

It's time for the madness to begin

Favorites or not, plenty of NCAA Tournament-bound teams stand a chance at winning the championship

By Blair Kerkhoff
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

Every year, by the eve of the NCAA Tournament, a power team or two has emerged to give your bracket some clarity. Last season, it was a pair of Wildcats — Kentucky and Arizona.

Often it is Duke, running out of space for all of its Atlantic Coast Conference championship trophies. In recent years, Michigan State, Connecticut and Kansas have been choices.

These teams don't necessarily win the championship — neither Wildcats team even reached the 2003 Final Four. But what happens when the tournament begins is not the issue.

On some of the most uncertain days in sports, these next few with the guts of your bracket begging for some answers, we need the strength of a favorite. You'll struggle over those No. 8 vs. No. 9 games and find some upset specials among the 11th and 12th seeds.

But what every bracket author demands at this moment a sure-bet, can't miss, odds-on choice to, at least in our minds, ride confidently through the bracket, to the Alamodome and the Final Four. You need a

national-champion pick.

Only this time they're in hiding. "I think it's pretty wide open," said Oklahoma State coach Eddie Sutton, whose Cowboys are a No. 2 seed in the East Rutherford, N.J., regional and will open play Friday in Kansas City.

Oh, you have your favorites. But, and this is what separates this year from others, the favorites offer plenty of reasons not to pick them as a national champion.

Start with the four No. 1 seeds, Kentucky, Duke, Stanford and St. Joseph's. Wonderful regular seasons all. But...

The Wildcats took their usual stroll through the Southeastern Conference tournament, blowing out Florida 89-73 for its 25th crown. A Kentucky appearance in the league final was inevitable; the Wildcats are 33-1 in the SEC semifinals. Their only loss came in 1936.

But this isn't a typical imposing Kentucky team. The Wildcats can play smothering defense but aren't overly talented on offense. Kentucky wins with great ball movement and interior passing. It has experience, but the group hasn't gotten past the Elite Eight in their careers. Those regular-season losses to Georgia were troubling.

So troubling that coach Tubby Smith returned to a trick from 1998. After the second loss to the

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ACC teams head to Big Dance

Six of the nine ACC teams receive tournament invites, including a No. 1 ranking for Duke in the Mideast

By David Teel
Daily Press (KRT)

The NCAA tournament selection committee rewarded college basketball's top conference and some difficult schedules, while punishing conferences that played late championship games.

The 65-team bracket unveiled Sunday night includes six teams from the ACC and three from Virginia, including the University of Richmond. The Spiders (20-12) earned one of the final at-large bids based on the strength of their non-conference schedule, ranked sixth nationally by the Rating Percentage Index.

"I'm not really up on the selection process," Richmond coach Jerry Wainwright, 57, said of the computerized data the committee relies upon. "I'm lucky if I can even answer an e-mail. Bracketology? Shoot, at my age I'm more worried about proctology."

Richmond's Atlantic 10 rival Saint Joseph's joins heavyweights Kentucky, Duke and Stanford as No. 1 regional seeds. Like the Spiders, the Hawks (27-1) were rewarded for their non-conference schedule.

"They didn't just play a good schedule, they played the best (nonconference) schedule based on our RPI system," said committee chairman Bob Bowlsby.

Bowlsby conceded that Oklahoma State, the Big 12's regular season and

tournament champion, might have merited a No. 1 seed. But he said the conference's decision to start its tournament final at 3 p.m., EST Sunday left the committee too little time to adjust.

A similar fate befell Wisconsin. The Badgers won the Big Ten tournament Sunday, but the game didn't start until 3:30, and the committee made them a relatively low No. 6 seed.

Bowlsby, the athletic director at Big Ten member Iowa, said that is the price conferences pay for agreeing to late starting times in exchange for television rights fees.

Wisconsin, Illinois and Michigan State are the only Big Ten teams in the field, the conference's fewest since 1984. As expected, six teams each from the ACC, Big East, Southeastern and Conference USA will attempt to make the Final Four, April 3-5 in San Antonio.

So regarded was the ACC that Duke remained a No. 1 seed despite losing to Maryland in Sunday's conference tournament, while the Terps, an NCAA uncertainty until last week, rose to a No. 4 seed.

This marks the sixth time in seven years that Duke is a No. 1, the third time in five for Stanford. The Cardinal, which advanced to the 1998 Final Four in San Antonio, failed to make the Final Four in its previous years as a No. 1.

For the first time, the committee designated regions not by directions (East, West, Midwest, South), but by the cities that will host the regional semifinals and finals. Hence, the St. Louis, Phoenix, East Rutherford and Atlanta regions.

Also, the committee seeded the four No. 1s, making Kentucky the

tournament's top overall seed and bracketing the Wildcats to face the fourth No. 1, Saint Joe's, at the Final Four. Duke and Stanford, the second- and third-ranked No. 1s, are in the opposite side of the draw.

Several teams will play close to home: Duke and Wake Forest in Raleigh, N.C., Kansas in Kansas City, Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Gonzaga in Seattle, Cincinnati in Columbus, Air Force in Denver. Among the state teams, Virginia Commonwealth plays in Raleigh, Richmond in Milwaukee, Liberty in Buffalo.

Based on seeds, Air Force, Richmond, Texas-El Paso and Brigham Young were the last of the 34 at-large selections. Air Force last made the field in 1962, under Bob Spear.

Big Sky champion Eastern Washington is the field's only first-timer. Arizona is in for the 20th consecutive year, seven shy of the record set by North Carolina from 1975-2001.

Among the notable exclusions was 25-3 Utah State, regular-season co-champion of the Big West. But the Aggies lost in the league tournament and, according to Bowlsby, didn't play a challenging enough non-conference schedule.

Richmond did, but when the Spiders gathered at Wainwright's house Sunday evening, he didn't know what to expect. And when their name came up?

"It reminded me of Christmas Day when my sons opened a package they really wanted," Wainwright said. "There is a Santa Claus."

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Women's team upsets could abound

The women's NCAA Tournament could prove to be a harrowing experience

By Brian Davis
The Dallas Morning News (KRT)

No Division I women's team was able to remain atop the Associated Press Top 25 poll this season for more than three weeks. With parity on the rise, No. 1 seeds in this year's NCAA Women's Tournament can ill afford to pencil themselves into the Sweet 16 just yet.

Each region contains scintillating second-round matchup possibilities, which makes upsets more likely than ever. Here's a look at each region:

West Region

No. 1 seed Texas did not lose its place among the top four national seeds after a stunning loss to Oklahoma in the Big 12 women's tournament championship. UT opens against No. 16 seed Southern, the automatic qualifier from the Southwestern Athletic Conference, and could meet Michigan State or Arizona in the second round.

TCU drew a No. 6 seed and,

barring a first-round upset against Temple, should face No. 3 seed Georgia in the second round. Georgia, though, doesn't seem so tough after the Lady Bulldogs gave up an 18-point lead in the SEC tournament championship game and lost to Vanderbilt.

Midwest Region

Oklahoma coach Sherri Coale and the NCAA selection committee were thinking alike. Coale felt her Sooners would be a No. 3 seed after winning the Big 12 tournament, and they are. OU, though, has a potentially big hurdle looming in the second round against Missouri, a team that knocked off the Sooners, 77-65, during the regular season.

Missouri, a No. 11 seed, first meets sixth-seeded Stanford, the team that won the Pac-10 title but may have dropped because of its mediocre strength of schedule.

Fourth-seeded Baylor has enough athleticism to overmatch No. 13 seed Loyola Marymount. But if 12th-seeded New Mexico can get past fifth-seeded Florida on the Lobos' home floor, a second-round game against Baylor

would be interesting.

Mideast Region

Texas Tech was awarded the No. 4 seed for its RPI (No. 12) and strength of schedule (No. 38) despite having lost in the quarterfinals of the Big 12 tournament.

But a first-round trip to Missoula, Mont., is a far cry from Lubbock, Texas, the place where Tech has hosted first- and second-round games the last six years. A second-round matchup against No. 5 seed Louisiana Tech is not the type of game Texas Tech is used to seeing on its usual route to the Sweet 16.

East Region

No. 3 seed Houston stormed through the Conference USA season and finished 27-3. The Cougars drew one of the toughest sites in Division I at UC Santa Barbara. The atmosphere at the Thunderdome is a huge advantage for the Big West champion Gauchos, who drew No. 6 seed Colorado in the first round.

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