

Matt Walsh leads Florida to victory against Kentucky

BY PAUL NEWBERRY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — Matt Walsh made sure Florida didn't squander another chance to win the Southeastern Conference tournament.

Walsh scored 26 points, including consecutive three-pointers that sparked a stunning 21-2 run, leading the Gators to a 70-53 rout of No. 4 Kentucky on Sunday and their first SEC tournament championship.

Florida (23-7) beat the Wildcats for the second time in eight days, effectively knocking them out of contention for a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tournament.

The Gators also defied history, winning their first tournament title on their 40th try against the team that has defined success in this event. Kentucky (25-5) had won the last two tournaments, 10 of the past three and 25 in all — more than every other school in the SEC combined.

Even though the Georgia Dome resembled Rupp Arena South (Florida fans took up only one section in the crowd of 24,408), the Wildcats couldn't fend off a team that is playing its

best basketball of the season at the perfect time.

The Gators have won seven in a row and certainly improved their positioning for the NCAA tournament.

Florida led throughout the first half and well into the second, but Kentucky appeared to seize control with a 15-1 outburst that had the blue-clad fans in an uproar.

Randolph Morris scored on an offensive rebound with 12:32 remaining, letting out a yell after giving Kentucky its first lead of the game at 42-40.

After Florida turned it over, Patrick Sparks drove into the lane and flipped in another basket that pushed the Wildcats to a four-point lead.

But it was all Gators the rest of the way.

Walsh, the tournament MVP, hit a three-pointer to stem Kentucky's momentum. After Morris put up an airball, Walsh hit another three from the corner to put Florida back in front at 46-44.

Anthony Roberson, part of Florida's "Big Three" with Walsh and David

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Illinois, Washington, North Carolina, Duke receive No. 1 seeds

BY MICHAEL MAROT
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS — Top-ranked Illinois heads into the NCAA Tournament with one loss and the overall No. 1 seed, while Washington was this year's surprise at the top of the bracket.

Joining the Big Ten Conference champion Illini as No. 1s on Sunday were North Carolina and Duke from the Atlantic Coast Conference and the Huskies of the Pacific-10 Conference.

Illinois (32-1 overall) was assigned to the Chicago regional. North Carolina (27-4) will be at Syracuse, N.Y., Duke (25-5) will be in Austin, Texas, and Washington (27-5) in Albuquerque, N.M.

The 14th-ranked Huskies took advantage of Kentucky's loss Sunday in the Southeastern Conference championship game to move onto the top line. Tournament officials said the Wildcats would have been a No. 1 seed had they won that game.

It is the sixth time in eight years two teams from the same conference were

seeded No. 1. The last time was 2003, when Oklahoma and Texas of the Big 12 Conference were No. 1 seeds.

Illinois won't get any frequent flyer miles in this tournament. The Illini will play the first and second rounds in Indianapolis with possible regional games in Chicago. And if they advance far enough, the Final Four is April 2 and 4 in St. Louis, Mo.

Illinois, which opens play Thursday against Northeast Conference champion Fairleigh Dickinson, was followed in the Chicago regional by second-seeded Oklahoma State, which won the Big 12 tournament; No. 3 Arizona, the regular season Pac-10 champion, and fourth-seeded Boston College, co-champions of the Big East Conference.

Two teams went into last year's tournament with just one loss. St. Joseph's lost in the regional finals to Oklahoma State, while Stanford lost to Alabama in the second round.

Washington opens play Thursday in Boise, Idaho, against Montana, the Big Sky Conference champions.

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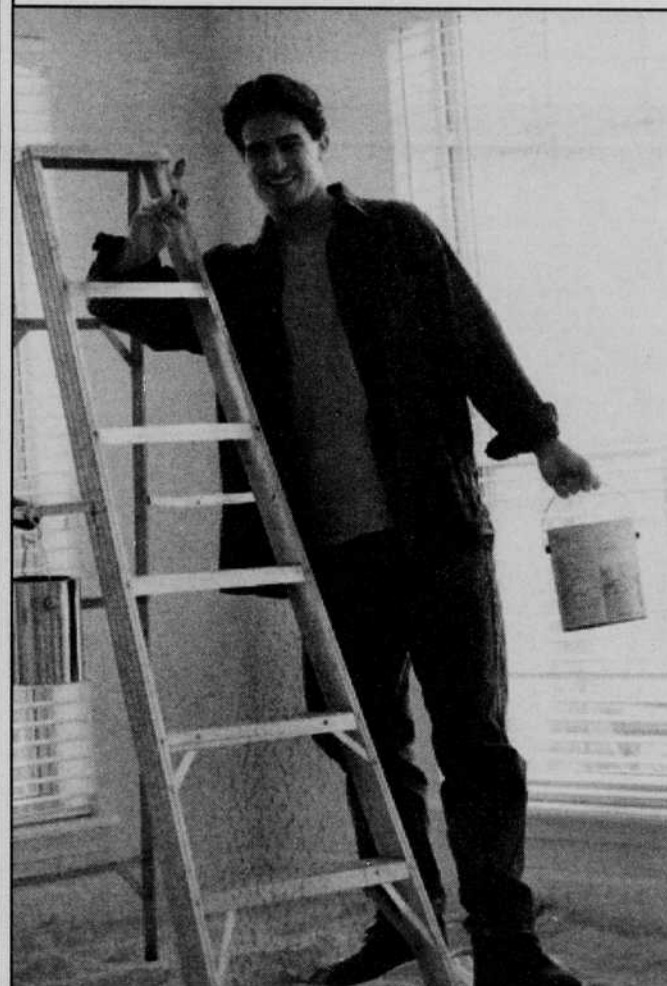
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