

Sports

NCAA MEN'S BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT

Perfect Zags on to Final 4

By John Marshall
AP Basketball Writer

INDIANAPOLIS — Gonzaga's countdown to perfection has ticked to two. The Bulldogs are back in the Final Four, two wins from becoming the first undefeated team since the 1976 Indiana Hoosiers. And, after all those upsets, the March Madness apex in the Hoosier State will be a high-seeded affair. Gonzaga is a No. 1 seed. So is Baylor. Houston, a 2. UCLA is an 11, but it's also the all-time leader in national championships. There also will be a trip down Southwest Conference memory lane.



Tim Nwachukwu/Getty Images-TNS

Drew Timme (2) of the Gonzaga Bulldogs competes for the ball with Chevez Goodwin (1) of the USC Trojans in the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament on Tuesday, March 30.

But the Zags will be the team to beat.

Gonzaga (30-0) has been an offensive juggernaut rarely seen in college basketball. Fast moving and free flowing, the ultra-efficient Zags have steamrolled everyone in their way, winning a Division I-record 27 straight games by double digits.

An 85-56 dismantling of Southern California in the Elite Eight stretched their win streak to 34 games over two seasons and put them back in the Final Four for the second time in the past four NCAA Tournaments. Gonzaga came up short in a loss to North Carolina in the 2017 national title game, but has its sights set on finishing it off this time — and grabbing a piece of history.

"Everyone wants us to keep moving forward, but that's not how we roll," Gonzaga coach Mark Few

Men's Final 4

HOUSTON VS. BAYLOR

• Saturday, April 3, 3:14 p.m. (TV on CBS)

GONZAGA VS. UCLA

• Saturday, April 3, 5:34 p.m. (TV on CBS)

Women's Final 4

SOUTH CAROLINA VS. STANFORD

• Friday, April 2, 3 p.m. (TV on ESPN)

ARIZONA VS. UCONN

• Friday, April 2, 6:30 p.m. (TV on ESPN)

said. "This is a heck of an accomplishment. We're going to take it and savor it for what it is. That doesn't lessen our desire to win this game, the next game or win two more games." The next one won't be easy.

Mick Cronin will make sure of that. The former Cincinnati coach has returned UCLA to relevance after a couple of mediocre seasons. In two years at Westwood, he's added a level of toughness that's helped

them go from the First Four to the Final Four after losing their last four games entering the NCAA Tournament.

UCLA (22-9) has grinded out five wins in the NCAA tourney, including No. 2 seed Alabama and a 51-49 take-down of top-seeded Michigan in the Elite Eight. The Bruins are in the Final Four for the first time since 2008 and play the kind of game that might be able to slow the Gonzaga machine.

The Texas half of the draw will have a Southwest feel. Baylor and Houston were both members of the Southwest Conference, which splintered in 1996. The Bears were there when the league started, circa 1914. The Cougars made the move from independent to SWC status in 1975.

BAKER VOLLEYBALL

Bulldogs push Tigers to 5 sets

By Corey Kirk
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Baker's volleyball team didn't quite come away with a win Tuesday evening, March 30, at La Grande. But the Bulldogs did push the Tigers to the limit. After losing the first two sets, Baker (3-6 on the season) rallied to win the next two and force a decisive fifth set.

It was the first time La Grande (7-3) had needed five sets to win a match.

The Tigers held off Baker 15-11 in the final set. "I'm beyond proud of their efforts," Baker coach Ali Abrego said on Wednesday, March 31. "Last night was a good growth moment for us, navigating through tough situations and overcoming deficits to finish a hard match out strong. You can't ask for anything more out of your girls."

La Grande started off strong on its home court, winning the first two sets, 25-13 and 25-19.

But Baker, which lost to La Grande in four sets on March 8 in the Baker gym, responded, winning the third set 25-17 and the fourth 27-25.

La Grande took an early lead in the fifth set. Baker came back, narrowing the Tigers' led to two points.

But La Grande closed out the match to remain unbeaten (3-0) against Greater Oregon League rivals in this pandemic-shortened season.

Abrego said she encouraged her players to learn from the competitive match.

"Teaching kids to compete is something they have to do for themselves with their team," she said. "I can give them the tools they need, but they need to put it together, and they did that."

La Grande also won the JV match Tuesday, beating Baker in four sets.

The Baker varsity continued its busy final week of the season Wednesday evening by playing host to Powder Valley (the match was played after press time).

The Bulldogs play their final home match Friday, April 2, against Vale at 6 p.m. Baker concludes its season by traveling to Burns on Monday, April 5, for a 5 p.m. match against the Hilanders.

Burns is 9-1, with its only loss coming to unbeaten Powder Valley in five sets on March 15. Burns beat Baker in five sets on March 2, the season-opening match for both teams.

OREGON STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

Beavers' rally falls short

By Dave Skretta
AP Basketball Writer

INDIANAPOLIS — Oregon State hardly looked like a No. 12 seed the first two weeks of the NCAA Tournament.

For a while Monday night, the Beavers sure did.

Yet facing a 17-point second-half hole, the plucky Pac-12 upstarts showed the kind of ferocious defense and determination against No. 2 seed Houston that brought them to their first Elite Eight in nearly three decades. They came all the way back with a frantic rally, only to watch the Cougars hang on for a 67-61 victory and a spot in the Final Four.

The heartbreaking loss ended a charmed late-season run for Oregon State (20-13), which was making just its second trip to the NCAA Tournament since 1990 and was part of a big showing by its often-overlooked conference.

"It was a hell of a run," Oregon State coach Wayne Tinkle said from his hotel room, after the NCAA's technical difficulties for postgame interviews gave him more than an hour to digest the loss. "The guys were down. There were tears. I think they understood how hard

we fought to get back in the game and how we squandered it.

"But I'm thankful for the staff and people around me that boosted us back up," Tinkle added, "and I'm proud of the effort of this group. We showed amazing heart, fight, and we got every ounce out of this group that we could."

Picked to finish last in the Pac-12, the Beavers beat five AP Top 25 teams, the most since their 1975-76 team won the same number. They won their first game in the Big Dance since 1982, tied the 1963 Final Four team for the most tourney wins in school history with three, and matched Missouri in 2002 as the worst-seeded team to reach the Elite Eight.

The Final Four? It was just 3 1/2 minutes out of reach.

All-Pac 12 guard Ethan Thompson, who ushered the bubble-dwelling Beavers into the tourney with a stunning conference tournament title, struggled all night before coming alive down the stretch. He had 11 points and seven boards, and was the catalyst during a 17-3 run midway through the second half that gave Oregon State a chance.

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