

Syracuse paints New Orleans orange



Patrick Schneider Charlotte Observer (KRT)

Kirk Heinrich reacts to his airballed three at the buzzer that would have sent Monday night's NCAA Championship game to overtime. Instead, Syracuse won 81-78 for the title.

Andrew Bagnato
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

NEW ORLEANS — Seniors? Who needs seniors?

With unstoppable freshmen Carmelo Anthony and Gerry McNamara leading the way, the Syracuse Orangemen held off Kansas 81-78 Monday night in a thrilling NCAA championship game at the Superdome.

Syracuse won its first NCAA title in its third trip to the final. Coach Jim Boeheim won his first championship with his 654th career win and 38th in the NCAA.

Anthony scored a game-high 20 points, pulled down 10 rebounds and dished out seven assists on his way to being named the Final Four's Outstanding Player.

"We talked him being the best player in the country," Boeheim said. "Not the best freshmen in the country, the best player."

Boeheim's triumph came at the expense of a golfing buddy, Kansas coach Roy Williams, who has earned the distinction of being the finest coach never to win a national title. Williams has 418 career victories, 33 in the NCAA tourney.

Under Boeheim, Syracuse lost the '96 title game to Kentucky and the '87 final to Indiana. Against Indiana, Syracuse's undoing came at the free-throw line, where the Orangemen missed several key free throws down the stretch and made only 11 of 20. Monday night, Kansas made only 12 of 30 from the line.

"I told Roy the same thing people told me in 87," Boeheim said. "He'll be back, he's a great coach."

Will this be Williams' last game at the Jayhawks' helm? He is said to be the leading candidate at North Carolina, his alma mater. Williams has handled questions about the Tar Heels job without providing a clue to his intentions.

Kansas faithfuls obviously want him to stay; when he strode onto the Superdome floor about 25 minutes before tipoff on Monday night, a roar went up and became a standing ovation.

The Orangemen start two freshman and a sophomore. But they weren't the least bit intimidated by the bright lights of the sport's biggest night, with 54,524 watching in a football stadium.

"This late in the year, our guys are pretty fed up with listening to all this stuff about youth and the all the talk of us being young," McNamara said before scoring 18 points in the title game. "We haven't played like it all year and we're not going to start now."

Syracuse set the tone on the game's first possession. Anthony faked a drive on the right wing, drew two defenders and threaded a pass to Craig Forth alone under the basket. Forth laid the ball in.

That basket was more than Kansas guard Kirk Hinrich scored until 9 minutes 30 seconds remained in the first half.

Syracuse hit long shots and short shots; in the first 20 minutes the Orangemen hit 20-of-36 shots from the floor (55.6 percent), and 10-of-13 from beyond

the arc (76.9 percent).

For Kansas, the frightening part was that Syracuse had cooled off from its pace in Saturday's semifinal victory over Texas. The Orangemen hit 57 percent for the game in a 95-84 win.

Syracuse's 53 first-half points set a championship game record.

Williams assigned 6-foot-5-inch Keith Langford to guard the 6-foot-8-inch Anthony. Langford matched Anthony's 13 points in the first half but picked up his third and fourth fouls in a 9-second span less than 2 minutes into the second half. Syracuse seemed in command at that point. But then the Orangemen began to fray.

McNamara threw the ball away twice in three possessions. On the second turnover, Hinrich scored on a fastbreak layup and drew a foul on Kueth Duany. The free throw sliced Syracuse's lead to 53-52.

No one has ever come back from a deficit as large as 18 points to win a title game.

There had been a lot of pregame talk about how KU would handle Syracuse's 2-3 zone defense. But the Jayhawks had most of their trouble at the free-throw line. During one critical stretch in the second half, as they desperately tried to rally, the Jayhawks missed nine straight free throws and 12 of 13. Perhaps that's not surprising for a team that shot only 66 percent from the line during the regular season, seventh in the Big XII.

One might expect a more veteran team — a team that had played in the Final Four only 12 months earlier — to handle the pressure better than a younger squad. But it was the Jayhawks who came apart down the stretch.

In one of the more telling exchanges, Langford and Hinrich collided at the top of the key, creating a turnover. Langford compounded the blunder by fouling out trying to prevent a breakaway layup at the other end. Still, Collision and Hinrich made Syracuse earn the title.

In the last 4 minutes they combined to score 11 consecutive points to pull KU to within 80-75 with 1 minute 53 seconds left.

When Miles found Michael Lee for a layup with 1 minute left, the Jayhawks trailed 80-77.

The final minute was riveting, a fitting end to an unpredictable tournament. KU had a chance to tie with 39 seconds left, but Aaron Miles' three-pointer rimmed out. Jeff Graves made 1-of-2 free throws to whittle the deficit to 2. After Duany hit a free throw to make it 81-78, Hinrich's potential game-tying three rolled out with 14 seconds left. Hakim Warrick could have put the game away at the line, but he missed two free throws.

Warrick atoned by swatting Lee's three-pointer into the baseline photographers with 1.5 seconds left.

Kansas had one shot left, but Hinrich's three-pointer at the horn sailed over the rim and the youthful Orangemen were champs.

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UConn, Tennessee meet for women's title Track

Mel Greenberg
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

ATLANTA — After Connecticut claimed its second NCAA women's basketball championship in three seasons last April, it seemed that the Huskies might have to live off that triumph for a while before returning to the Women's Final Four.

Sue Bird, then the top player in the nation, and three others in the starting lineup were on their way to graduation and careers in the WNBA.

"I did not think we would be back," Connecticut coach Geno Auriemma, who grew up in Norristown, Pa., said Monday. "But Oct. 12 when practice started, it was business as usual."

"We are Connecticut and we need to be in the Final Four and we need to play for the championship and that's the way it is."

The Huskies were 39-0 last season and, as improbable as it once

seemed, they almost put together another undefeated run to reach tonight's title game (8:30 EST, ESPN) at the Georgia Dome before a sellout crowd of 28,010.

The only smudge on this season's 36-1 performance was left by Villanova, which shocked the Huskies in the Big East Conference title game to end their women's Division I record 70-game win streak.

It will be the third time Connecticut will meet archrival Tennessee (33-4) in the championship game, after claiming victories over the Vols in 1995 and 2000. The Huskies also posted a rout a year ago over coach Pat Summitt's squad in the national semifinals.

Tennessee has a record six NCAA trophies, but has gone five seasons since claiming its last one with the stellar 1998 team that included junior Chamique Holdsclaw and a talented group of freshmen.

This Connecticut squad also has a group of blue-chip newcomers in 6-foot guard-forward Barbara Turner, 6-foot-2-inch guard Ann Strother and 6-foot-2-inch forward-center Willnett Crockett. But it has been the consistent work of 6-foot junior guard Diana Taurasi, who succeeded Bird in the national spotlight, that has carried the Huskies.

The native of Chino, Calif., saved Connecticut on Sunday night when she popped a three-pointer to complete a rally from what had been a 50-41 deficit to Texas earlier in the second half.

After putting the Huskies ahead with 2 minutes, 6 seconds to play, Taurasi, who had 26 points in the game, also knocked a last-second attempt out of the hands of the Longhorns' Alisha Sare to preserve the 71-69 triumph.

"Toward the end of the games, I want the responsibility to be in con-

trol of the outcome," Taurasi said yesterday. "When there is an open chance to take the shot, I am going to take it. If I miss, I miss. If it goes in, it's great. I am not the type of person who would want to think later that I should have taken that shot. I can't be afraid."

Taurasi's no-fear attitude produced a 63-62 win over Tennessee earlier this season in overtime in Hartford when she hit several key baskets down the stretch. Earlier, she hit a what-the-heck long attempt from behind the half-court line as the first half ended.

"It's exciting to see — not necessarily to go against — but to see a player like that in the women's game," Summitt said of Taurasi.

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Record books beware

In a squad that is returning all six of last year's NCAA participants and three Pacific-10 Conference runners-up, the record books should continue to take a beating in 2003.

Oregon already has eight participating athletes who rank in the top-three on the Ducks all-time rankings in their respective events. Senior Carrie Zografos owns Oregon's best time in the steeplechase at 10:42.0. She currently ranks third among returning Pac-10 athletes in the event.

The Ducks have a total of 18 athletes that rank in the top-10 of almost every event. With veteran leadership and new freshmen powerhouses, the records could continue to improve during the next two months.

Contact the sports reporter at jessethomas@dailyemerald.com.

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His proposals no less than shake the very foundation of the NCAA mansion. He will force the student-athlete scale, currently weighted in favor of the revenue-producing "athlete," to tip back to the knowledge-

spouting "student."

Brand's main detractors are college coaches, the villains of Brand's tale. When Syracuse graduates one-fourth as many players as it did last year, the implication is that Jim Boeheim couldn't keep his kids in school.

A standoff is coming. On one end of the dusty road is Brand,

touting grand theories of academic reform. On the other end are the coaches, who want desperately to hold on to fat contracts and athletes who will focus on three-pointers more than they'll focus a microscope. They decry Brand's use of silly graduation rates.

But Brand should win this duel because his plan will do more than

harp on graduation rates. He'll ask for degree-progress reports, expecting student-athletes to keep pace with college like a sprinter keeps pace with his competition. He'll come up with a fair formula that allows for transfers and other irregularities, a BCS of college life.

The point is, Brand will turn a college education back into some-

thing of value. He'll make sure that if college athletes aren't paid with dead presidents, they'll at least get paid in knowledge.

Adam Smith would be so proud.

Contact the sports editor at peterhockaday@dailyemerald.com. His views do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.