA the easy way with an automatic bid gained through the conference championship. As always, in the Ivy League, regular season play determines the champion. Penn has a one-game lead over Dartmouth down the stretch, but no other teams appear to have a shot to catch the Ivy frontrunners.

The power conferences will produce multiples galore so teams are basically playing to enhance their potential NCAA seeding. But even in this world, there are bubble squads that need to force their way ahead of bubble squads elsewhere.

A year ago in the Big East, for example, Miami, despite a bad computer rating, fought its way into the NCAA field by advancing to the semifinals.

Let's look at the mega groups first

The Atlantic Coast Conference used to be knee deep in strong contenders. This time, it's a different dynamic. Favored Duke, one of six teams in the hunt for a No. 1 NCAA seed, needs to win the ACC to stay on target. North Carolina is also a lock to land an NCAA berth. The bubbles are N.C. State, Maryland, and Clemson. Although the conference has a ranking of three, only two of these schools seem likely to go at best as at-large guests.

The Big East made news right before their Tournament, when Villanova upset the Huskies again for the second time, with the last meeting being during the 2003 Conference Championship. That victory ended Connecticut's 70-game win streak. With these types of match-ups, along with Connecticut and Notre Dame taking NCAA titles, the conference has really grown in stature during the last several seasons. Even with the loss, the two-time defending NCAA champion Huskies seem destined for a

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No. 1 seed no matter what happens at the conference level. Notre Dame, Miami, Villanova, and Boston College seem solid. West Virginia, which has made major strides, should also go based on its season performance. It's computer ranking, though, has a bit of a drag so the Mountaineers may need to continue to impress. Rutgers and Virginia Tech, despite decent computer numbers, have been so-so and may need strong conference runs to be sized up for dancing shoes.

In the Big Ten, Purdue and Penn State are fighting for a potential No. 1 NCAA seed besides the conference title. There's a clear separation in the standings so look for Ohio State, Minnesota, Michigan State, and Iowa to all be taken unless an outsider disrupts this group in the conference tournament.

In the Big Twelve, Texas is fighting for a No. 1, which it may not get unless it wins the conference tournament. Kansas State, Colorado, Texas Tech, Baylor, and Oklahoma all seem to be in unless an outsider does some damage.

Conference USA has locks among DePaul, TCU, and Houston so fans of bubble teams need to hope an outsider

doesn't storm past this group and win the conference title.

The Pac-10 seems to have four in play among Stanford, Arizona, Arizona State, and Southern Cal. UCLA or Washington could create problems for Arizona State or Southern Cal with a strong conference tournament performance. It doesn't seem that the Pac-10 is worth five teams and will be fortunate to get four.

The SEC is looking at just six, a small drop from other seasons. Tennessee is playing for a No. 1 seed. Vanderbilt became a factor in recent weeks. LSU, Auburn, Georgia, and Florida seem set. If an outsider makes noise in the conference tournament, it will be interesting to see if all of the above are still standing when the NCAA field is announced.

The Atlantic Ten is intriguing. Preseason favorite George Washington seems to have a bid wrapped up but Temple has been strong in recent weeks and the Owls are one of 16 subregional host schools. With a rating of eight, one would think the conference is worth two teams. But watch out for an outsider because Richmond and Duquesne are vastly

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improved and St. Joseph's, which suffered some tough losses, is the host school.

The remaining conferences seem to be destined to send their winner alone. Only small chances of rescue by the NCAA committee for an at-large exist for teams who have dominated the regular season standings. One or two might get saved if that's all that is needed, so fans of teams considered bubbles need to make sure upsets don't occur to play it safe. The exception is in the WAC, where Louisiana Tech is a lock no matter what happens. But if the Techsters win, Rice needs to be the runnerup to keep its hopes alive.

Chattanooga in the Southern Conference and Old Dominion in the Colonial Athletic Association, along with Southwest Missouri in the Missouri Valley have the best chances to be saved among the one-team only leagues. Thus, clear conference tournament favorites such as Liberty in the Big South, Maine in the America East, Utah in the Mountain West, Miami of Ohio in the Mid-American, Montana in the Big Sky, Loyola Marymount in the West Coast, and St. Francis of Pennsylvania in the Northeast, need to

uphold their reputations. UC Santa Barbara is a favorite in the Big West, which is probably worth just one team.

Other one-team conferences, where projected winners are undetermined for NCAA automatic bids, are the Atlantic Sun, Horizon, Metro Atlantic, MEAC, Ohio Valley, Patriot, Southland, SWAC, and Sun Belt.

Creighton, New Mexico, and UNLV will probably last a long time on the table for discussion by the NCAA committee depending what the playoffs show.

The players are the thing

The NCAA tournament will consist of star power soon to appear in the WNBA along with future pro stars among a motherlode of talent. Connecticut offers Diana Taurasi one last time as the Huskies aim for three straight titles. The Californian and Duke senior Alana Beard loom as the top two picks in April's pro draft. Other names in the Connecticut attack are underclasswomen Ann Strother, Ashley Battle, and Barbara Turner to name a few.

The Duke roster also features Iciss Tillis and Monique Currie among others. At Penn State, look for Kelly Mazzante and Tanisha Wright as leaders for the



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Nittany Lions. Texas has a pair of stars in Stacy Stephens and Heather Schreiber. Minnesota's Lindsay Whalen has a broken hand but may return in time for the NCAA tournament. Stanford features Nicole Powell, Kansas State has Kendra Wecker and Nicole Ohlde, while LSU's big name is Seimone Augustus. Houston's rise is attributed to Chandi Jones, and Florida's return to prominence has been aided by the play of Vanessa Hayden. Rutgers' Cappie Pondexter and Georgetown's Rebekkah Brunson have drawn WNBA scouts to their games, which is worth mentioning even if neither team makes the NCAA field. Purdue's Shereka Wright has kept the Boilermakers in the season-long fight with Penn State for Big Ten supremacy.

WNBA news and notes

The Washington Mystics, who have the No. 2 pick, seemed to take a baseball approach with its new coach Michael Adams, a former NBA assistant, being named out of leftfield. It was thought that either former Cleveland coach Dan Hughes, or former NBA star Rick Mahorn would get the nod.

Phoenix, which has the No. 1 pick, is still seeking its coach as of this deadline.

DeLisha Milton of the Los Angeles Sparks recently suffered an ACL practicing with the USA National team and her loss could cause problems for both the USA in the Olympics and the Sparks in pursuit of a WNBA title.

The pro league is going through its first experience with free agency and there have been some interesting movement. Former New York Liberty star point guard Teresa Weatherspoon signed with Los Angeles. The defending champion Detroit Shock traded Kedra Holland-Corn to Houston for draft picks and signed former Cleveland star Merlakia Jones.

Through the dispersal draft of the former Cleveland Rockers roster, New York signed former No. 1 overall pick Ann Wauters from Belgium. The Liberty also re-signed Becky Hammon and Crystal Robinson. Indiana got Kelly Miller from the Charlotte Sting for draft picks. [RS]

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Authority in Women's Sports™ by Brian Straus

WUSA Revival Begins with Small Steps (Updated on 3/2/04)

While the U.S. women's national soccer team sweeps through its foes at the CONCACAF Olympic qualifying tournament in Costa Rica, the WUSA is taking the first small steps in its effort to revitalize itself. The league was scheduled to announce today the sites of the three doubleheader "festivals" it will stage in June. The games and accompanying events will take place on the weekends of June 11-13, 18-20 and 25-27.

As of Sunday, Feb. 29 there still was some indication that league officials were having difficulty determining the three sites. One location - Cary, N.C. – was thought to be a sure thing. However, the league announced on Monday, Mar. 1, that

Los Angeles, Calif. and Blaine, Minn. had been selected. The league has stated that it may choose a third location.

Meantime, WUSA founder John Hendricks' quest for life-saving sponsorship dollars continues and league officials expect to know by the time the festivals kick off whether there will be women's pro soccer in 2005. **[RS]**

EVENT DETAILS:

June 17-20 National Sports Center, Blaine, Minn.

June 24-27 The Home Depot Center, Carson, Calif.

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Olympic Preview – Athens Greece by Brian Straus

Taking a Dive, Takes on a Whole New Meaning

(Second of a seven-part series)

It won't be nearly as surprising if Laura Wilkinson stands atop the medal podium this summer in Athens as it was four years ago, when the Texan with the broken foot ended her country's 36-year drought with her stunning gold medal performance in the women's 10-meter platform diving competition.

Since that long-awaited victory in Sydney, claimed by less than two points and aided by a special boot worn to protect her injured foot while climbing the ladder, the 26-year-old has become the face of women's diving in the United States. Diving, especially from the platform, was dominated by the Americans in its early stages has been ruled by the Chinese (who had won seven of the previous eight platform golds) for the past few decades. Wilkinson was the only American diver in any discipline to medal in Sydney and repeated that feat at the recently

completed FINA Diving World Cup in Athens, where on Feb. 19 Wilkinson comfortably claimed gold in her signature event. The next highest American finisher came in 24th.

Wilkinson had a slight brush with celebrity following her Olympic triumph. She was spotted on several television shows, including Who Wants to Be a Millionaire and Hollywood Squares, in several magazines and on her own Wheaties box. But she has not forsaken her training, which takes up more than six hours a day on six days each week. Wilkinson had a relatively disappointing 2003 season, finishing eighth at the FINA World Championships and fifth at the Pan Am Games, but her gold medal last month indicates Wilkinson may be rounding into form just in time.

The U.S. Olympic qualifying meet will be held from June 7 to 13 in St. Peters, Missouri. [\[RS\]](#)