



**e-Zine November 2006**  
**Your *Inside Scoop* (TM)**

## PRE-SEASON NCAA CONFERENCE PREVIEW

It used to be so easy not too long ago at this time of year.

Simply put all the money down on Connecticut or Tennessee to win it all and keep praising the Southeastern Conference with all those ranked powers as the top league in the country.

Well, the monopoly is gone, even if all those entities just mentioned remain formidable.

The Atlantic Coast Conference has much to brag about. All those folks did was send their top three teams to the NCAA Women's Final Four and produce Maryland as the best of all in one of the most exciting title games in the 25-year history of the tournament.

The Terrapins are even deeper, a reason Maryland is drawing consensus acclaim as the overall preseason No. 1. But Duke and North Carolina will still have much to say in the conference wars, which also translate to the national race.

The SEC, yeah, they're still in the big time. They might have the top player in the country in sensational sophomore Candace Parker at Tennessee, and they have a bunch of ranked folks again in Georgia, LSU, Kentucky, and Vanderbilt.

Some Big East coaches concede the ACC might have three of the best teams, but Louisville's Tom Collen says, "When it comes to looking at things top to bottom, this place is unbelievable."

The conference shuffle of a year ago, primarily because of football considerations, ballooned the Big East to a 16-team free-for-all. Well, not exactly in that manner.

Connecticut and Rutgers are still the best of the bunch, but then it is a tight fit from No. 3 to No. 12.

"This was the hardest year for coaches to make their picks," said Connecticut coach Geno Auriemma, who spent the offseason being inducted into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in Knoxville, Tenn., and the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass.

"You can reverse 3 through 12 and still be right."

But when it comes to the top, Auriemma's Huskies are the overwhelming Big East favorite and freshman Tina Charles is the top newcomer in the nation. After narrowly just missing another trip to the Final Four, Connecticut might be ready to take a shot at a trip to Cleveland in April.

Rutgers lost all-America Cappie Pondexter, one of the top rookies in the WNBA last summer, but still has a slew of talented vets such as Matee Ajavon and another top rookie class.

What was interesting in the Big East was the rise of perennial doormats Pittsburgh and St. John's into NCAA contenders, while the new additions of DePaul, Louisville, South Florida, Marquette, and Cincinnati all were competitive.

"I honestly believe this conference prepares you better than any one I've been in to go deep in the NCAA tournament," DePaul's Doug Bruno said.

Leading the numbers parade out of the Big 12 is Oklahoma, with Courtney Paris one of the key players to challenge Tennessee's Parker for national player honors. Texas, Baylor, Texas A&M and Texas Tech are also quality operations and perhaps Iowa State is ready to rejoin the mix.

The Big Ten isn't what it used to be in the national mix, but conference favorite Ohio State is considered an NCAA title contender. Purdue and Michigan State are getting early mentions as nationally-ranked possibilities.

In some other places such as the Colonial Athletic Association, the competition is tight unto themselves. Perennial winner Old Dominion, however, may be ready to get back into the national spotlight with a team that could be a throwback to the glory days when Nancy Lieberman, Inge Nissen, and Anne Donovan were leading the Lady Monarchs.

New Mexico continues to energize its fan base, and George Washington, with a solid core of veterans, could crack the national rankings as well as end Temple's recent domination of the conference now that Candice Dupree has graduated. Xavier could be a team of interest with one of the better rookie classes.

Stanford, six-time defending conference champion, continues to be synonymous with the Pac-10, but Southern Cal, Arizona State, with perhaps UCLA and Washington all have chances to give the conference as a group more notoriety, not to mention the rise of Cal in the mix. In all, the Pac-10 has 6 schools in the ESPN/USA Today Poll.

**So, who's your pre-season pick to take the NCAA title?  
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## LET THEM PLAY – NCAA RULE CHANGES

A change in the NCAA with two more games allowed on the regular season schedule and an earlier start will give teams with veterans and depth an early advantage since the shortened preseason training period will not be detrimental to the learning curve at those programs.

Because of the number of games at the start, we may get some early clues on the national race by the time the first week of December comes creeping across the calendar.

There are some sidebar issues, as always. One is the use of male practice players. There is a move within the NCAA to eliminate them, but most coaches we've talked to believe they have value to their intra-squad scrimmages.

In less than two weeks with a tipoff doubleheader at Oklahoma when the Sooners host DePaul and Rutgers meets Georgia, we'll learn the names of the next six inductees to the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame. The induction ceremony events will be June 8-9 in Knoxville.

On the same day, a poignant doubleheader will be played in West Point, N.Y., when the Pittsburgh men meet Army and the Ohio State women meet the Knight counterparts.

It's the Maggie Dixon Classic named for Army's late women's coach who died suddenly a day after the Final Four after she had led the team to the Patriot League title and first-ever NCAA appearance in her rookie season as a head coach. She had been a former assistant at DePaul.

Pittsburgh is coached by Jamie Dixon, who is Maggie's brother.

Meanwhile, the NCAA and top print writers who cover women's basketball will meet at NCAA headquarters in Indianapolis, Nov. 1-2, to discuss growing the sport and also resolving some of the controversies that occur when the bracket is announced.

In the WNBA, even when the quiet season arrives, it's never totally still. Chicago has yet to name a coach, Minnesota may announce one soon, and now Sacramento needs one after John Whisenant decided to just retain his general manager position.

## WNBA OFF-SEASON MOVES

The Houston Comets, one of the WNBA's original eight teams is up for sale, and, according to the Los Angeles Times, the Sparks might be likewise. Sacramento and Seattle continue to have arena issues.

Phoenix's remarkable closing win streak that left the Mercury just short of a playoff berth, continued in other ways. Three years after owning the No. 1 pick and the ability to land UConn superstar Diana Taurasi, the Mercury gained the No. 1 pick in the lottery.

So that's it for now, we'll be back in several weeks after the collegiate action is well under way.

Exclusive to REAL SPORTS

By Mel Greenberg