

Inside Scoop™

by Mel Greenberg

Wolverines in Cinderella Clothing – Women's Hoops

The onset of April in women's basketball is a transitional time because the NCAA Women's Final Four that will be played Sunday and Tuesday in New Orleans will mark the end of one of the most competitive seasons ever.

But it is also a month of new beginnings because as quickly as a champion will be crowned, attention will then turn to April 17, the day of the WNBA draft and the date we'll learn which teams will be the recipients of one of the most talented senior classes to play the game.

First things, first, however, and that means looking at the field and the so-called Wolverines in Cinderella clothing who are known by their school names of Minnesota and LSU.

Tennessee and Connecticut are back again. That may not be new but the Volunteers, with a little help from the sports' No. 1 problem, had two daredevil escapes in the Midwest regional against Baylor and Stanford.

You could say Tennessee played its Tasha Butts off with the 5-11 senior guard making two foul shots in the final eyelash of a second to give the

Vols a comeback win over Baylor in the semifinals.

Just how Butts got to the foul line is another story with a referee making a call on a scramble for a loose ball in a situation that begged for him to swallow his whistle and let the players decide the game in overtime.

A firestorm of criticism erupted across the country not helped by the NCAA's refusal to allow the official to be interviewed by a pool reporter from the news media. The aftermath will continue to flow this weekend, especially later in the tournament when the issue is certain to be brought up in the annual media session with the NCAA tournament committee chairperson.

In both collegiate and pro circles, officiating is the item one hears most discussed in need of major improvement in women's basketball, except upgrading is not as easy as it might seem.

Meanwhile, two days later Butts came back and broke Stanford's heart with a shot with 1.7 seconds and Tennessee was on its way to another Final Four.

The match up with LSU in the semifinals reunites two rivals in the

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rugged Southeastern Conference. Tennessee has been struggling since point guard Loree Moore suffered a knee injury in the Duke game in January and was lost to the season.

But coach Pat Summitt's group has found ways to win close games, but not as inventive as what Butts did at Oklahoma City. Ashley Robinson and Shrya Ely are two other key players to watch in the Orange and White uniforms.

Connecticut is making a nostalgic trip in its unprecedented fifth straight trip to the Finals as the Huskies try to match Tennessee's NCAA record by winning a third-straight national title.

There were thoughts coach Geno Auriemma's squad was in trouble following a late season loss at Villanova and a loss to Boston College in Connecticut's second home - the Hartford Civic Center - in the Big East tournament semifinals.

The Huskies had also yielded a huge lead against Duke in Hartford in January.

Overall, the comforts of home are still the comforts of home and Connecticut didn't have to leave the state with a sub regional in Bridgeport and the East finals in Hartford.

Senior Diana Taurasi, likely the name to be uttered on April 17 as the overall first

choice of the WNBA Phoenix Mercury, and sophomore Barbara Turner were the offensive guns, especially in the East final against Penn State that ended the collegiate career of Kelly Mazzante with the Nittany Lions.

Junior center Jessica Moore was huge in helping Connecticut contend with UC Santa Barbara's size in a physically grueling win in the East semifinals.

Connecticut's trip is nostalgic because the Huskies made the first of their eight Final Four trips in 1991 where they lost the semifinals to Virginia.

However, the Dawn Staley-led Cavaliers then lost in overtime in the title game to Tennessee.

So much for the oldies.

As for the debutantes, yeah, well, great storylines, great efforts, but major surprises - not really when you go turn the page back earlier in the season.

Minnesota was rocking with a 15-0 win streak to get started, a run that caused former Golden Gophers coach Brenda Freese, now in her second season at Maryland, "if Minnesota was ever going to get to a Final Four, this is their year."

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Freese spent the 2001-02 season in Minnesota in turning the program dramatically around to a winner before Maryland came with a tantalizing offer to join up with the Terrapins.

The inside-outside attack of senior guard Lindsay Whalen and 6-2 center Janel McCarville, who plays even bigger than her size, have made the Golden Gophers a force.

But in mid-February, Whalen broke two bones in her right hand and missed seven games. Minnesota took an immediate dive, hence the No. 7 seed.

However, Whalen made a great recovery and returned for the start of the tournament where she torched opponents including Duke, the No. 1 Mideast seed, and the top team in the final AP poll.

The fact that Minnesota was a different team without Whalen than with her only helps to make her value higher when the WNBA teams begin making their picks.

LSU, only an hour away up the road from New Orleans at Baton Rouge, becomes a sentimental favorite and also because the Tigers have been without coach Sue Gunter, who is on a medical

leave taken in early February because of an acute bronchitis condition.

Her assistant Pokey Chapman has guided the Tigers in her absence.

Still, LSU isn't really coming out of nowhere. Many thought the Tigers might make the finals a year ago. The players to watch, who also made the team a preseason favorite to thrill the locals, are sophomore Seimone Augustus and senior Tameka Johnson.

The key against Tennessee will be to produce a better rebounding effort than when the two met earlier in SEC competition.

Connecticut has the experience over Minnesota, but the Gophers are showing no fear so this could be an interesting game if the Huskies' defense has no answer for McCarville.

Déjà vu.

Penn State's Rene Portland will receive her second coach of the year award from the Women's Basketball Coaches Association. Her first occurred in 1991, ironically, in New Orleans.

On Saturday, the Kodak all-American team will be announced, along with the

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AP coach and player of the year. The first female Wooden Award winner – top female college basketball player – will be announced, April 10.

History lesson.

This is not LSU's first national semifinals appearance, even though it is the Tigers' NCAA finals debut. In 1977, the team knocked powerful Immaculata out of the semifinals of the AIAW tournament in Minneapolis and then lost to Delta State in the title game.

One of LSU's stars was a center from Australia named Maree Jackson. Years later, her daughter Lauren Jackson has become a sensation with the Seattle Storm in the WNBA and last season was the league's Most Valuable Player.

Consolation four.

Here's one person's view of the four programs who should have won titles by now but haven't. The quartet is Georgia, Auburn, Virginia, and, after this week, our newest entry - Duke.

The top five.

What a year it's been for talent, especially in the senior class. Picking a top five is not easy because, technically,

there are a slew of players who are close to the elite of the elite.

Without regard to ranking, here goes: Connecticut senior Diana Taurasi - Her stats may not have reflected her ability this year, but if this was baseball, how many times does she drive runners home with the game on the line. Some are already calling her the WNBA's LeBron James in terms of stature if not similar circumstance.

Minnesota senior Lindsay Whalen - As previously noted, look at the Gophers with her and without her - enough said.

Duke senior Alana Beard - Her personality may not consist of the same flair as another well-known senior, but her game does a lot of talking. It's not totally her fault that her supporting cast has failed to show several times in big-time situations.

Stanford senior Nicole Powell - There were times this season where she made one scratch one's head over the way the Cardinal and she fit together. But in the Vanderbilt game with the seconds ticking in the Midwest semifinal, she showed coolness under fire in kicking that pass to Kelly Suminski, who hit the mark and



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kept Stanford alive into the Tennessee game.

Houston center Chandi Jones - The senior guard-forward was a scoring machine and carried the Cougars to new heights.

The others.

Penn State's Kelly Mazzante, the Nittany Lion scoring machine should be saluted for a great career even though we don't know how she'll adjust to the WNBA after the physical pounding she got from UConn.

Florida's Vanessa Hayden. She's right there with the elite and a name we should hear throughout the summer in the pros.

Kansas State's Nichole Ohlde. Hurt by the Wildcats' annual collapses. But her pro career should be intriguing.

LSU's Seimone Augustus - An immediate star next season in the post Taurasi-Beard era.

[RS]

2004 NCAA Women's Basketball Championship

Sunday, April 4, 2004, ESPN
Tennessee vs. LSU
6:00 p.m. CST

Connecticut vs. Minnesota
8:00 p.m. CST

Tuesday, April 6, 2004, ESPN
Winners meet at 7:30 p.m. CST



Authority in Women's Sports™ by Brian Straus

FREEDOM STILL STANDS – Women's Soccer

Spring's arrival has seemed to have little impact on the dwindling hopes of a Women's United Soccer Association rebirth. The February deadline for potential sponsors to submit a letter of intent passed quietly, plans for a third summer festival seem to have been abandoned (according to a source with a potential venue) and the individual spearheading the league's reorganization effort - former Boston Breakers President and General Manager Joe Cummings - has left his post and taken a front office job with Major League Soccer's New England Revolution.

Daunting news to some, but not Washington Freedom Head Coach Jim Gabarra. Note there is no 'former' attached to his title. Gabarra still is hard at work trying to organize exhibitions for his league champions, running voluntary practices and directing the team's ambitious youth programs. He still comes into the office and works only for a small portion of the money generated by the Freedom's youth camps and teams. Gabarra said he is unwilling to throw in the towel, leaving the Freedom the last WUSA team standing.

"You just don't just want to give up on it," he said. You believe in [WUSA Founder John Hendricks] and that something will get restarted. Either way, you can't just waste three years of good hard work. You go forward."

The focal point of Gabarra's effort to maintain the Freedom's pulse is a series of exhibition games he hopes will augment his former players' effort to stay involved in high level soccer during 2004. Only a small percentage can count on the U.S. national team for training and a paycheck. The rest are filtering into the United Soccer League's W-League and the WPSL, two semipro circuits that play a summer schedule.

The Freedom kicked off its 2004 campaign on March 26 with a 6-0 triumph over the University of Louisville before 1,641 fans. The Freedom fielded a selection of players who remained in the Washington area, including Founders Cup MVP and Women's World Cup stalwart Abby Wambach, and guest players like Heather Mitts and Christie Rampone (formerly Pearce). The team conducted a clinic in Cincinnati



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on Saturday before playing the University of Cincinnati (another 6-0 Freedom victory) and Xavier University (3-0 to the Freedom) as part of an abbreviated round-robin tournament the following day.

Gabarra said that a portion of the money generated from ticket sales and camp fees would be paid to the Freedom players who participated, allowing them to continue - at least for a weekend - to play professional soccer.

Gabarra will lead the Freedom against the University of Maryland on April 4 as part of the annual Kicks Against Breast Cancer tournament in Germantown, Maryland then into an April 10 match against the NCAA champion North Carolina Tarheels in Virginia Beach, Virginia. During the summer Gabarra and assistant coach Clyde Watson will run the Freedom's camps and youth teams. Gabarra said he also intends to field a Freedom "reserve team" of WUSA players, college players and select high school graduates against a variety of W-League and WPSL sides.

"The motivation was to offer our team and our players who don't have a national team commitment the chance to still put on the Freedom uniform and be a pro player and get a little appearance fee and get a game in," Gabarra said. "If they want to continue playing in the W-League or WPSL that's a 10 to 20 game season. I figure I could offer them another four or five before that season, a couple after, and then you have something close to a real professional season."

If Hendricks' somehow manages to secure the sponsors needed to bring back the WUSA in 2005, Gabarra's Freedom will have had quite a head start.

[RS]

EVENT DETAILS:

June 17-20 National Sports Center, Blaine, Minn.

June 24-27 The Home Depot Center, Carson, Calif.

Olympic Preview – Athens Greece by Brian Straus

Great Expectations - Triathlon

(Third of a seven-part series)

The United States was unable to claim a medal in the inaugural Olympic triathlon in Sydney, but hopes are much higher heading into this summer's Games in Athens. As May's ITU World Championship in Portugal approaches, the United States boasts the planet's top-three female triathletes.

The first official triathlon was held in California 30 years ago, but the inspiration for the sport goes all the way back to Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games who said in 1875, "we need a sport that combines swimming, cycling and running, which are all so popular...."

The rise in triathlon participation and the commercial success of events like the Ironman led to the sport's inclusion in the Olympic program at a distance that, according to the International Olympic Committee's website "correspond to the longest distances adopted by the respective International Federations (FINA, UCI, IAAF), regarding the disciplines carried out in a stadium." Thus the Olympic triathlon consists of a

1,500 meter swim, a 40 kilometer bike ride and a 10 kilometer run.

Baltimore's Joanna Zeiger finished fourth over that distance in Sydney, missing out on a medal by 17 seconds. Since then American women have surged to the top of the ITU world ranking.

Idaho's Barb Lindquist tops the list, followed by Laura Reback (North Palm Beach, Fla.) and Sheila Taormina of Livonia, Mich. The latter has been especially busy in the past month, vaulting into the top three thanks to a second place finish (2 hours, 17 minutes, 21 seconds) at the Bay Islands International Triathlon on March 6 and a gold medal performance (1:57:51) at the ITU Pan American Championships in Acapulco on March 27.

A University of Georgia business school graduate and former Waffle House waitress, Taormina, 35, won a gold medal at the 1996 Olympics as part of the U.S. 800-meter freestyle relay



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team, then turned to triathlon in 1999. She finished sixth in Sydney.

Lindquist, 34, is a Stanford graduate and another former swimmer who finished fourth at last year's world championship and famously won the richest purse in the sport's history last August, when she took home \$250,000 from the Life Time Fitness Triathlon in Minneapolis. Reback, 28, placed second at last year's world championship.

The trio is not guaranteed the United States' three berths in the Olympic triathlon. Qualification is an involved process that will include the results of three upcoming races, including May's world championship. The top American finisher in each of the first two will qualify, while the third spot will be filled by a formula including past results following the third race in Washington State in June. [RS]

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