

Top seeds dominate Final Four

There have been almost 4,000 basketball games played this season by Division I teams. There are three to go, and fans of the sport couldn't have asked for much more.

All four teams left in the NCAA tournament have been ranked No. 1 at some point this season. Three of the Final Four started in the 64-team field as a top seed, one more than has ever made it that far before.

Kansas-North Carolina and Kentucky-Michigan.

What a way to end a season. What a Final Four.

There'll be a week of:

—Kansas, the only non-No. 1 seed left, claiming no one respects it and everyone picks against it.

—North Carolina coach Dean Smith evading questions about reaching the Final Four more than any man but John Wooden, but having come home with the nets cut down just once.

—Kentucky fans reminding everyone how easily the Wildcats marched through the regional one year after the most crushing defeat of all.

—Michigan explaining how the object is to win games by any margin and that the Wolverines really don't care if anyone likes them or not.

The first semifinal game Saturday night at the Superdome — Kansas vs. North Carolina — is a rematch of the first game of the 1991 Final Four, the one Smith wasn't around to see as he was ejected after being hit with his second technical foul. It made

for an awkward postgame news conference considering Smith's Tar Heels had just been beaten by a Kansas team coached by his longtime assistant Roy Williams.

Williams certainly isn't in awe of anyone standing in front of the other bench as shown by Kansas' Midwest Regional victory over top-ranked Indiana. That win gave Williams a 3-0 record against Bob Knight, and he became the first coach outside the Big Ten to beat Knight twice in the same season.

The Jayhawks are riding an attitude of being overlooked into New Orleans. Listen to guard Rex Walters after the Indiana game:

"Last night I was watching ESPN and the man picked us to lose and he was wrong again. It feels good. It feels real good," he said. "We just try and prove them wrong. A lot of people have been picking against us, and a lot of people have been wrong."

Few picked against North Carolina in the East, and the Tar Heels had to go five extra minutes to beat Cincinnati and get Smith his ninth trip to the Final Four. His only national championship came in New Orleans when then-freshman Michael Jordan hit his famous jumper from the left side to beat Georgetown and Patrick Ewing.

"We won a tournament this weekend, and we'll go down there and try to win another one," Smith said.

North Carolina's size and depth wore down Cincinnati,

but Kansas has enough of both to make this a close game. Despite Walters' remarks, Kansas should beat the Tar Heels again.

Kentucky has won its four NCAA tournament games by an average of 31 points, and the Wildcats have done it inside and outside. The 3-point barrage has forced teams to try and cover the post people one-on-one, and coach Rick Pitino's system has taken advantage throughout.

Pitino coached Providence to the 1987 Final Four. His Kentucky team last season came within a miracle buzzer-beater by Duke's Christian Laettner of getting there. With only Jamal Mashburn back from last year's starting five, Pitino has done an impressive job in getting the Wildcats back to the Final Four for the first time since 1984.

"We were too young, too inexperienced," point guard Travis Ford said of preseason expectations. "It feels great because it was a team effort the whole season."

And Mashburn isn't getting caught up in how impressive the wins were.

"It doesn't matter about the margin of victory. You can win by two points. It doesn't matter as long as you get the W," he said.

Now the Wildcats get Michigan, the only team back from last year's Final Four.

The Wolverines were known as the Fab Five when they lost to Duke by 20 in last year's title game.

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