

Loss doesn't derail top placement for St. Joseph's

The Hawks will head to Buffalo for a first-round matchup with Liberty

By Ray Parrillo
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PHILADELPHIA — Jameer Nelson showed up for the Selection Sunday festivities at Alumni Memorial Fieldhouse Sunday wearing a black cap and a St. Joseph's jersey with the No. 15 and the name "West" across the back.

"Why not?" the Hawks' smiling all-American senior said of his backcourt mate, Delonte West. "I like the guy. He made me who I am."

As he's done so frequently during the two seasons he has played alongside Nelson, West took the pass and went with it.

"I've raised Jameer since he was a little boy," he said. "Yeah, I noticed him wearing my jersey. That's just how we get down with each other."

On Hawk Hill Sunday, the gloom from the Hawks' 87-67 beating by Xavier in Thursday's Atlantic Ten Conference quarterfinal was finally lifted,

replaced by some levity as the Hawks received a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tournament for the first time in school history. St. Joe's is the first Big Five team since Temple in 1988 to get a No. 1 seed.

"At 2:30 today when we finished practice, we put Thursday behind us," coach Phil Martelli said. "Now it's time for a celebration."

The Hawks, who went 27-0 and rose to No. 1 in the polls before Xavier ended their perfect run, will face No. 16 seed Liberty (18-14) on Thursday in the first round of the NCAA East Rutherford Regional in Buffalo. A university in Lynchburg, Va., founded by the Rev. Jerry Falwell, Liberty won the Big South Conference championship game with an 89-44 win over High Point, a North Carolina university.

"I know they give up only five three-point shots a game," Martelli said after the Hawks made it to the NCAA tourney in consecutive seasons for the first time since 1981-82, and for the fourth time in his nine seasons as head coach. "We have to study how they've done that."

If St. Joe's wins, the Hawks will face either No. 8 Texas Tech, coached by Bob Knight, or No. 9 Charlotte, which

will join the Atlantic Ten Conference in two years.

If the Hawks get out of Buffalo intact, they will move on to East Rutherford, N.J. And if any of Martelli's players dare to look around, they will see Oklahoma State as the No. 2 seed, Pittsburgh as the No. 3 and Wake Forest as the No. 4.

More than likely, though, Xavier — and not getting dismissed by Billy Packer on the selection show — made certain the Hawks will pay attention to the task at hand. To a man, the Hawks said Sunday it was great that the tournament selection committee rewarded them for their historic regular season. But they also said a No. 1 or No. 2 seeding didn't matter as much as getting back on the court to prove that the team that was blasted out of the conference tourney was not the real St. Joseph's.

"It really didn't matter to me if we were No. 1, 2, 15 or 16," Nelson said. "We just want to play somebody so we can get this nasty taste out of our mouths. That loss still hurts, and we know that if it happens again, we turn in our uniforms."

Elsewhere in the Fieldhouse, amid

the din made by the pep band and the cheerleaders and the well-wishers, it did seem to matter. Martelli grabbed the microphone and called Packer "a complete jackass" after Packer counted on two hands the number of teams he thinks are better than St. Joe's, insisting that the Hawks didn't deserve a No. 1 seed.

Just as West was asked to respond to Packer, the junior guard was drowned out by Martelli's booming voice telling the crowd that Packer can, well, you know.

"Yeah, well, Coach Martelli speaks for our program, so I guess we should feel the same way about him (Packer)," West said with a wide grin. "We've been hearing stuff like that all year, but we haven't been listening."

"But what this (No. 1 seed) really means is that this program has come a long way," West added. "We've been a work in progress and now I guess God has shined the light on us. Otherwise, whether you're a No. 1 or No. 2 seed, the team you play against is going to do all it can to beat you. We just want another opportunity to get back on the floor and play somebody."

The possibility that St. Joseph's

would drop to No. 2 decreased when Pitt and Mississippi State lost in their conference tourneys. No doubt, the Hawks' loss to Xavier made it more difficult for the selection committee. In their favor, the Hawks had the No. 1 nonconference strength of schedule in the Ratings Percentage Index, a computer formula that closely approximates that used by the committee. According to the RPI, St. Joe's played a more difficult schedule than Pitt and Oklahoma State. And, of course, the Hawks went undefeated in the 27 games on their schedule, which obviously caught the attention of the committee.

"It was great to see the No. 1 seed flashed in front of our name," junior Pat Carroll said. "But I don't think it really made a difference if we were No. 1 or No. 2. I think we went into the Xavier game without the same hunger we had in the other games. We're looking at this as a fresh start, feeling we have to prove ourselves again."

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continued from page 2B

"It is what it is," Washington head coach June Daugherty told The Seattle Times on March 8. "Our season is done, and we've done what we've done. We'll leave it up to the committee."

In fairness, the Sun Devils and Huskies, although mostly the Sun Devils, struggled at the end of the season.

Washington started 5-0 early in the season, then turned around and kicked off Pac-10 play with a 1-5 record. The Huskies ended their season with a 3-1 push before the conference tournament, the one loss at the hands of first-place Arizona.

Arizona State closed the regular season with a 2-4 plunge down the Pac-10 ladder. Poor finishes wear thin on the NCAA selection committee, so the Sun Devils should instead be headed to the Women's National Invitation Tournament with a 17-11 record.

"The bright side of the WNIT is that we are going to have to play on the road," Arizona State head coach Charli Turner Thome told Arizona State's The State Press on Friday. "We didn't finish the season strong on the road. (Sun Devil sophomore) Kristen Kovesdy made the comment that we don't want to wait until next year to improve on

the road, 'let's go out and do it now.'"

Arizona State finished the season 4-9 outside of Wells Fargo Arena. With one senior leaving the squad, it would be more valuable for the Sun Devils' future to have the WNIT opportunity than go one-and-out in the NCAA.

The WNIT could prepare the younger players for future, more high-profile postseason appearances. It would also mean one last farewell — on perhaps a better note than the Pac-10 Tournament — for Arizona State's sole senior and Washington's three.

For the Huskies, with attendance figures that are among the top 20 in the country, a WNIT bid — and likely chance to host — is the second-best icing on the cake. Washington's three seniors — Andrea Lalum and Gioconda and Giuliana Mendiola — should have one final farewell for the hometown fans.

Both teams were left out of deserving spots for the NCAA Tournament, but they still have one last chance to end the season on a positive note. Each season, a WNIT championship is one team's way of telling the NCAA selection committee that it screwed up.

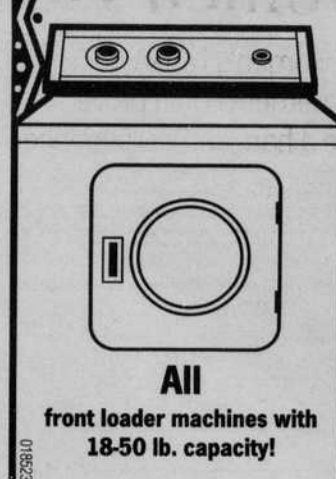
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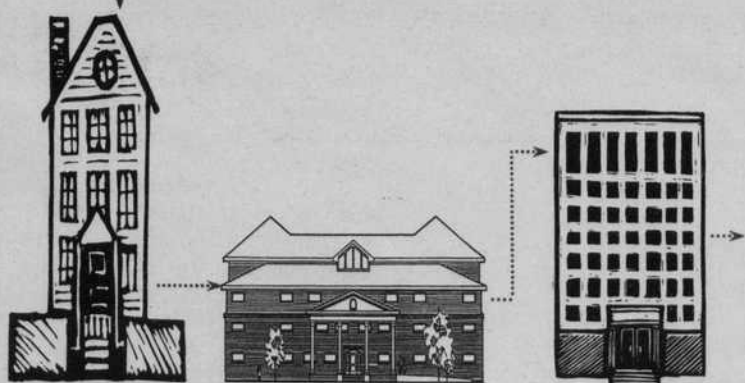
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