



Oregon senior Natzsha O'Brien, who scored 14 points in the Ducks' 80-57 victory over California on Saturday, shadows Bears' guard Kenya Corley on the perimeter

Strong SEC flavors NCAA pairings

By Chuck Schoffner
The Associated Press

Tennessee, Purdue, Louisiana Tech and Connecticut received the top seeds Sunday in the NCAA women's basketball tournament, which has a decided Southeastern Conference flavor.

Eight SEC teams made the field of 64, a record for one conference. That contingent is headed by Tennessee, the regular season and conference tournament champion and winner of the last three national championships.

The second-ranked Lady Vols (28-2) were made the No. 1 seed in the East Regional. They'll begin their quest for a fourth consecutive title and eighth overall against Appalachian State (14-14), the Southern Conference representative, at home on Saturday.

Top-ranked Purdue (28-1) heads the bracket in the Midwest, third-ranked Louisiana Tech (26-2) is the top seed in the West and sixth-ranked Connecticut (27-4) is the No. 1 seed in the Mideast.

The tournament begins at eight sites on Friday. The remaining first-round games are Saturday, also at eight sites.

The other SEC teams named to the field were Alabama, Auburn, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana State and Mississippi State. All are veterans of NCAA play except Mississippi State, which will be making its first appearance.

"Eight teams from the SEC is a reflection of the parity from top to bottom," Tennessee coach Pat Summitt said. "I think most folks would tell you that one through

those top eight or nine ... you go into the arena knowing you have to play strong basketball to win."

Connecticut claimed a No. 1 seed after bouncing back from a rash of injuries at midseason, when the Huskies lost three of six games. They've won 12 of 13 since then, including an impressive three-game run through the Big East tournament.

Last year, a late-season injury to All-American Nykesha Sales kept Connecticut from becoming a No. 1 seed. The Huskies had been a top seed in each of the four preceding years.

This year, a key injury cost Notre Dame, which had been expected to be among the top 16 seeds before losing point guard Niele Ivey to a season-ending knee injury in the Big East tournament. The eighth-ranked Irish, with their best record ever at 25-4, are the No. 5 seed in the West.

"I would have to think (the injury) did have to be a factor," said Bernadette McGlade, who chairs the selection committee. "It occurred in a semifinal game. In the championship game, Notre Dame had a little bit of a different look."

Notre Dame committed 24 turnovers in a 96-75 loss to Connecticut in the tournament finals. Connecticut meets St. Francis in the first round at home on Friday, Louisiana Tech plays host to Central Florida on Friday and Purdue entertains Oral Roberts on Saturday.

The brackets are arranged so that the Midwest Regional champion faces the West and the East winner meets the Mideast in the

national semifinals in San Jose, Calif. That creates the possibility of a Tennessee-Louisiana Tech rematch in the championship game.

Tennessee beat Tech 93-75 in last year's title game in Kansas City, Mo., to complete a 39-0 season.

The SEC hit the NCAA jackpot after being ranked as the nation's No. 1 conference all season.

Four of the SEC teams in the field finished .500 or below in the league. Kentucky, Alabama and Mississippi State all went 7-7, while Florida was 6-8 — the first team with a losing conference record to get an at-large bid. Florida is 19-13 overall.

"Nineteen wins in the SEC is a pretty good season most teams in the country would take," said McGlade, assistant commissioner of the Atlantic Coast Conference.

In previous years, the SEC has had as many as seven teams. McGlade said she did not think the committee was setting a dangerous precedent by picking so many teams from one league.

"The committee felt strongly that teams that got in from the top three or four conferences in the country were all teams that definitely were one of the best 64 in the country," she said. "That does not mean the SEC will forever get eight."

The Atlantic Coast Conference and Big 12 followed the SEC with five teams each in the NCAA field. The Big East, Big Ten, Conference USA and Pac-10 all had four.

Women

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three players break double-digits in scoring and three others record eight points.

"I thought Shaq did a good job of not only looking for shots herself, but also looking to get the ball to other people," Runge said. "Nicole and Lindsey were nice

sparks off the bench."

California (12-15, 6-12), which won twice as many games this season as in either of its previous two seasons, was led by forward Courtney Johnson, who scored 13 points, and Jennie Leander, who finished with 12. Two other players tallied nine points apiece.

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