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Your *Inside Scoop* (TM)

By Mel Greenberg

BEYOND 1-2, TALENT IS DEEP IN THE NCAA's

And so now that the WNBA season has been sort of tucked away, it's time for the collegiate season to take center stage.

In previous years, the opening polls showing Tennessee-Connecticut 1-2 or vice versa in the same position would indicate that not much is changing on the national landscape.

But that would be a misrepresentation this time.

Instead of speculation over the potential outcome when the two would make their annual seasonal confrontation, the talk this time continues to focus on why they are not.

Tennessee coach Pat Summitt, for reasons not publicly specified, decided last June to cancel the longstanding regular season rivalry.

Of course, the two could cross paths near or at the finish line of the NCAA tournament, a meeting that would only rocket the pre-game hype to new levels.

But the two national powers are not the only teams capable of winning a national title and as the major powers bump into each other through conference and non-conference battles, it will become apparent that Tennessee-UConn is no longer the only game in town.

Rutgers, and old kid on the block that has a new look, is one team capable of proving such after the Cinderella run to the NCAA title game. Outside the Big East, coach C. Vivian Stringer's talented squad will be tangling with Tennessee, Maryland, Stanford, to name a few, while inside there will be the sizzling wars with Connecticut plus six other Big East squads that earned rankings in the Associated Press pre-season poll.

Maryland has four starters back to try to regain the Terrapins' lost paradise of a year ago when everyone expected them to defend their NCAA title of 2006.

Special attention will also be on Maryland coach Brenda Frese, who is expecting twin about a month before March Madness arrives.

While women's collegiate fans can't wait for the season to begin, WNBA league and team-level executives eagerly await its close.

The reason is a super talented senior class that will offer one of the more lucrative and deep drafts of recent selections.

And other than the "why aren't they playing?" talk about the Lady Vols and Huskies, there will be the anticipation of whether Tennessee junior Candace Parker decides to leave Knoxville to join the big girls before her eligibility expires.

Parker is allowed to make that move, as Detroit's Deanna Nolan did several years ago, because Parker would normally be a senior had not she been sidelined her freshman season with injuries.

Other big names that will draw WNBA scouts are LSU's Sylvia Fowles, Stanford's Candice Wiggins, Rutgers' Essence Carson and Matee Ajavon, Maryland Crystal Langhorne and Laura Harper, and North Carolina's Erlana Larkins, to name a few.

In a sense, Parker has already become a semi-pro after playing with the U.S. National Team last summer in its successful bid to land an Olympic berth.

No matter what her career decision is made before spring, Parker will surely become part of the U.S. group heading to Beijing. Another collegian with that potential is Oklahoma's Courtney Paris, who is a junior.

Besides the action on the court, the sidelines will be a place to observe because of two specific reasons.

One will be whether to see if coaches are behaving themselves in accordance with the new emphasis to keep them within their coaching areas or risk technical fouls.

But the other reason is to get adjusted to a slew of familiar faces in new places.

MUSICAL CHAIRS

There were 49 changes at Division I schools since last season closed and many shuffles involved a large number of acclaimed programs and mentors.

Van Chancellor, who led the Houston Comets to the first four WNBA titles, has returned to the collegiate ranks and the Southeastern Conference where he replaced Pokey Chatman at LSU, a school that was once a rival opponent when he was at Mississippi.

Former Notre Dame associate head coach Coquese Washington is launching a new era at Penn State, where former coach Rene Portland made a controversial exit after 27 seasons guiding the Lady Lions.

Portland's former Immaculata teammate Theresa Greutz decided it was time to leave the profession from Illinois and she is now back at her alma mater involved in assisting the university president and fundraising.

Having had several NCAA heartbreaks at Duke, Gail Goestenkors is now ready to take Texas to a new era with a \$1million contract after Hall of Fame veteran Jody Conradt retired.

Goestenkors was succeeded in Durham by Joanne P. McCallie, who took Michigan State to the NCAA title game several years ago.

Former Penn State star Suzie McConnell-Serio, who coached the Minnesota Lynx in the WNBA and also was an all-star, is back home in her native Pittsburgh starting out at the collegiate level at Duquesne.

And if coaches didn't leave, they will be under pressure to continue their success after their current schools offered fat increases to make sure they didn't get involved in the musical chairs.

Kim Mulkey was rewarded at Baylor, after her name was speculated for the Duke job, while Temple's Dawn Staley was kept in place after her name was mentioned at a bunch of schools.

Hartford did likewise for Jen Rizzotti, the former UConn star who is part of the younger generation of mentors along with Staley and Washington.

While the goal is to get to Tampa, Fla., and the Final Four, surviving injuries and tough competition between now and then may make the NCAA tournament seem anti-climatic.

WNBA STAYS IN THE NEWS

Despite exciting playoffs that resulted in the Phoenix Mercury earning its first WNBA title, the pro league will not be away from the headlines until next spring.

The stars, themselves, who are not overseas, are currently playing an exhibition tour with the U.S. senior national team to prepare for the Olympics.

The biggest news of the tour is the return of the Los Angeles Sparks' Lisa Leslie, who missed the WNBA season after giving birth to her first child, a daughter, in June.

Phoenix is still seeking a new coach to replace Paul Westhead, who brought blazing speed to the desert for two seasons before returning to the WNBA as an assistant coach in Seattle.

Of course, he may not be in Seattle for long, since team ownership is threatening to move to Oklahoma City over arena issues.

That same dispute is impacting the WNBA Seattle Storm, which is coached by Anne Donovan, also the Olympic coach, and features Australia's Lauren Jackson and former Connecticut star Sue Bird.

Ownership noted some offers are being made to keep the Storm in Seattle no matter what happens to the NBA's Sonics.

Phoenix assistant Corey Gaines is considered the frontrunner to replace Westhead, but former Auburn coach Joe Ciampi is a candidate and former Indiana Fever coach Brian Winters has been interviewed.

Winters was involved in a surprise decision to not be retained in Indianapolis, despite leading the Fever to the Eastern Conference finals.

Former WNBA coach Lin Dunn is an assistant and is one name to date mentioned as a potential successor.

Since we signed off a month ago, the WNBA has grown back to 14 with the addition of a new team in Atlanta. Nickname and office personnel have yet to be determined.

And at some point, the ongoing talks involving the WNBA and players' collective bargaining agreement will make their way forward. Depending on who's talking behind the scenes at a given moment, the two sides are either close or way far apart.

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