

Men's College Basketball

The must-watch games to close the regular season

By JOHN MARSHALL
Associated Press

PHOENIX — The college basketball season has been filled with great games the past four months, from the showdown between Kentucky and North Carolina in Las Vegas to Nevada's miracle comeback against New Mexico.

But it's not time to wrap up the regular season just yet.

There are still two weeks left before March Madness kicks in and plenty of great matchups to be seen.

Here are some of them:

No. 7 Louisville at No. 8 North Carolina, Wednesday. Two of the ACC's best are playing for the only time during the regular season, with both hoping to lock up high seeds in the NCAA Tournament. An awful lot of talent on the floor at one time.

California at No. 6 Oregon, Wednesday. The Ducks are trying to keep pace with Arizona for the Pac-12 title. The Bears could use a marquee win to bolster their NCAA Tournament hopes.

No. 13 Florida at No. 11 Kentucky, Saturday. The Gators won the first meeting 88-66, though that was in Gainesville. This one is at Rupp and the Wildcats seem to be

back on track after a stretch of three losses in four games that ended with the game against Florida.

Northwestern at Indiana, Saturday. The Wildcats appear to be on course for their first NCAA Tournament and beating the Hoosiers in Bloomington would be the perfect topper. Injury-ravaged Indiana will miss the NCAAs unless it wins the Big Ten tournament but still has a ton of talent on its roster.

BYU at No. 1 Gonzaga, Saturday. This will likely be the last impediment to the Zags' perfect regular season. The Cougars put up a fight in the first meeting, losing 85-75 in Provo, but this one is the final game at the Kennel this season.

No. 5 UCLA at No. 4 Arizona, Saturday. A top-5 game between two of the best teams in the Pac-12, both playing for high NCAA seeds. The Wildcats won the first meeting 96-85 in Allonzo Trier's first game back following his suspension but are banged up now. This still figures to be one of the most entertaining games of the season.

No. 8 North Carolina at No. 18 Virginia, Feb. 27. The Tar Heels turned the first meeting into a laugh, holding the Cavaliers to 41 points in a 24-point rout. The Cavaliers will be looking for a little payback at home

while hoping to boost their NCAA seeding.

No. 12 West Virginia at No. 9 Baylor, Feb. 27. The Bears will no longer be a No. 1 seed after losing both games last week and four of six. Baylor could use a win over another ranked opponent to move back up the bracket. Beating a top-10 team — assuming the Bears are still there — could help the Mountaineers when Selection Sunday rolls around.

VCU at Dayton, March 1. The Rams and Flyers enter this week tied atop the Atlantic 10 at 12-2 apiece. Hold court this week and this game will be for the conference title.

No. 10 Duke at No. 8 North Carolina, March 4. One of the best rivalries in the game is not a bad way to end the regular season. The Blue Devils won the first meeting 86-78 at Cameron Indoor Stadium.

Colorado State at Nevada, March 4. The Rams hold a one-game lead over the Wolfpack heading into this week, so this one could be for the Mountain West Conference title.

No. 3 Kansas at Oklahoma State, March 4. The Jayhawks will likely have clinched their 13th straight Big 12 title by then but will still be playing for a No. 1 NCAA Tournament seed. The Cowboys could be playing for their NCAA lives.

MARINERS:

Continued from 1B

once the season starts.

"As far as the chemistry in the clubhouse, those guys are a big part of what we're doing, so that's a little bit challenging. But we'll rev it up early here in camp to make sure they have a good feel, but more importantly, the new players have a good feel for them. Because it's their team and their clubhouse, and our leadership is really important to that."

Servais worked on developing that chemistry in the offseason when he made a surprise visit to Cruz in the Dominican Republic, where he had dinner with Cruz, Cano and new shortstop Jean Segura.

Cruz, Seattle's designated hitter, is coming off a 43-home run, 105-RBI season.

For Cruz, the slogan "Whatever It Takes" means that even when a player doesn't want to think about the higher expectations, they are there for the Mariners. He recalled how much fun he and his teammates had the last few days of last season, when every pitch and every at-bat was meaningful as the Mari-

ners chased the postseason.

"But we came up short, so we'll make sure this year we can be on top and clinch early," Cruz said. "Sometimes you have to leave your comfort zone. If that means I have to hit a ground ball to second base, whatever it takes. If you have to take one for the team, you take it. You have to go out there every day and compete and just find a way to get it done."

NOTES: The Mariners have players from 10 different countries plus Puerto Rico in camp: U.S., Canada, Dominican Republic, Panama, Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba, Brazil, Japan and South Africa. ... LHP Ariel Miranda, 5-2 with a 3.88 ERA in 10 starts last season, will continue to work as a starter. With the five-man rotation set for now, Miranda figures to be the first one to get the call if a replacement is needed. "Certainly based on what he did for us last year, at this point I think he's earned that," Servais said. ... All five projected starters — Hernandez, Hisashi Iwakuma, Drew Smyly, James Paxton and Yovanni Gallardo — threw a bullpen session Sunday.

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