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**Your *Inside Scoop* (TM)**

### FOG LIGHTS REQUIRED

Those in the San Francisco Bay area that have had their experience in foggy weather can relate to the NCAA women's basketball tournament outlook with a little over a month left until the 64-team field is announced on Selection Monday.

The scene at the moment is very unclear, in fact, extremely unclear.

The only area that appears somewhat settled, barring a shocking upset, is at the very top where defending NCAA champion **Maryland**, North Carolina, Duke, and Tennessee, have held that ground all year. Maryland's only losses at our monthly deadline have been to ACC-rivals Duke and North Carolina. The other two are unbeaten but will face each other for the first time next week. Tennessee's only losses are to Duke and North Carolina.

If they continue, with ACC teams only losing to each other, and Tennessee winning most of the way, those will be the four No. 1 seeds. Connecticut, which lost in close scores to Tennessee and North Carolina, has an outside shot at a No. 1 by running the table, but that may not be enough. At worst, the Huskies could be a No. 3, but more likely a No. 2. The same goes for Ohio State, Stanford, Oklahoma, and LSU right now, though, obviously, they can't all be No. 2.

But everything else is very wide open, especially in terms of just who will land coveted at-large bids if those teams don't win automatic berths through conference championships.

Studying the RPI isn't going to be a major help this season.

That's because the so-called bubble is looming to be very large as a result of the strange dynamic of conference races. In the past, there may have been a solid group of five guarantees out of a power conference.

However, in many leagues, there are clear frontrunners in specific groups and then there is a huge drop-off to the next teams. Now when you lump them all in one big tournament-consideration pile, what you have right now is one big mess, as we'll soon illustrate.

Thus, the deal maker might be the stat that has just kicked into play – last ten games. Those that can launch a run right now, which will include prominent wins over teams in similar situations, are likely to be perceived as the hot teams worthy of selection.

So, let's start with a look at the mega conferences and for the use of computer rating reference, we'll use the one out of the College RPI web site.

Understand, when you are reading this, that we're working off a picture taken Jan. 29-30.

**The Atlantic Coast** – Forget the precise standings because some teams have yet to meet each other. Basically, we've spoken about Duke, North Carolina, and Maryland. Although the ACC has sent many representatives in the past, the next group is comparable to similar groups in other conferences. If one team can dominate the rest, the hot finish will be good for a bid. Florida State has a nice record, but a bad RPI number at 65. More teams can be considered, but who they are is not worth a guess, other than it would be great to see North Carolina State land a berth considering the courageous battle with cancer that coach Kay Yow has fought this season.

**Big Twelve** – Here's a place that could send a big group through. Defending conference champion Oklahoma seems a lock, as does Texas A&M, which beat Oklahoma; Baylor, and possibly Nebraska. Others may advance from a group of Texas Tech, Iowa State, Kansas State, and Texas. Missouri needs a run and wins over the others mentioned.

**Big East** – Connecticut, favored to run the table, is very solid. Rutgers struggled with a young team in December, but the Scarlet Knights are getting their act together and can be formidable at the finish, especially if they upset UConn in Storrs, next week. This is a conference very representative of how we spoke at the front of this conversation. DePaul, we'd say, not now. But the Blue Demons could be a dangerous team if they heal over the next several weeks. Pittsburgh looked great going into the 2007 but suffered some tough losses, some of which won't be excused. Marquette and Louisville are likely to land bids. Notre Dame is a team that needs a run and South Florida must try to stay in the upper portion of the conference.

**Big Ten** – Someone needs to explain how this conference has a No. 2 RPI. Leader Ohio State is a heavyweight, no doubt, and Purdue is a candidate for a No. 3 or No. 4 team if it stays on course. Despite Michigan State's fall from the AP Poll this week, the Spartans could still land a berth. But after that, you tell me.

**PAC-10** – The Stanford conference, right? It's looking that way again. But Arizona State looks like a lock by staying in the upper portion, and there should be no reason for anyone to question California's pick this season. As for the rest of the hopefuls, they need conference upsets and to get better positioned quickly, but they will also have deal with their comparisons to teams in similar situations in other conferences.

**Southeastern** – Tennessee is unbeaten in the conference to date. LSU, Georgia, Mississippi, and Vanderbilt are all likely to go. Arkansas and Kentucky need a run and maybe an upset or two of those above them.

**Mountain West** – Very messy. How many and who they are, is a mystery but the names in the hunt are Utah, BYU, Wyoming, and TCU as the frontrunners.

#### The Next Group

Because the crowd above may not produce the NCAA yield in plentiful numbers, there are mid-majors that could get extra berths that weren't attainable in the past.

**Atlantic Ten** – There's usually a multiple out of here. George Washington, having an elite season for the first time in over a decade, is a lock. Temple, which won the last three conference titles, has kept pace, but an upset of GW or a strong finish might be needed. Charlotte and Xavier are good teams but they need some upsets or find some way to emerge above the many others who will be lumped on the bubble.

**Colonial Athletic** – The time may have arrived for an at-large bid, maybe even two. But it won't go to perennial champion Old Dominion if the Monarchs don't win the conference again. Delaware and James Madison are the other two in the picture. Hofstra was there, but slumped in recent weeks.

**Conference USA** – They all went to the Big East last year. Tulane needs to win the automatic bid because there will be no guarantees, otherwise.

**Horizon** – Wisconsin-Green Bay has a shot at an at-large bid if it doesn't win the conference.

**Mid-American** – Bowling Green seems like a lock. Ball State needs to finish strong, but it might not be enough.

**Missouri Valley** – Illinois State needs to win the league.

**Northeast** – Only mentioning this conference, folks, to let you know that Long Island coach Stephanie Gaitley, who once was at St. Joseph's in Philadelphia, finally has the Blackbirds making noise and they are leading the conference with a 10-1 record and a 17-5 overall mark. An RPI of 142, however, won't get them an automatic bid.

**Patriot** – Again making use of this space to provide some news tidbits. Defending champion Army, which is playing its first season after the tragic death of first-year coach Maggie Dixon, is currently in second place with a 5-2 Patriot mark and 16-4 overall to leader Bucknell, which is 6-1 and 14-8.

**Sun Belt** – Middle Tennessee is a lock. Western Kentucky is looking at either a pick off the bubble or a controversial omission. Of course, the Hilltoppers could make it easy with a conference title.

**WAC** – Boise State and Nevada are the frontrunners, but Louisiana Tech could emerge. However, an RPI of 112 won't be worth much in comparisons on the bubble.

Note to other teams and conferences. If you haven't been mentioned, it's because we both know your fate. So just win the automatic bid and settle it the easy way.

Exclusive to REAL SPORTS

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