

Michigan State beats Florida for NCAA title

by Andrew Bagnato
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INDIANAPOLIS — Mateen Cleaves had come too far, worked too hard and promised too much.

An ankle injury was not going to keep him out of the biggest game of his life. No chance. Cleaves hobbled off the floor midway through the second half of Monday night's NCAA final, then limped back and helped lead Michigan State to an 89-76 rout of Florida in front of 43,116 in the RCA Dome.

The triumph gave Michigan State its first national title since 1979 and the Big Ten's first since 1989, when Michigan did it.

Michigan State was led by its three star seniors: Morris Peterson led the way with 21 points, A.J. Granger added 19 and Cleaves had 18 points. Cleaves was named Most Valuable Player of the Final Four, just as his friend Magic Johnson had been 20 years ago in Salt Lake City.

It was the perfect ending for Cleaves, who last month vowed to bring home the trophy.

"Michigan State answered the promises," coach Tom Izzo told the spectators in the RCA Dome.

"I'm not saying we're the greatest basketball team, but we've got some of the toughest kids."

This was what Cleaves envisioned when he returned for his senior year, delaying a shot to play in the NBA.

"When I talked to Magic Johnson, he said it would be a good idea to come back because of the experiences you gain in college," Cleaves said.

Magic knew what he was talking about. In the first half, Cleaves supplied superb leadership, guiding the Spartans through the maze of Gator defenders. The Gators had pressed Duke and North Carolina into submission. But junk defenses don't rattle Cleaves.

Michigan State's mastery was never more clearly demonstrated than in the third minute of the game, when Cleaves twice broke away for fast-

break layups. On the first, Cleaves appeared to run a post pattern, gathering in a long pass from Charlie Bell for an easy bucket.

But for one scary stretch of the second half, it looked as if Cleaves would experience heartbreak and perhaps a broken ankle. Michigan State was in the same predicament as it started the season, with Cleaves sidelined with an injury.

Flying toward the basket on a fast break, Cleaves tangled with Florida guard Teddy Dupay and twisted his ankle as he landed. Cleaves writhed on the floor in agony.

Michigan State led 50-44 with 16 minutes 18 seconds remaining when Cleaves limped to the dressing room. In the RCA Dome grandstand, friends consoled Cleaves' mother, Frances. Down on the floor, the Spartans drew themselves together and displayed their trademark grit.

First Mike Chappell stepped out and knocked down a three-point shot from the top of the key to make it 53-44. Then the Spartans swarmed Florida's Mike Miller and ripped the ball out of his hands. When Chappell tipped in Jason Richardson's missed layup, Michigan State had matched its biggest lead, 55-44.

The Spartans were doing exactly what they did when Cleaves fractured his foot before the season: surviving. Their defense smothered the Gators and kept them off the board for the nearly four minutes.

When the big-screen television high above the floor showed Cleaves limping out of the dressing room, a buzz swept through the RCA Dome crowd. As the television cameras followed Cleaves down a long hallway, a roar began to swell. By the time Cleaves limped onto the bench, the building erupted. It was as if Spartan alum Kirk Gibson, who was supposed to attend this game, were staggering up to the plate to face Dennis Eckersley with a World Series game in the balance.

Some teams might have buckled at the sight of their emotional leader being led off the floor. But Izzo has instilled an unusual toughness in the



Michigan State coach Tom Izzo, along with his team, hoists the NCAA men's basketball championship trophy after the Spartans beat Florida 89-76, Monday, at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis, Ind.

Spartans. They don't look for excuses. Problems become opportunities. Cleaves, who has the ugliest jump shot of any star in Division I, has personified this attitude for four seasons.

"He wears his heart on his sleeve," Bell said before the game. "He motivates us like coach Izzo, but in a different way. He plays with passion and gives it his all."

With a bulky black brace on his ankle, Cleaves checked back into the game with 11:51 to play. He had missed 4 minutes and the Spartans had expanded their lead to nine points from six.

Cleaves' return ignited the Spartans, who closed the game on another rush. They had buried Syracuse 17-0 at the end of a game and ran Iowa State off the floor with a 20-3 burst.

In a little less than seven minutes, Michigan State's lead ballooned from 58-50 to 82-62 as Cleaves staggered around the court. Let's face it: they would have had to amputate to keep Cleaves out.

As he prepared for his last collegiate game, Cleaves said: "I know that after this game, I have to hang up the Michigan State jersey. But I'd rather hang it up with a national championship than without one. I want this last game to be as special as possible. We've had a great time this year."

When the buzzer sounded, Cleaves met Peterson at center court. As Peterson hoisted his friend, Cleaves didn't need to walk any more. Neither did Michigan State. It had taken the final step.

NFL panel urges better policing of players

by Mike Bruton
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PALM BEACH, Fla. — The NFL meetings drew to a close on Wednesday with the league's owners, executives and coaches vowing to focus more attention on curbing off-the-field violence by players.

In a discussion that was described as very candid, the NFL's leadership grappled with this thorny problem that was inflamed this season when two active players were charged with murder.

The homicide charges against Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis and Carolina Panthers wide receiver Rae Carruth sparked unprecedented criticism of a so-called criminal element in the NFL and the flames were fanned by incidents of burglary, domestic violence, players being named in alcohol- and drug-related situations and a bar fight.

Though no resolution was passed to alter the league's current anti-crime programs, NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue said that along with continuing conversations with the NFL players union, a concerted effort to find league-wide solutions would continue.

The anti-crime issue, said Tagliabue, will be addressed again at the league meetings on May 23-24 in Baltimore.

In the meantime, the focus is being put on individual teams to police their own players using a combination of preventive measures, education and discipline.

"It's the obligation of every club," said Seattle Seahawks coach Mike Holmgren, who sat on a six-man panel that led the anti-crime discussion in the coaches/owners session. "A certain amount of support staff has always been a priority with me. There are too many sad stories. We've got to do something about it."

There were talks of better screening of college players who are likely to be drafted and possibly even instituting a probation period for those who are considered at-risk players because of criminal or violent incidents in their past.

Strengthening of positive peer pressure in the form of support groups composed primarily of veteran players was roundly endorsed and the enforcement of disciplinary action when players violate rules was something that was supported by the players union and the league.

One of the more sticky issues involved cultural considerations, such as the need to keep players away from people and venues that increase their chances of being involved in a violent

or criminal act.

In both the Carruth and Lewis cases there were other people who allegedly contributed to the problem.

"Most of our players are African American," said league executive Harold Henderson. "Many of our players come from single-parent families, they come from deprived backgrounds. They come from communities where standards of conduct are different from standards we hold in the NFL."

Suddenly these young men have enormous amounts of money, Henderson explained, and others from the same impoverished neighborhoods, friends and relatives, compete with several other forces that try to get the players attention.

The league cannot dictate whom the players can spend their time with yet.

"There are limitations morally, ethically and legally," said Ravens coach Brian Billick, "as to what a coach can do and dictate to a player."

Henderson added: "Even if you had the power, I don't think it would work. The break away from their communities is a difficult one for the players to handle."

This is the area where positive peer pressure should be applied, said Tampa Bay assistant coach Herman Edwards, one of the panelists.

"You have to educate players that it's really not their right to play in the National Football League," said Edwards, a former Eagles defensive back. "It's a privilege and with that comes the hard, cold fact that you're looked upon as a leader whether you like it or not."

Then there is the temptation to go easier on star players because if they are suspended it could cause the team to lose games.

Part of the discussion centered on the fact that too many players arrive on the NFL's doorstep predisposed to preferential treatment because they've been given it both in high school and college.

"I think there is probably a natural inclination to do that in whatever position of authority you're in," said anti-crime panelist Tony Dungy, who is Tampa Bay's head coach, "whether you're a coach, the police department, the district attorney or the president of the United States. You have to make a conscious decision to treat everybody the same."

Dungy also said it would probably be a good idea if the league specified which punishments would be administered for certain infractions.

"I like limitations and letting people know this is what you can expect," he added. "I personally would be for that league-wide."

UConn's Philadelphia story is NCAA title

by Ashley McGeachy
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PHILADELPHIA — His Philadelphia story is complete, with an ending no one, except maybe the coach himself, anticipated. In the end, he was right: Geno's is better. Geno's is the champ.

In what was billed as a historic national championship game between the top two teams and the top two programs in women's college basketball, Geno Auriemma's Connecticut Huskies overwhelmed the Tennessee Volunteers, delivering their slick-haired, street-smart coach his second national title. His first, in 1995, also came on April 2 and also was at Tennessee's expense. But even that win wasn't like this.

That win capped an undefeated season, but it was a close, hard-fought game. Last night's victory was a 71-52 rout played before 20,060 fans at the First Union Center.

When it was over, after the commemorative early editions of the New Haven Register proclaimed UConn "Champs!" and Shea Ralph was named the most outstanding player and the nets were cut down, Auriemma playfully suggested that he was too busy to wait around for a call from the President of the United States.

A White House aide tried to contact President Clinton, who was on Air Force One en route to California. When the aide told the coach he would have to wait a few minutes for the call, Auriemma replied, "I can run out and get a cheesesteak if we don't know what's going to happen. Call me back in 15 minutes, and we'll stay for that

long. And I don't mean to be rude, but then we have to have an answer."

Undoubtedly, he would have run to Geno's for a cheesesteak. On Saturday, he facetiously declared Geno's better than Pat's, but the proclamation proved true last night. With precision, unamated intensity and a pressing, trapping defense that completely befuddled the Volunteers, UConn embarrassed Pat Summitt's second-ranked team.

The record book proves it. Tennessee's 52 points were the third-lowest total in school history and third-lowest scoring performance in an NCAA title game. The Vols' 16 field goals tied for fewest in a championship game, their 26 turnovers were the most, and their 31.4 shooting percentage was the second-worst team performance of the season. After the first 13 minutes, when the Huskies built a 21-6 lead, the game was virtually decided.

Tennessee never seemed to recover from what happened yesterday morning. During a non-contact walk-through at the First Union Center, Kristen "Ace" Clement went for a casual, routine lay up and came down on teammate Michelle Snow's foot. Clement, a Broomall native, sprained her right ankle and was unable to play.

The Vols could have used her scrappy defense and veteran leadership. Freshman point guard Kara Lawson lost her poise early and never regained it, missing 11 of 13 shots to finish with six points. Connecticut hounded Tamika Catchings, who got off only six shots but scored 16 points. She was the only Volunteer to score in double figures.

Meanwhile, everything the Huskies

did was perfect. Their passes into the post were crisp. Their hands were quick, making 12 steals and blocking 11 shots, including nine by Kelly Schumacher. They shot a solid 44.1 percent from the field in the first half and a spectacular 59.3 percent in the second half to protect the lead they had from the very beginning.

Ralph was outstanding, making 7 of 8 shots to score 15 points. She also had 7 assists, 6 steals, 1 block and just 1 turnover. Svetlana Abrosimova added 14 points and Asjha Jackson had 12 points off the bench. Both joined Ralph on the all-tournament team, which included Connecticut guard Sue Bird and Catchings.

"This was a great team tonight," Tennessee coach Pat Summitt said. "There's no question about it, they were awesome. ... 1/8But 3/8 we are not going away. I am not as old as Geno thinks I am, and I'm certainly not on my way out. We'll be back here, hopefully again, next year."

Unprecedented hype surrounded the game. It was billed as a landmark moment in women's athletics, comparable to the World Cup soccer frenzy of last summer. On Friday, Bird faked pulling her shirt over her head a la Brandi Chastain, but Bird knew the images of last night would be indelibly etched on the national sports landscape.

It also was billed as a landmark moment in women's college basketball. It was No. 1 vs. No. 2, UConn vs. Tennessee. The Huskies had held the top ranking all 19 weeks of this season, the first team to go wire to wire at No. 1 since the Vols in 1997-98. Between the two schools, there were eight high school all-Americans in the starting

lineups, this year's Naismith player of the year, and four Kodak all-Americans, all of whom were named Thursday.

Moreover, the game was held in the town that for years has been synonymous with women's college basketball — Philadelphia, the town that gave the world Immaculata, Cathy Rush, Marianne Stanley, Theresa Grentz and Dawn Staley. If there was any doubt, Auriemma, a former Norristown resident, has solidified his spot in the Philadelphia hoops annals. In 15 seasons in Storrs, Conn., he has built a powerhouse program, his sideline soliloquies notwithstanding. His 393-95 record gives him the third-best winning percentage among active Division I coaches, and his five consecutive 30-plus winning seasons are a first in basketball history, men's or women's.

He is also king in Storrs again. The scoreboard reads: "Auriemma, two titles; Jim Calhoun, one."

"I don't want to share what I anticipated," Auriemma said, "because it will make me look as something other than the way I want to be perceived. I just anticipated a great game, I really did."

It capped a great weekend in Philadelphia. On Saturday night, Auriemma hosted a party for a couple of hundred of his closest friends at local restaurant Finnegan's Wake. Last night's plans were more intimate: a small celebration with his family and a few friends.

"I'll just kind of reflect back on all that's happened and try to make sense of some of it."

Then tomorrow, maybe a cheesesteak from Geno's.

NBC joins World Wrestling Federation for new football league

by Barry Jackson
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NBC announced Wednesday it will enter into a business partnership with the XFL, the World Wrestling Federation's new football league, and plans to televise 10 of the league's regular-season games in prime time on Saturday nights.

The NBC exposure is expected to bolster the success of the XFL, which will launch next February in Miami and seven other cities.

NBC will not pay a rights fee. Instead, the network and the WWF will be 50-50 partners and split revenue and costs.

WWF Chairman Vince McMahon said he expects the XFL to be profitable by the start of its third season. NBC will not televise any wrestling as part of the deal.

"The objective is to get young males to the television set," NBC sports chairman Dick Ebersol said. "Fans crave a much more wide-open brand of football than they are seeing today. There will be no committees voting to ban on-field celebrations. There will be cameras on the field, on the players, in the huddle, on the sidelines and in the locker-room."

"There are no fair catches, much faster play clocks, a 10-minute half-time, and it will clearly fit in a three-hour time period. The four teams that

win each week will receive a cash bonus. We can't in prime time just be doing traditional dramas and sitcoms."

NBC said XFL games should generate ratings similar to those produced by entertainment programming on Saturday nights, which is traditionally a weak night for TV viewing. NBC has not televised pro football since losing the NFL in 1998.

NBC also purchased 2.3 million shares (at \$13 a share) in the World Wrestling Federation's, a public company. WWF shares rose 6 cents Tuesday to \$17.38.

The XFL will schedule four games each weekend of its 10-week season. NBC will regionally televise two games each week.

The XFL will seek a cable partner to televise at least one of the two other games each week, which will be played on Sundays.

The inaugural season will start Feb. 3 and end with the April 21 championship on NBC. Miami's team will play at the Orange Bowl.

New York, Washington D.C., Orlando, San Francisco and Los Angeles also have been awarded teams. Two other cities will be named at a later date.

Rosters will be stocked mostly with ex-college players who are not in the National Football League. The XFL does not plan to bid for high-priced NFL players.