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Your *Inside Scoop* (TM)

IRON FENCE ENCIRCLES ELITE TEAMS

An iron fence is quickly going up in terms of a bloc of front-running contenders for the NCAA Women's Final Four in Cleveland. Furthermore, the number of challengers with potential to break through and replace them is not all that large.

As of now, especially after [North Carolina's](#) win over [Tennessee](#), these two schools, as well as defending NCAA champion [Maryland](#) and [Oklahoma](#) are the best bets with [Duke](#) right behind.

The teams most capable, and we're talking long-range, as the biggest threats to that field are [Connecticut](#), [Georgia](#), when the Bulldogs' roster is in tact again; [LSU](#), and, possibly if all the talent comes together at the end, [Rutgers](#).

Everyone else is going to have to really prove their worth to be considered among the group we just mentioned.

For example, [Stanford](#) started the season thought of as one those teams. But a shocking home loss to [Brigham Young](#) along with setbacks at [Tennessee](#) and [Georgia](#) has lowered the Cardinal's profile.

Yes, the road losses to quality opponents might deserve a pass. But if you're labeled "elite" going into the season, you have to find a way to win one of those games.

The PAC-10 is already taking hits in phone conversations among the media for the number of losses after six, count them, six conference schools were in the preseason AP poll.

[Arizona State](#) is given a bit of an exception at the moment. Another is [California](#), which is considered a team in development aspiring to new levels. But as for the rest of the group - the heads are shaking in disappointment once again.

When it comes to new faces, suddenly the Colonial Athletic Association is drawing attention because of the recent success of [Delaware](#) and [Hofstra](#) knocking off nationally-ranked [Kentucky](#) and [Michigan State](#) on the road.

The CAA is usually known at NCAA tournament-talk time as a one-team conference because of the domination of **Old Dominion**. But the Monarchs are struggling and not even drawing votes in the rankings.

The way things look in the polls, beyond the powers we spoke of at the top of this monthly conversation, point to a lot of shuffling in and out of the rankings in the lower portions.

We're not ready to exclaim parity yet because until the lower teams beat the top teams, regularly, there are two different levels. Granted, the lower portion deep into the group of also rans has more quality but those schools in the group don't seem to have the same kind of solid strength teams at that level had in the past.

So the door is open to more upsets because of injuries, less time than in the past for young teams to get ready for the season, and those nights when favorites show up believing they just can mail in their results.

We are probably going to have to wait until conference action begins in earnest after the New Year arrives to see who the contenders are for overall NCAA berths.

The ACC will be a mini-NCAA tournament with **Maryland**, **North Carolina**, and **Duke** battling each other. **Oklahoma** will be watched to see if the Sooners can again dominate the Big 12. Connecticut is starting to loom as the Big East favorite it is in terms of the conference coaches' preseason selections. The suspense will be over who claims the spots immediately behind the Huskies since some traditional powers such as **Villanova** and **Notre Dame** are re-tooling.

Ohio State and **Purdue** seem to loom as the major showdown clash in the Big Ten, but the test will be can either team win a significant game late in the season outside their conference.

In the SEC, **Tennessee**, **Georgia**, and **LSU** are the headliners, and then it will be interesting to see who can be that next team – contenders range from **Vanderbilt**, maybe **Arkansas**, and **Kentucky**.

In the world of the WNBA it is a little quiet right now, but look for the hot stove conversation to begin once the pursuit of free agents gets under way.

HALL OF FAME TAKES A TEAM

Meanwhile, as noted in this internet publication by our good friend Michelle Smith, around Thanksgiving, we find ourselves being part of the news as well as writing the news this season in terms of becoming one of six inductees in the next class that will enter the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in Knoxville in June.

Plenty will be said later as the time draws near. But for now, as much credit as is being thrown in our direction, none of it would be possible without existing writing entities, such as Real Sports, as a place to offer the news of the day.

Over the years, the association with athletic department sports information directors has been vital. Behind the scenes are editors and copy editors who either pony up the bucks to go on the road or clean up our copy to show ourselves in the best light.

And, finally, without the development of terrific talent over the years and the increase in coaches taking programs to new levels, we'd have nothing to write about.

So thanks to all in that regard and join our group – Andrea Lloyd Curry, Bridgette Gordon, Daedra Charles-Furlow, Pam (Kelly) Flowers, Andy Landers, and Yours Truly in June for what will be quite a party. Trust me on that one.

Exclusive to REAL SPORTS
By Mel Greenberg