

SPORTS

SPORTS BRIEFS

NIT Semifinals In New York

Four days before the NCAA Final Four comes to the New York area, the semifinals of the National Invitation Tournament take place at Madison Square Garden. Tulane (21-9), a school that felt it was snubbed by the NCAA Tournament, makes its first ever-trip to the semifinal round of a post-season tournament when it plays Nebraska (19-14) at 7 p.m. EST Tuesday. Alabama (19-11) opposes St. Joseph's of Pennsylvania (18-12) in the second game. The championship game is Thursday night.

Abdul-Rauf Returns

Denver guard Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf plays his first home game Tuesday since the NBA suspended him for refusing the stand during the national anthem. Abdul-Rauf, a Muslim, was suspended March 12th, but the suspension was lifted after one game when he agreed to stand and pray during the anthem. Abdul-Rauf refused to stand for the anthem because he said it conflicted with his religious beliefs.

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Final Four Showdown Set

Rick Pitino doesn't want to hear any talk that the Kentucky-Massachusetts game in the Final Four is the true championship.

"Who's to say that Massachusetts or Kentucky is better than Syracuse or Mississippi State?" the Kentucky coach said Monday. You don't know that."

The Massachusetts-Kentucky showdown is the headline attraction at Saturday's semifinals in New Jersey, with the Syracuse-Mississippi State game commanding less attention.

Mississippi State, a fifth seed, upset Connecticut and Cincinnati at the Southeast Regional while Syracuse upset top-seeded Kansas to come out of the West.

Going into it you would say Connecticut and Cincinnati would have been there, or Kansas would have been there," Pitino said during a news conference. But you don't know. That's what makes the game so unbelievable.

Because Mississippi State or Syracuse could play the best ball, I hope not, from The Meadowlands."

And that's why Pitino is not in favor of seeding teams after they reach the Final Four.

I think what makes college basketball so great is that it's unpredictable," he said. I know we have our hands full with any of those opponents."

During the season, Kentucky lost 92-82 to Massachusetts and split

against Mississippi State, winning 74-56 and losing 84-73.

While Kentucky is favored to win the national title, Pitino isn't sure his Wildcats should be in that role.

I think they've been in Margaritaville too long," Pitino said of the oddsmakers. Maybe they should concentrate on other areas because two of the three teams in this Final Four beat us.

I don't care what you factor in, I'm from the old school when it comes to this. Forget the rhetoric, forget who's up and who's down, who's afraid and who's not afraid, the game is won or lost on the court.

I won't say Mississippi State is better than us because we beat them once.

But they beat us late in the year when it counts more. And Massachusetts beat us. So, I can't speak for Syracuse, but you definitely have to make Mississippi State and Massachusetts big favorites," he said with a laugh.

Kentucky has steamrolled into the Final Four, winning by an average margin of 28.3 points. The closest game was the 83-63 victory over Wake Forest in the Midwest final.

Pitino isn't making too much of the wide margins because of his team's up-tempo game.

"They can play it because that's their style or they can play like Wake Forest, a different style," he said. Then eventually if your style starts to win, now they're forced to play that

style. And that's when you see lopsided victories.

It's not because you're that much better than that team. It's just that your style takes over and then suddenly it goes the other way with the big numbers."

Kentucky, if it wins the title, is on course to break the 23.75 scoring margin set by UCLA's national champions in four games in 1967. Since the field was expanded to 64 teams in 1985, UNLV's national champs in 1990 have the biggest margin at 18.67 points.

"NCAA-wise," Pitino said, "we relax very well and play with great confidence in our ability and we play good defense."

Miss State Goes Ballistic

The usually quiet country roads of Starkville have been anything but during Mississippi State's unprecedented run in the NCAA tournament. Many of the university's 14,000 students have celebrated each victory by joyriding around campus, blowing horns and setting off firecrackers.

"It's been bedlam. I have never seen anything like it," athletic director Larry Templeton said Monday. "I've dreamed of having this kind of experience. Having grown up here, to be here firsthand is almost unexplainable."

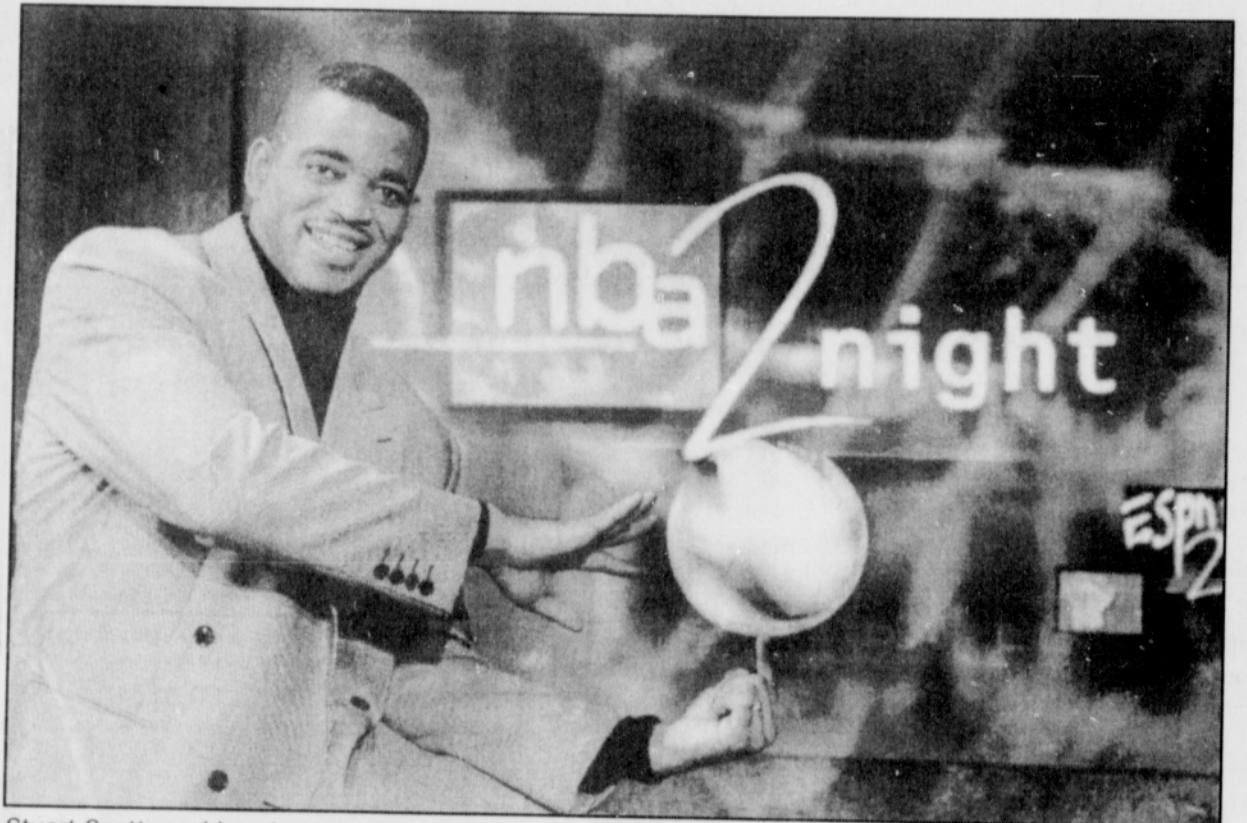
A crowd of about 5,000 people packed the small Golden Triangle Regional Airport Sunday to greet the Bulldogs, who earlier in the day beat Cincinnati 73-63 in the Southeast Regional final to earn a spot in the Final Four.

"Cars were backed up from the airport to the highway. It was an unbelievable crowd," said Jim Ellis, a 1969 Mississippi State graduate in his 18th season as color analyst on Bulldog radio broadcasts.

"It's the biggest thing that has happened, certainly in basketball and probably in Mississippi State sports," Ellis said his trip from the airport back to campus took 90 minutes, compared to the usual 15. There he ran into another crowd - "100 or so students" already in line, and ready to stay overnight in rainy weather, waiting for the chance to buy Final Four tickets. By midday Monday, the 250 student tickets were gone. The rest of the school's allotment of 2,500 tickets were being offered on a priority basis to season ticket holders and Bulldog Club members.

Oral Roberts Talks To Parker

Oral Roberts University reportedly is trying to recruit former New York prep star Richie Parker, who pleaded guilty to first degree sexual abuse last year. According to today's New York Post, Oral Roberts coach Bill Self is speaking to Parker about playing for the Golden Eagles next season. Parker is currently attending Mesa (Arizona) Community College as a freshman and is not allowed to play on the basketball team. "Yes, there have been conversations," Self told the Post.



Stuart Scott provides viewers with the latest spin on highlights and news from the NBA on ESPN's new sports program NBA 2night.

Gil Undergoes Surgery

Texas Rangers shortstop Benji Gil will undergo surgery for a herniated disc in his lower back that will sideline him six to eight weeks. Gil underwent an MRI by

the club's spine consultant Doctor Drew Dossett in Dallas Monday. The exam revealed a herniated disc that is causing irritation to the nerve in his left leg.

Guyton Waived

The New England Patriots

waived safety Myron Guyton and linebacker Vincent Brown Tuesday. Guyton had five interceptions in 30 games since joining the Patriots as an unrestricted free agent prior to the 1994 season. Guyton assumed the starting safety role with his former team as a rookie.



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