

Dear REAL SPORTS fans:

REAL SPORTS is pleased to provide a special edition to our monthly e-Zine, as we provide you with the *Inside Scoop*® you need to follow the *Road to the Final Four*.

With almost half the field from 2005 missing in this year's Tournament, 2006 presents a new look for long-time women's basketball fans. Log-on to www.realsportsmag.com to download your own copy of this year's Tournament bracket.



What a week as we move toward the start of the NCAA tournament.

Among the highlights in the wake of the annual bracket birth, we learned the following:

Happiness (900 wins) can get you at least a million dollars in Knoxville, but money can't buy happiness when it comes to this year's seedings.

Coach Summitt, who was expected to agree to a new contract flipping her ahead of Mr. Auriemma's current deal at UConn, has been seething since the committee made Tennessee a No. 2 seed, and by gosh, the lowest No. 2 seed, in the Cleveland regional. That portion of the bracket also has North Carolina as the overall No. 1 seed and Rutgers as the region No. 3 seed.

Ah for the days of total domination when it didn't make a difference who was in the Vols' bracket, not that coach Sylvia Hatchell in Tar Heel country is any more delighted.

Only Rutgers coach C.Vivian Stringer noticed the obvious which is you can't win the national title these days unless you beat somebody, so you might as well get them out of the way early unless there's an incentive in your contract to last a few rounds.

The reality is that Tennessee probably had some injustice done to itself, but how many years have they been quite delighted with their placement, not that that notion was a mindset of the committee.

It used to take an army to beat Tennessee, but in the opening round, Summitt's troops will have to specifically beat Army, the first U.S. government representative in the women's tournament that is one of the feel-good stories of the season. Coach Maggie Dixon led the Black Knights to their first Patriot League title after taking over the team just before the start of fall practice.

A Tennessee win could advance the Vols against Old Dominion in Norfolk, Va., while North Carolina has a shot at playing Vanderbilt in the second round in Nashville.

There's not a lot of happiness over that setup, either, because of the potential of higher seeds playing essential road games. But if you're the higher seed fretting about those match-ups, maybe you shouldn't be the higher seeds, if you get the drift.

Speaking of drift, how about that new powerhouse by the Bay as in Cal-Berkeley, the surprise at-large pick of the entire field.

While there was much moaning elsewhere over that move, it must be noted that in the past at this time of year, Cal was already on skateboards before the Selection Show went on the air on ESPN.

Cal will open at neutralized Penn State's Bryce Jordan Center (that should put a chill in the Bears except for first-year coach Joanne Boyle who was previously enduring East Coast winters running Richmond in the Atlantic Ten. Before that, she had a long stint as an assistant at Duke). The Bears' opponent is St. John's, another team that had been a long absentee from the Big Dance. The winners most likely will meet Maryland in the second round.

While people are grouching over seven teams from the Atlantic Coast and Big East conferences and four from the Mountain West, here's a little secret.

In case you missed the last couple of years, prior to the great conference re-alignment, the Big East trio of Louisville, South Florida, and DePaul, along with the Mountain West's TCU, used to annual threats to come out of Conference USA, which has only new member and conference champion Tulsa in the field. South Florida finally blossomed this season. And the Atlantic Coast twins of Virginia Tech and Boston College used to be representatives from the Big East.

If Baylor was the dark horse that worked its way to the NCAA title last season, Big 12 sister Oklahoma is back in a big way to hold that honor, especially with freshman Courtney Paris.

Temple and Rutgers, though in opposite brackets, are thrilled to be close to home in Trenton, N.J., this weekend.

Temple will open against Hartford, pitting a one-time point guard rivalry of Jen Rizzotti and Dawn Staley in the American Basketball League and WNBA as sideline coaches with Staley heading the Owls and Rizzotti running Hartford.

Ironically, Temple was distressed with a sixth seed a year ago when the Owls set all kinds of program records. This time they were delighted with No. 6. In the second round, they could face Georgia, whom they beat in overtime on senior Jen Owens' three-pointer at the buzzer, in December in Philadelphia. Georgia is playing MAAC champion Marist in the first round, so here's a chance for the team from the host conference to make some headlines.

Iowa was another surprise pick as the fifth team out of the Big Ten, and Missouri was a mild surprise out of the Big 12, but it appears that the committee got to a certain point and still needed teams. That forced them to go to another set of standards to finish the bracket because no one was left to meet the prime standards for selection.

In the group of perceived one-team conferences and wrong losers, many feel Western Kentucky out of the Sun Belt deserved to be rescued after the Hilltoppers fell to Middle Tennessee in the championship.

"I've watched them and they're a great team," DePaul coach Doug Bruno said. Maybe that basketball argument should have been made during committee deliberations to override what the computer readouts said.

Until this year, Texas and/or Texas Tech and/or Penn State have always appeared. This time none are in the field after suffering subpar seasons. All of them were high seeds two seasons ago.

Interestingly enough, that old complaint about the men's bracket has yet to be heard.

For those of you new to the annual conversation of thrills and complaints, there have been times in the recent past when male coaches of top teams – you know who they are – talked about conspiracy when a bunch of them were matched against each other early in the tournament.

Well, returning to the debate over the Cleveland regional, instead of calling it "The Final Four bracket", etc., the fact that Viv, Pat, Sylvia, and Purdue's Kristy Curry are in the group, maybe the committee decided it was time for "The women's regional."

Incidentally, almost half the field from last year is missing, and many conference tournaments had close games, in some case causing upsets that saw teams emerge with a combination of automatic bids and terrible RPI numbers.

We'll be back next week to review the first two rounds and look ahead with a little more precision at the Sweet 16.

-By Mel Greenberg
Exclusively for REAL SPORTS magazine