

NCAA College Basketball:

It's Madness, March Madness, Baby!!!

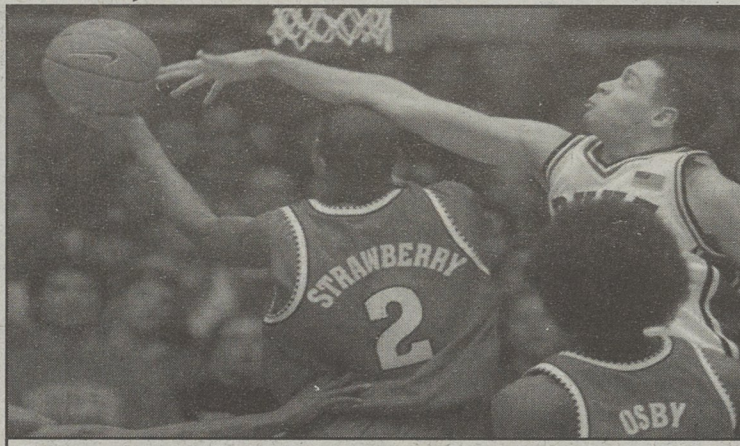
By Tony Arnold
Staff Writer

March Madness is a magical time for college basketball fans everywhere. Though we are all Penn Staters, most of us realize that basketball has never been our school's strong point and we either flock to a more prominent basketball powerhouse, or, if you're like me, simply enjoy watching college hoops for the drama and entertainment.

So it is with great anticipation that I lay out the four teams I think *deserve* be in the final four. Whether or not it will even be feasible is a crapshoot. Brackets are shifting every day so, realistically, two of these teams could meet up in the Elite Eight or even the Sweet 16. So, with that note, here goes nothing.

My first pick for the final four is what I thought would be my easiest: the Florida Gators. The reigning champs are riding a dominating season in both conference and non-conference play and have the added luxury of being the reigning national champs. However, as I write this Florida has been stunned by a ten-point loss to the Tennessee Volunteers in what amounts to the third loss in the last four games for the Gators. Now, to Florida's credit they were all road losses to conference rivals—Vanderbilt, LSU, and Tennessee, in that order—but they were also all double-digit losses. Is Florida slipping? I don't think so. I think the Gators just got caught in the unpredictable whirlwind that is the Southeastern Conference. I believe Florida rounds out the season with a decisive win at home against Kentucky, posts a good showing in the SEC tournament, and really turns on the jets in the big dance. They are my pick as a final four team and a probable championship contender.

My next pick? I'm taking the other national championship contender from the 2006 tournament and going with UCLA. Why? Because, as I write this, the Bruins have lost only three games,



With room for many Cinderella stories, one could possibly be that of Maryland, finishing off their season beating top ranked North Carolina and Duke.

all single-digit losses to quality teams from Oregon, Stanford, and West Virginia. Perhaps more impressive is their win column. The Bruins split the season series with both Oregon and Stanford, beat both Kentucky and Georgia Tech on the road, vanquished Big 12 powerhouse Texas A&M, and cleaned up most of its other Pac-10 rivals, sweeping season series against top-notch teams like USC and Arizona. Add to this the fresh memory of last year's national championship loss and you start to ask yourself: Why not?

Now I move on to a less obvious choice in Texas A&M. This team intrigues me because it is *quietly* moving up the ranks as a contender. The team has done well in what I honestly believe to be one of the country's toughest basketball divisions in the Big 12, with only two conference losses, both 2-point heartbreakers against an always scrappy Texas Tech team. Its other three losses consisted of a respectable bout against then 11th ranked LSU, a close 3-pointer to a UCLA team who was at that time tops in the country, and a double-overtime thriller to conference rival and perennial powerhouse Texas (whom they routed earlier in the season). The win column is impressive. The Aggies pounded a Winthrop team that has been otherwise very impressive, put up 18-point spreads over Oklahoma State and Texas, and beat the venerable Kansas Jayhawks on their homecourt. Overall, the Aggies have simply been consistent and really have no gaping holes that

need to be patched up. If this team can enter the dance with the same swagger they've shown all season, they will be tough to stop.

Now it's time for the dark horse. I know that now, if you haven't already, you've lost all confidence in my credibility. "Wait a minute!" you might be thinking. "Where's Ohio State in this final four?" The answer is, well, quite simply, not in the final four. Yes, I'm speaking of the same Ohio State Buckeyes who came out on top over Wisconsin at the end of the season to earn nationwide respect and sweep the polls almost unanimously as number one in the country. The truth is the Buckeyes just don't have the chops to dance.

My reasoning for not picking Ohio State as a final four candidate? First, let us examine their three losses: North Carolina by nine,

then Florida by 26 (correct, I said 26), followed by a 3-point loss to Wisconsin, all on the road. This is where I hear gripes that these are all impressive teams and that they're "good" losses. Sorry, but when you are Alpha dog, there are no good losses. If you can't go beat up on some of the nation's best during the regular season on foreign turf, then how are you gonna pull it off in the big dance? You're number one. You're in the spotlight. You need "good" wins. So, let's look at wins. We have a 2-point win against a respectable Tennessee team and a nail-biting one-pointer over Wisconsin, both at home. Sorry, but, to use some interesting phraseology, losses beat wins here. I don't need to explain; it's just that simple.

I also cannot buy into the argument that the Buckeyes weather the storm that is supposedly the Big Ten conference. I'll buy it for a minute. Wisconsin is fantastic, Illinois and Indiana are good when they wanna be, and, well, Michigan State just sort of shows up randomly. That said, you're hard-pressed to find another team that is even remotely reminiscent of a powerhouse in the Big Ten. If you take away the three shady teams you're only left with only one real worthy opponent: the Badgers, who I believe are the better team to begin with. I don't call a road loss and an indecisive

one-point homer in the season series against the other contender valid proof that Ohio State is best in the Big Ten, much less the nation.

Okay, now that we're past all the Buckeye talk, we move on to my dark horse pick. I had to pick one and, quite frankly, I think it should be bracket logical law that everyone does. Why? Because that's what makes March Madness so exciting. If powerhouses simply bowled over everyone on an easy cruise to the dance then college basketball wouldn't be very fun, would it? Hell no. March Madness is about the George Masons, the Bucknells, the Bradleys. I know too many of us don't expect another George Mason in the final four but, hey, it's fun to think about. So now, without further ado...

Marquette. Yes, there are better teams in the Big East but let's face it, the Big East is a gauntlet anyway. Yes, they've lost eight games but five of those losses came to high-quality teams: Wisconsin, Syracuse, Georgetown, Louisville and Notre Dame, all of whom are slated to be in the big dance. The other three—North Dakota State, Providence, and Depaul—are not that great but, hey, that's why it's called a dark horse. Before you call me crazy, wait a sec and listen up. The Golden Eagles see *March Madness* page 8



Despite Penn State's perseverance against their opponents this year, they finished the season with 11 wins, and 18 losses, including only 2 wins and 14 losses in Big Ten conference play.