

College Basketball

Pac-12 has several teams on NCAA bubble

By JOHN MARSHALL
Associated Press

The Pac-12's NCAA tournament bubble is beginning to pulsate.

No. 7 Arizona and No. 13 Utah are virtual locks to make the bracket, at this point fighting for higher seeds.

After that, the Pac-12 has three teams that could have a good shot with a strong finish and two others that will really need to make some noise at the end of the season.

Once on the outside looking in, Oregon (21-8) put itself squarely inside the bubble with its massive home win over Utah last Sunday. The Ducks beat California on the road Wednesday and could enhance their bracket chances by knocking off fellow bubble team Stanford in Northern California on Sunday.

The Cardinal (18-9) did not make it easy on themselves with four losses in five games, but followed that up with wins over Cal and Oregon State. Sunday's game against Oregon will be huge for Stanford, which closes the regular season with a road trip against the two Arizona schools.

UCLA (17-12) still has some work to do after a troubling trip to Arizona that resulted in a pair of losses. The Bruins bounced back to beat Washington, but can't afford slipups against Washington State and rival USC to close out the regular season. UCLA is 14-1 at home with its only loss to No. 3 Gonzaga, which could help.

The surprise of the early conference season, Oregon State (17-11) has taken a tumble with four losses in five games. The Beavers have some ugly losses — Quinnipiac was a big one — and an RPI of 89, so



AP Photo/Ben Margot

Oregon guard Casey Benson (2) lays up a shot in front of California's David Kravish during the second half of an NCAA college basketball game Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015, in Berkeley, Calif.

winning the Pac-12 tournament may be their only shot.

Arizona State (15-13) is in the same lifeboat as Oregon State, likely needing to win the conference tournament to get into the bracket for the second straight season. The Sun Devils knocked off rival Arizona, but have too many losses and an RPI too low (82) to expect an invite at this point.

A few more teams rising and falling on the NCAA tournament bubble.

ON THE RISE

Georgia. The Bulldogs (18-9) needed a quality road win to pad their resume and got it Wednesday night by knocking off fellow bubbler Mississippi 76-72. A decent RPI

(30) and strength of schedule (35) should keep Georgia in good shape if it doesn't trip up down the stretch.

Davidson. The Wildcats (20-6) have won six straight and recently got point guard Jack Gibbs back after he suffered a knee injury. Davidson's RPI of 48 is average and its strength of schedule is weak at 122nd, so a few more wins could strengthen its case.

LSU. The Tigers (20-8) aren't exactly on the rise, more holding steady. A loss to Texas A&M last week didn't look good, but LSU completed a season sweep of Florida and knocked off Auburn on the road since then. Some tough games coming up, including Ole Miss on Saturday.

St. John's. The Red Storm (19-9)

picked up a huge win on Monday by knocking off fellow bubble team Xavier by one, their fourth win in five games. There's still some tough games left, though, including No. 6 Villanova in the regular-season finale.

FADING HOPES

Illinois. The Illini (17-11) had a good opportunity to beef up their resume on the road against Iowa on Wednesday night. Instead of picking up a quality road win, Illinois lost 68-60, its third straight loss since knocking off Michigan State and Michigan. The Illini play Northwestern and Nebraska at home next, games that won't do much for their NCAA chances even if they win.

Texas. The Longhorns (17-11) have been bouncing along the bubble for a few weeks and seem to have landed on the outside after a three-game losing streak. Texas is 6-9 in Big 12 play and has just one win against RPI top-50 teams, which doesn't look good. The Longhorns have a couple of big chances to make an impression coming up, though: at No. 8 Kansas on Saturday and against No. 19 Baylor next week.

Temple. The Owls (20-9) stumbled last week with two big chances to boost their resume, losing road games to No. 21 SMU and Tulsa. Temple has a rout over Kansas on its resume, but may need a strong finish to get into the field of 68.

Indiana. The Hoosiers (19-10) did not do themselves any favors by losing to Northwestern this week. Indiana closes out the season against Iowa and Michigan State before the Big Ten tournament, so there are still chances to impress the selection committee.

New-look Weeks hopes for fresh start with M's

By JOSE M. ROMERO
Associated Press

PEORIA, Ariz. — The most noticeable thing is the hair. Gone are the long dreadlocks that were once a Rickie Weeks staple.

He'd worn them since 2008, but said he grew tired of the hair style.

"It's just one of those things," Weeks said.

Weeks also made more major changes. After 12 seasons in the Milwaukee organization, he signed a one-year contract with the Seattle Mariners.

And the 32-year-old veteran won't be strictly be playing second base, his longtime position with the Brewers. The Mariners are trying him out in the outfield.

That's where Weeks, a second baseman for more than 1,000 games with the Brewers, could make his biggest contribution this season.

Weeks hasn't played outfield in the major leagues, but for the past few days he's been taking fly balls and said it comes naturally to him.

"It brought me back to high school," Weeks said. "That was the last time I played outfield fully."

Not to say Weeks won't be exclusively used in left field for the Mariners. Manager Lloyd McClendon has said that Weeks will play second base and third base,



AP Photo/Charlie Riedel, File

This is a 2015 file photo shows Rickie Weeks of the Seattle Mariners. Weeks has never played any position other than second base. It's no wonder he's spending the early days of spring training with the Seattle Mariners in the outfield, learning a new position.

and possibly first, on occasion.

That makes Weeks the Mariners' second utility player expected to be on the opening day roster, along with Willie Bloomquist. Weeks could also find himself sharing playing time with Dustin Ackley in left field.

"The first week, outfield, and then maybe work myself back to infield the second week," Weeks said of his plan for spring training.

McClendon likes what he's seen so far.

"I've watched Rickie for the last three days," Mc-

Clendon said Friday. "I've been fairly impressed with the way he's moving around out there. Listen, I made the transition from catcher to (outfield). Rickie is certainly a much better athlete than I ever was. I don't see the major concern that most people see. I think he's going to adapt real easily."

After an All-Star season in 2011, Weeks' numbers slipped to a .230 batting average in 2012 and .209 in 2013. The Brewers opted for a platoon at second base with Weeks and Scooter Gennett.

Weeks ended up with

about 200 fewer at-bats than Gennett in 2014. Weeks hit .274 with eight homers and 29 RBIs in 121 games.

A hamstring injury had cost him the last two months of the 2013 season. Following the 2014 season, the Brewers decided to move on, declining his contract option for this year.

There were no takers for Weeks, though, until the Mariners and general manager Jack Zduriencik signed him for a year and \$2 million. Zduriencik and Weeks go back a long way — Zduriencik approved the drafting and signing of

Weeks while serving as the Brewers' director of scouting in 2003.

After years of reporting to Brewers' camp in the nearby Maryvale neighborhood of Phoenix, Weeks said there isn't much difference switching facilities.

"When you show up somewhere, you just do it," Weeks said. "I don't have any regrets, or how is it here compared to there. I don't go through anything like that."

Weeks compared his first Mariners workout earlier this week to a first day of school.

"New teacher, new guys in the clubhouse," he said. "You're trying to learn names. That's probably the hardest part."

NOTES: Former Mariners pitcher Brandon Maurer, traded to the San Diego Padres in the offseason, visited his former teammates in the clubhouse. Maurer's new team shares the fields complex with Seattle. ... The Mariners will play an intrasquad game on Monday in preparation for their first spring training game on Wednesday, weather permitting. Rain is expected in the area this weekend. ... RHP Erasmo Ramirez is being worked as a starter and not competing for a bullpen spot, McClendon said. Ramirez is out of minor league options after spending the past three seasons shuttling between Seattle and Triple-A Tacoma.

NASCAR

Dude, where's my car: NASCAR machine stolen before race

By PAUL NEWBERRY
Associated Press

HAMPTON, Ga. — When Travis Kvapil got the call Friday, he figured someone on his race team was playing a joke.

"They said there was trouble with the car," Kvapil said. "I thought we could figure it out when we got in the garage area. They're like, 'No, the car is gone.'"

The No. 44 NASCAR Sprint Cup car owned by small-budget Team XTREME was stolen from a hotel parking lot near Atlanta Motor Speedway, police said, forcing Kvapil to withdraw from this weekend's race before he even got a chance to qualify.

The \$250,000 race car was still missing late in the afternoon, and police were hoping the public could assist in the search. The owner of one NASCAR sponsor offered a pit pass to every race the rest of the year to anyone who helped locate the high-powered Chevrolet.

"It's insane," said team owner John Cohen, who didn't have a backup car to run in Atlanta.

For a few hours, the team held out hope of the car being found in

time for qualifying Friday, but it was forced to withdraw when it missed NASCAR's mandatory inspection.

The Sprint Cup race is Sunday. "It's really bizarre," Kvapil said. "You can handle maybe getting a flat tire, or getting caught up in a wreck, or a blown engine, something that actually happens on the race track. Or you don't qualify, because you don't have enough speed. But to not even get a chance ... that's pretty disheartening."

It was an especially tough blow for Team XTREME, which doesn't have the funding of major multi-car operations such as Hendrick Motorsports and Joe Gibbs Racing. Despite a wreck in qualifying, the team managed to make the field for the season-opening Daytona 500 with Reed Sorenson behind the wheel. He finished 32nd in the race.

Sorenson switched to a different team for the Atlanta race, prompting Team XTREME to hire Kvapil, a one-time Sprint Cup regular who had only five starts in the top NASCAR series last season and was looking to make his first appearance of 2015.

"I was excited to be part of a small team and trying to build up with them," Kvapil said. "Personal-

ly, it's a big setback."

A trailer with the red race car inside was hitched to a black 2004 Ford F-350 pickup truck parked outside a hotel in Morrow, Georgia, about 15 miles south of Atlanta and a short drive from the speedway, police said. Surveillance video showed the truck and trailer being driven out of the parking lot around 5:30 a.m., Morrow police Detective Sgt. Larry Oglesby said.

The team, which had been working 18-hour days to get the car ready for Atlanta, was scheduled to leave for the track at 5:45 a.m., and a crewman had been outside a few minutes before the theft, smoking a cigarette. "I've been doing this since 1979," crew chief Peter Sospenzo said. "I've probably been to 1,200 hotels and 1,200 race tracks. Never once has this happened. It's crazy. But there's a first for everything, I guess."

The trailer is plain white with no markings. The person who stole it likely didn't realize the race car was inside, and may have thought it was lawn equipment or something else he could easily sell, Oglesby said.

"Hopefully they'll open this one up and say, 'Oh no, this isn't what we thought,' and will drop it off at

the nearest vacant lot or apartment complex or somewhere," he said.

Normally, the car would have been transported using the team's hauler, an 18-wheel tractor trailer. But, with a winter storm moving through the Southeast this week, Cohen sent the hauler to Atlanta earlier in the week. Back at the shop, the team was still working on the car, a different version than the one that ran under restrictor-plate rules in Daytona. It was sent separately to Atlanta late Thursday after the storm cleared out, accompanied by Sospenzo and six other crew members.

"My whole plan backfired," said Cohen, who has been running a Sprint Cup car since 2012 and is one of the few African-Americans involved in NASCAR's top series.

In addition to the race car, the trailer also contained a spare engine valued at \$100,000 and racing equipment valued at \$17,500, according to a police report. Even so, Cohen vowed the team would return for next weekend's race in Las Vegas.

Kvapil said the thieves probably won't be able to cash in on their surprising haul.

"There's really no use for it out in the general public," he said.

Hernandez prosecution reveals text messages

By MICHELLE R. SMITH
Associated Press

FALL RIVER, Mass. — Texts and phone records shown to jurors Friday in the murder trial of former New England Patriots player Aaron Hernandez showed that several messages he exchanged with a co-defendant before the killing were deleted from his phone.

Evidence presented to the jury Friday also showed multiple calls placed from the phone of co-defendant Ernest Wallace to the victim, Odin Lloyd, in the hours before he was killed, including the same minute that Lloyd was seen getting into a car outside his home about an hour before he died early on June 17, 2013.

The records showed that Hernandez, at times using his lawyer's phone, called Wallace repeatedly the night of June 17 after police had gone to his home and asked him to come to the station while they investigated Lloyd's death.

Ricardo Leal, who works for the phone company Sprint, testified for 3.5 hours Friday.

Prosecutor Patrick Bomb-berg went through dozens of nondeleted text messages Hernandez exchanged with Wallace in the days surrounding the killing. Prosecutors have previously said Lloyd sent his last text to his sister at 3:23 a.m. and was killed within minutes, shot to death at an industrial park near Hernandez's home in North Attleborough.

Lloyd was dating the sister of Hernandez's fiancée.

Wallace and a third man, Carlos Ortiz, are also charged and have pleaded not guilty. They will be tried separately. Prosecutors have said Hernandez orchestrated the killing.

Bomb-berg on Friday showed the jury several texts from Hernandez to Wallace hours before the killing in which Hernandez pushed Wallace to come see him.

One, at 9:02 p.m., said "Please make it back Cuz Im Def trying to step for a little." Another, at 10:23 p.m., told him to "hurry up" with a couple of expletives.

On June 11, Hernandez asked Wallace if he removed everything from a car, "clip and cds and everything?" The following day, he tells Wallace he needs "those keys" and things are "crazy." "U gotta listen yo," he writes. "I need them by 6 man please head back now."

A few hours later, early on June 13, he writes: "I wanted to kill u but u kno I love u hit me tomorrow get some rest and tell the rest I love them."

Leal testified that several other text messages that appeared in records did not appear on the phone. It's not clear yet whether investigators were able to retrieve them.

He also testified that records showed Wallace's phone was used to call Lloyd five times between 1:22 a.m. and 2:32 a.m. on June 17. Video surveillance previously shown to the jury showed Lloyd getting into the back seat of a sedan at 2:32 a.m. outside his home.

Lloyd's body was found the evening of June 17, and police soon tied him to Hernandez because Lloyd had a key in his pocket to a Chevrolet Suburban that Hernandez had rented. That night, police went to Hernandez's home and asked him to go to the police station, which he did.

Video from the police station parking lot previously shown to the jury showed Hernandez using his lawyer's phone to make several calls.

Phone records introduced Friday showed Hernandez repeatedly calling Wallace the night of June 17 and early the next morning, often using the lawyer's phone. More than a dozen calls were made to Wallace that night between 9:47 p.m. and about 2:20 a.m. from Hernandez's phone, his lawyer's phone or the phone of his fiancée, Shayanna Jenkins.