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Inside Scoop™

by Mel Greenberg

NCAA COLLEGE HOOPS – WIDE OPEN

And so as the last month of the year arrives and the collegiate women's basketball season churns up to full speed, the phrase "wide open" might have some legitimacy this time around.

That's "wide open" as in the chase for participation in the NCAA Women's Final Four in Indianapolis as well as a claim on the national championship itself.

That's "wide open" as in the competition for becoming the nation's top player.

That's "wide open" as in what fun it is going to be when the battles begin next month for supremacy in many conferences, including the so-called elite leagues.

However, understand that the phrase "wide open" does not equate with the arrival of parity per se.

Unheralded programs in the middle of the 300 or so Division I schools still face long odds in becoming Cinderellas in March.

What has loosened, however, is the previously strong grip by a limited number of schools such as three-time defending NCAA champion Connecticut, it's arch-rival Tennessee, Duke and a few others on action at the top of the pile.

Graduation of last year's seniors is one factor in the breakup of the monopoly.

Eventually, the playing eligibility of Diana Taurasi, Alana Beard, Lindsay Whalen, Nicole Powell, Kelly Mazzante and several others had to expire.

As those players moved on to make the WNBA's eighth year the most exciting in its history, others are stepping out into daylight after being in the shadow of the previous senior class.

It's not that many of today's headliners had gone unnoticed. Certainly, the WNBA crowd has been aware of them as they look down the road to strengthen their teams through the draft.

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It's just that the last senior class was so plentiful that only so much time in terms of national media focus could be given to the underclasswoman.

So, now we talk more of LSU's speedy guard Seimone Augustus, Minnesota center Janel McCarville, Penn State guard Tanisha Wright, Notre Dame center Jacqueline Batteast, Rutgers guard Cappie Pondexter, assuming she'll return from an absence for undisclosed reasons in time for the Big East battles, Connecticut's Ann Strother and Jessica Moore, North Carolina's Ivory Latta, Kansas State's Kendra Wecker, TCU's Sandora Irvin, Tennessee's Shyra Ely, Texas' Heather Schreiber, Stanford's Brooke Smith – a Duke transfer – and the list goes on.

But wait, newcomers are also making impacts. Maryland is already getting strong play from freshmen Laura Harper and Crystal Langhorne. Other freshman making quick impressions are LSU's Sylvia Fowles and Rutgers' Matee Ajavon, among others.

As for the team contenders, the signs of an even more competitive season have become quickly apparent.

LSU took over first place in the Associated Press poll on Monday for the first time since 1978.

Want to know how long ago that was. An Australian sophomore center was on that team by the name of Maree Jackson.

You might have heard of her daughter – Lauren Jackson – who happens to have already claimed one MVP season honor in the WNBA and is a mainstay of the champion Seattle Storm. Texas showed that the Longhorns can also handle Tennessee. They didn't go to No. 1 because of losses to Georgia and, really, UCLA.

Georgia was victimized by TCU in Hawaii. As for Connecticut in the year A.D. – as in After Diana – the Huskies took an early loss to North Carolina. It was so early, in fact, that it was the first time in a decade Connecticut suffered a setback in November.

Not only did Tennessee lose to Texas, but on Sunday the Vols nearly lost to Dawn Staley's defending Atlantic Ten champion Temple Squad, 52-48, in Knoxville.

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By the end of the month, there may be some clarity as to who the frontrunners will be, but that sign may only be temporary once the conference wars begins.

THE PROS

The arrival of December means that the WNBA draft lottery winners were set to be revealed.

The event, to be announced at halftime of the NBA 76ers-San Antonio contest, is probably the last national ceremonial function of WNBA president Val Ackerman, who announced her resignation in late October and will be departing in February.

The attention over the announcement, except among the teams involved, is somewhat less than a year ago in terms of media attention.

An unlikely newcomer will be among the hopefuls in the Houston Comets, who missed the playoffs for the first time in their eight years after capturing the first four WNBA titles.

The San Antonio Silver Stars, which finished with the worst record, is considered with the best odds among the five teams. Indianapolis is also in the hunt, as is the Charlotte Sting, and Phoenix Mercury.

While the prizes may not be tantamount to last year when Phoenix won the right to pick Taurasi, enough talent remains at this year's collegiate senior level, many mentioned above, to allow the five teams much bargaining power in determining whether to hold the pick or make a trade as Seattle did last year with Minnesota as an early step in the Storm's run to the championship.

At the presidential level, names have yet to surface as frontrunners to succeed Ackerman.

Meanwhile, coaches still have to be named in San Antonio, Los Angeles, and New York, although in terms of the Liberty, Patty Coyle, who became the interim head coach at mid-summer, is likely to be given the full title.

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