



e-Zine May 2007

Your *Inside Scoop* (TM)

FINAL LINE ON THE FINAL FOUR

One could give us a demerit for not showing up here 30 days ago to wrap up the collegiate season, except for one small item – in a rarity, only now are all but a few details of the 2006-07 October-to-April events being finally sealed in the history books.

Oh, it's got nothing to do with the action on the court – that got wrapped up in its usually timely manner, although it once again concluded with a title game that existed in virtually no one's forecast back in October when teams reported for preseason practice.

At that moment, almost everyone was on the Maryland bandwagon after the Terrapins had captured the 2006 NCAA title by mounting a terrific second-half rally and then beating Atlantic Coast Conference rival Duke in overtime.

With everyone back, how could Maryland not repeat again?

Well, first the Terrapins found that Duke and North Carolina were as tough as ever when it came to going up against their ACC rivals.

And the innocence of youth that helped carry Maryland to a trophy 12 months earlier, this time was a bit of problem, by coach Brenda Frese's admission, when it came mounting a defense of the crown.

Ultimately, Maryland never made it far in the 64-team field when March Madness arrived.

Tennessee, meanwhile, which had almost been ignored because of the largesse of the ACC, was able to ride Candace Parker all the way to Cleveland.

But when the Vols got there, they found that less people cared about the return of the empire than the run mounted by another youth brigade that stumbled to a 2-4 start and wasn't much better after 10 games at 5-5.

That would be Rutgers, which took most of the season to finally understand how to play Hall of Fame coach C. Vivian Stringer's defensive schemes. But once the Scarlet Knights got the hang of it, their performance became as big a story on campus as the football team had been in the fall.

A week after Rutgers had been embarrassed a second time in less than a month by Big East rival Connecticut, Stringer's bunch had the story of conference tournament activity when they beat the dominant Huskies in Hartford to capture their first Big East title.

The other storyline, which was less spoken of, was the vast total of No. 1 seeds, including Connecticut, that failed to win their conference crowns. That omen made itself felt quickly in the NCAA tournament with surprise mid-major teams such as Marist and Bowling Green becoming Cinderella types themselves.

But by the time the Sweet 16 went through the first part of its weekend determining the survivors to move to the Final Four, Rutgers was back leading the headlines.

In Greensboro, N.C., less than an hour from Duke's campus in Durham, the Scarlet Knights overcame a 12-point deficit in the second half and took a one-point lead in the final minute against the Blue Devils, who were the overall No. 1 seed in the tournament.

A steal with 5.6 seconds left seemed to have a major upset for the Scarlet Knights all gift wrapped. But a Rutgers turnover on the inbounds play put the ball in Lindsey Harding's hands and she was fouled with a tenth of a second left in the game.

This time, however, Stringer would not be on the losing end of another heartbreaking defeat.

Incredibly, Harding, the winner of several national player of the year awards, missed both foul shots and Rutgers survived to go on and beat Arizona State for a second Final Four appearance and first since 2000.

Tennessee advanced to Cleveland, in part, when the so-called Dayton region of death fell apart with most of the serious challengers in that portion of the NCAA bracket being upset before they ever got to play the Vols.

North Carolina advanced out of Dallas while LSU, which was already making more news for off-the-court activity, beat top-seeded Connecticut to complete the field.

LSU began the NCAA tournament without Pokey Chatman, when the Tigers coach was ousted right before Selection Monday after university officials claimed they had the evidence of allegations that Chatman had an inappropriate relationship with a former player when she had been an assistant coach.

Major news also came out of Texas, where Hall of Fame coach Jody Conradt retired after the Longhorns failed to gain the NCAA tournament for the second straight year.

Immediately, the school leaked word that it had Duke coach Gail Goestenkors targeted as its top candidate to take over the program.

Back on the court to wrap things up in Cleveland, Rutgers surprised by routing LSU, while Tennessee mounted a late rally to beat North Carolina.

The Vols then went on to beat Rutgers at its own brand of tough defense and finally end what had been a nine-year drought since Tennessee had won its last title in the era of the “Meeks” in 1998. That now makes the record of NCAA crowns extended to seven for coach Pat Summitt.

Oh yeah, and somewhere along for the ride, the WNBA was also in town to once again to hold its draft the day after the NCAA title game for the second straight year.

We’ll be back to that.

While those of us remained in Cleveland to “turn pro,” events back East were beginning to overshadow the Tennessee victory.

Don Imus, the national talk show radio host in New York, managed to make some disparaging remarks about the appearance of Rutgers players in the championship game.

A firestorm quickly followed which resulted in the firing of Imus, but also the nation’s acclaim for Stringer and her Rutgers players over the way they handled themselves at the nationally-televised press conference to address the Imus controversy.

Ultimately, Imus apologized, which was quickly accepted, after he met the team, players, parents, and Rutgers officials at the New Jersey governor’s mansion.

The governor, himself, however, was absent after getting seriously injured in a car accident while returning from elsewhere in the state to attend the meeting.

And if all of this wasn’t enough to keep women’s basketball reporters and broadcasters busy, there was also the unprecedented number of “big name” coaches either leaving, replacing, or making a bunch of money being retained so as not to get involved in someone else’s search.

Some of the more notable names (by now most of you have watched the revolving door for most of this) had Joanne P. McCallie leave Michigan State for Duke after previously agreeing to a contract extension several weeks earlier.

Right in the middle of March Madness, Penn State veteran Rene Portland resigned a month after a settlement in a case in which former player Jennifer Harris had accused the Portland of trying to run her off the team for being perceived as a lesbian, which Harris claimed she was not.

A month later, Portland’s Immaculata teammate Theresa Greutz announced her resignation from Illinois. That job is the last major one unfilled at this hour.

Van Chancellor, who had become the last of original WNBA coaches to leave last fall when he “retired” from Houston after the Comets gained new owners, returned to the collegiate ranks at LSU.

Suzie McConnell-Serio, who had coached Minnesota in the WNBA and was initially expected to land the vacant job at Penn State, her alma mater, instead took the Duquesne job in her native Pittsburgh.

The Penn State position went to Notre Dame associate head coach Coquese Washington.

June Daugherty, who had been fired at Washington, landed at Pac-10 and nearby rival Washington State.

Tia Jackson, a former Iowa star, replaced Daugherty after having been an assistant at Duke.

Although many big names were rumored to be involved in the Florida search after Carolyn Peck was let go, Amanda Butler, a former Gator who had coached Charlotte in the Atlantic Ten, succeeded her. Butler was replaced by Baylor assistant Karen Aston, who had also been an associated head coach at Texas.

Meanwhile, Stringer was rewarded with a rich contract extension that will probably see her career conclude at Rutgers, while Kim Mulkey at Baylor, Joanne Boyle at California, Jen Rizzotti at Hartford, and Dawn Staley at Temple where among those who got nice, in some cases extremely nice, contract enhancements to stay at their present schools.

It will be interesting this fall to see what collegiate media guides will look like in the wake of departed coaches who had been the face of their basketball programs.

WNBA – New Duds and New Trades – What’s New in the WNBA

The WNBA, though, showed it could produce some new wrinkles of its own during this year’s draft.

Duke’s Harding, for example, was picked No. 1 overall by Phoenix and quickly traded to Minnesota, while Ohio State’s Jessica Davenport was taken second by San Antonio and then dealt to New York in a move that had the Silver Stars acquire longtime Liberty point guard Becky Hammon.

That kind of dealing had never occurred before in the previous 10-year history of the league.

Maryland’s Shay Doron got a special draft day thrill when she was selected by the Liberty, which she had watched while growing up and being a high school star at Christ the King in New York City.

Meanwhile, to give you a little inside info, several of us found an hour to kill during the Final Four, which quickly vanished when the WNBA invited us over to their hotel to have a brief chat with commissioner Donna Orender.

Although the demise of the Charlotte Sting has left the league back at 13 teams, expansion continues to be discussed.

Orender acknowledged that three different groups in the Bay Area – one in Oakland, one in San Jose, and one in San Francisco are each vying for a team and she said all of them have interesting arguments, even though only one could emerge.

Atlanta is also actively pursuing a team, as is a group in the Denver area. Not discussed at that moment, however, was the fate of Seattle, which might be moved by its new owners.

So after all that, there is also a matter of this writer spending most of the month ahead collecting artifacts of his life that the folks in Knoxville would like to put in display cases when the next Women's Basketball Hall of Fame induction class enters the hall on the weekend of June 8-9.

Oh, and the WNBA has new uniforms, exhibition games begin this week, and now we are all up to date.

Exclusive to REAL SPORTS

By Mel Greenberg