

What's the key to NCAA Tournament success?

By Pete DiPrimio
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Hello, class, and welcome to How To Win Big In The NCAA Tournament.

In today's lesson, we're going to show how teams thrive under March Madness pressure.

Talent, of course, is crucial. Without good players, a team has no chance.

Duke has dominated the college basketball scene the last 10 seasons with waves of NBA-caliber talent. Last year, the Blue Demons won the national title with Shane Battier (last year's sixth overall pick) and Jason Williams (the likely No. 1 pick this year).

In 2000, Michigan State won with a lineup that featured future pros Mateen Cleaves (Sacramento) and Morris Peterson (Toronto). In 1999, Connecticut earned the championship with NBA picks Richard Hamilton (Washington) and Khalid El-Amin (Chicago).

And then there were the talent-

rich Final Four teams that didn't win national titles, such as Arizona last year (Jason Gardner, Gilbert Arenas and Richard Jefferson), North Carolina in 2000 (Joseph Forte and Jason Capel) and Duke in 1999 (Battier and Elton Brand).

And who can forget Michigan's Fab Five team of 1992, which reached the championship game with five freshman starters, three of whom — Jalen Rose, Chris Webber and Juwan Howard — have become NBA stars.

But is a lineup of future NBA players crucial to postseason success? It depends on who you talk to.

"You don't have to have NBA-caliber guys to get to the Final Four, but you do to win it," Indiana coach Mike Davis said. "You have to have at least one. I haven't known a team to win it without an NBA-caliber guy."

Michigan State coach Tom Izzo has made three straight Final Fours with a roster loaded with future NBA players. But he says that's not enough.

"Sure, talent is a key," Izzo said, "but you need other intangibles."

Perhaps the No. 1 intangible, Purdue coach Gene Keady said, is having players with desire.

"It has a lot to do with your kids' ambition to get to the Final Four," he said. "If you don't have players who want to get to the Final Four more than the coaches, you have a problem."

Added Davis: "You need guys who don't want the season to end. What sometimes happens is you have guys who are happy to make the NCAA and then start looking forward to the summer."

"You need guys who give it everything they have, and sometimes even that is not enough."

Keady, who has never coached a Final Four team, knows all about that. Still, he's had two squads make the Elite Eight, close enough for him to, like Moses, see the "Promised Land" even if it meant never making it.

"In the NCAA, you're one and

done, so you really have to focus and be cut in and respect everyone," he said. "If you have that, if you have tough kids and they're all on the same page, you don't have to have NBA talent to go a long way, but those kinds of teams are rare."

And then there's the old-fashioned concept of having fun and enjoying all the preparation (practice, conditioning, team meetings, the occasional in-your-face coaching tirade).

"The bottom line is, do you believe in what's going on?" Wisconsin coach Bo Ryan said. "Are you having fun playing with your teammates? Do you look forward to practice and the next game? Is this something you're getting something from?"

"At times, the answers aren't always yes. But when they are, you can do something special."

Added Keady: "Chemistry is more important than NBA-caliber players."

Monson led a 10th-seeded Gon-

zaga team without a future NBA player to the 1999 Elite Eight, losing to eventual national-champion Connecticut 67-62. He stressed a combination of factors—quality seniors, mental toughness and good players—as necessary to make a deep NCAA tourney run.

"You have to have good players playing well at the right time," Monson said.

Add it up, Monson said, and you have no clear strategy for NCAA tourney success.

"If you're looking for a blueprint," he said, "I don't think there is one. It's all about getting the right combination at the right time."

Perhaps Self's blueprint is as good as any.

"If you guard and rebound and take care of the basketball, if your team is focused, you have a good chance to be successful."

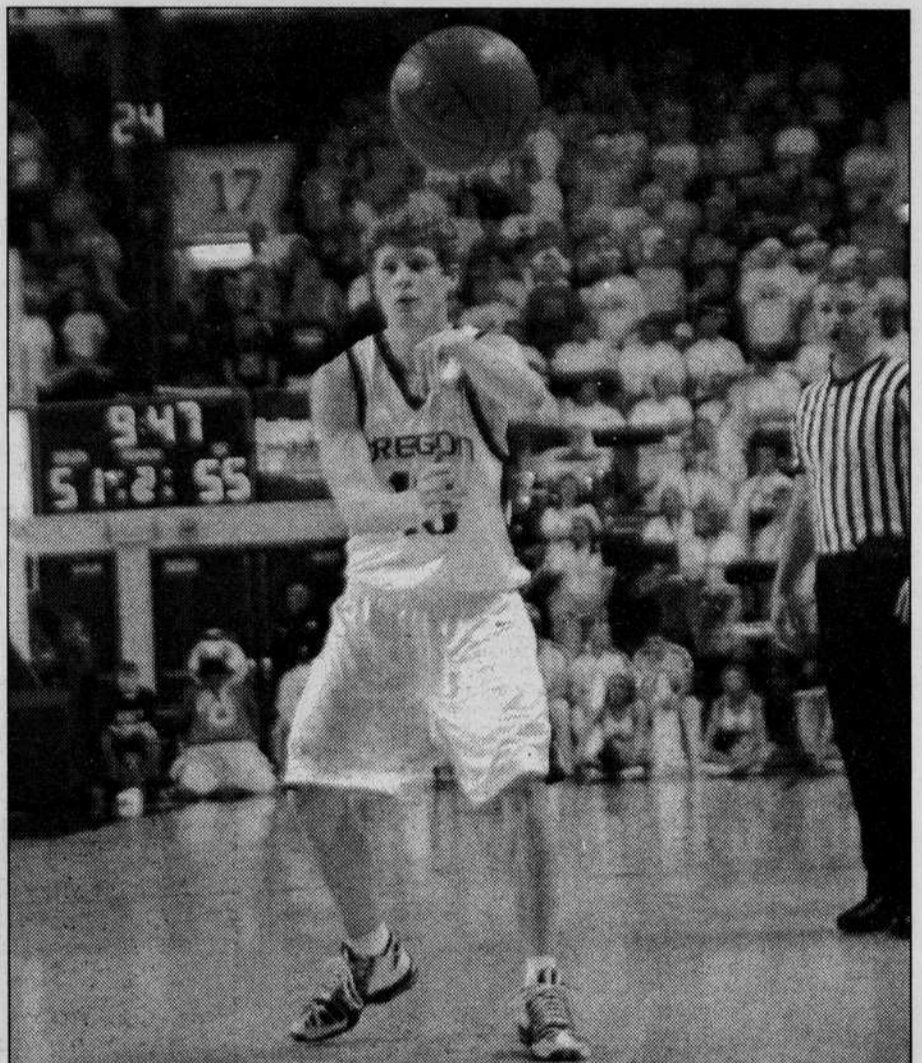
Class dismissed.

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Adam Amato Emerald

Right: Luke Ridnour earned a spot on the All-Pac-10 team this year after being named Pac-10 Freshman of the Year in 2001.



Thomas Patterson Emerald

Left: With Brian Helquist injured, Oregon center Chris Christoffersen (with ball) will play extra minutes in the Pac-10 Tournament, which starts today in Los Angeles.

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that may have saved head coach Bob Bender's job.

A month later, Wrenn scored 27 as Washington made the Ducks earn a hard-fought 90-84 victory that capped off Oregon's 16-0 home record. After the game, while the Ducks were celebrating a perfect season at McArthur Court, the Huskies were proclaiming it a moral victory and looking forward to a potential rematch with the Ducks at the Pac-10 Tournament.

"We match up well with them," Washington guard Curtis Allen told reporters afterwards. "We're just as athletic as them. If we can get them in L.A. that would be great."

Allen and the Huskies have gotten their wish. For them, this is the only postseason they'll see unless they shock everybody and win three games in three days to become the tournament champion.

"They played us tough both games," Oregon sophomore James Davis said. "We know they have a lot of confidence and have no fears. That's a scary thing. They have nothing to lose, but I think if we keep playing the way we've been playing, we'll come out on top."

Since losing two overtime heartbreakers in the Bay Area, the Ducks have won five straight, including sweeping the Los Angeles schools last weekend en route to becoming the outright Pac-10 champs — Oregon's first since 1939.

Oregon came back home after last Saturday's win at UCLA and then flew back down to Los Angeles on Tuesday evening. Should the Ducks make it to Saturday's Pac-10 Tournament title game (3 p.m., CBS), they would have played three extra games that could possibly wear the team out before the following week's NCAA Tournament.

"Because of our depth, I don't worry about fatigue," Kent said.

That depth, though, will be one short this week, with back-up center Brian Helquist sitting out the league tournament with a strained right knee suffered in Oregon's win at USC. His status for the NCAA Tournament is day-to-day.

"Jay (Anderson) and Mark (Michaelis) did an excellent job in

the UCLA game with Brian out, and the production they're going to give us this weekend is extremely important," Kent said. "And Chris (Christoffersen) has to stay out of foul trouble for hopefully the entire game."

If the Ducks do get past the pesky Huskies, they'd play at 6 p.m. Friday against the winner of today's USC-Stanford game.

In a Pac-10 season where the top six teams all finished just three games apart — and with all six most likely heading to the Big Dance — this week's tournament promises to be exciting, and one that should gain plenty of national attention.

"What the season has created is incredible interest in the confer-

ence tournament," Bender said.

"I think the Pac-10 has gotten a lot of notoriety with how competitive it is," Kent said. "It may become one of the most competitive conference tournaments in the country."

Perhaps Oregon's Davis said it best when trying to predict what will take place over the next three days when talented, even-matched teams go head-to-head.

"I mean, dang, the Pac-10's so tough," Davis said. "You don't know. 'SC might do it. Stanford, Arizona, all those are veteran teams."

"It's going to be a crazy tournament."

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