

Dream Season For Hoops In Iowa

Iowa State, Iowa, Northern Iowa Giving Fans Plenty To Cheer About

BY LUKE MEREDITH
AP Sports Writer

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — With just three million people and no major pro sports, Iowa has long directed its passion toward its college teams.

It's turned out to be a dream season for basketball fans in this sleepy Midwestern state.

Iowa State is ranked 13th and is a legitimate Final Four contender. Northern Iowa reached the top 10 for the first time, won the Missouri Valley tournament and is mentioned on the cover of this week's "Sports Illustrated." Iowa finished the regular season with a six-game winning streak, its best in the Big Ten since 1987, and will likely make back-to-back NCAA tournament appearances for the first time in nearly a decade.

"I think it's awesome," said Iowa State coach Fred Hoiberg, an Ames native nicknamed "The Mayor" and one of the best players the state has ever produced. "It's great for our state. It's great to have the interest level where it is."

And why not? It could be just the second time that all three of Iowa's public universities reach the NCAA Tournament in the same year. California, Florida and New York will barely be heard from this March.

Iowa's schools have been deeply committed to basketball for decades.

The Cyclones first rose to prominence in the 1980s under colorful and engaging former coach Johnny Orr. Orr entered Hilton Coliseum to the old "Tonight Show" theme — "Here's Johnny!" with a smile and a fist pump. Orr's up-tempo style of play was fun too, helping cultivate a devoted fan base fanatic about the "Hilton Magic."

The Hawkeyes, save for a few lean years in the late 2000s, have been a competitive Big Ten program for a long time. Iowa was a regular in the NCAA Tournament in the 1980s and '90s under popular coach Tom Davis. Its fans stuck with the Hawkeyes as coach Fran McCaffery slowly remade them into a winner.

Northern Iowa rose to prominence under former coach Greg McDermott, a native Iowan who built his program by recruiting heavily in Iowa, in the early 2000s. The Panthers have remained one of the top programs in the Valley under Ben Jacobson. He turned down opportunities to jump to bigger programs



Northern Iowa head coach Ben Jacobson cuts down the net after the Missouri Valley Conference championship game between Northern Iowa and Illinois State on Sunday, March 8, 2015, at the Scottrade Center in St. Louis.

CHRIS LEE/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH/TNS

after Northern Iowa shocked top-seeded Kansas in the 2010 tournament, and this week his Panthers sat just a spot behind the ninth-ranked Jayhawks in the Top 25.

The state's passion for hoops has been felt at the ticket office, too.

Iowa State averaged 14,295 fans per game this season, nearly three times last year's national average, and Iowa drew just over 14,000. Northern Iowa averaged crowds of just over 5,000 — which often includes U.S. senator and UNI graduate Chuck Grassley, who's been known to tweet out the final score within seconds of the final buzzer.

"I think all three institutions have really impressive fan bases. I think that helps. When you have an opportunity to play in front of people and it matters; certainly, that goes a long way," McCaffery said.

All three schools have also spent money on the kinds of facilities that modern-day recruits are looking for.

The Hawkeyes recently spent

over \$40 million renovating its arena, including the addition of a brand-new practice facility. Iowa State opened up an \$8 million off-campus facility in 2009, and Northern Iowa's McLeod Center, built in 2006, is one of the nicer gyms in all of mid-major basketball.

There's also a lot more talent in Iowa than many might realize — even with the likes of Harrison Barnes, Doug McDermott and Marcus Paige leaving home in recent years.

The Hawkeyes went from going 11-20 overall to 12-6 in the Big Ten during the regular season behind high-profile in-state recruits like Jarrod Uthoff, Adam Woodbury, Peter Jok and Josh Oglesby.

The small-school Panthers have taken a more developmental approach with their local talent. No player epitomizes their success in doing so that more than star Seth Tuttle.

Once a rail-thin freshman, Tuttle is now a 240-pound senior who recently won the league's Player of

the Year award and could soon be among the breakout stars of the NCAA tournament.

But Tuttle is far from the only Iowan making an impact for the Panthers. In fact, 53 of the 69 points Northern Iowa scored in the Valley title game came from players born in Iowa.

"It's been the backbone of our program," Jacobson said. "Without professional sports in our state, the kids grow up really attached to college athletics...and I just think we've just got tremendous role models and tremendous coaches for those kids."

Iowa State has just two Iowa kids on its roster — and they barely play.

But the Cyclones do have "The Mayor." Hoiberg has built up so much goodwill among Iowa State fans — some of whom have been cheering for him since he led Ames High to the state title in the early 90s — that he's been able to build through transfers without alienating his fan base.

It's worked again this season.

Senior Bryce Dejean-Jones, despite a few behavioral hiccups, has thrived while playing for his third school, averaging 11.4 points and 5.2 rebounds during the regular season.

Dejean-Jones and fellow transfer Jameel McKay headed to their first Big 12 tournament in Kansas City this week and got their first taste of "Hilton South." That's what Iowa State fans call the Sprint Center because of its preponderance of cardinal and gold.

All those traveling fans helped the Cyclones pull off a stunning comeback Thursday.

Willed on by a crowd that was at least three-quarters in favor of Iowa State, the Cyclones rallied from a 10-point deficit in the final four minutes and beat Texas 69-67 on a buzzer-beater by Monte Morris.

"It was like a movie, honestly," McKay said. "Everything was going our way. The crowd was unbelievable. It felt like we were at Hilton. It was like a little magic in there."

Kentucky Rolls Past Florida, Moves To 32-0

BY JERRY TIPTON

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(Lexington, Ky.)

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Nothing much changed in this season's third Kentucky-Florida game. Given UK's undefeated record, sameness held a lot of charm.

UK beat Florida 64-49 in a Southeastern Conference quarterfinal Friday that resembled the teams' regular-season games.

Florida battled on even terms into the second half. Then, inevitability prevailed.

This time UK's lead stood at five points with barely seven minutes remaining. Then a 14-2 run set up Kentucky for yet another historical footnote. By improving to 32-0, the Cats equaled the SEC record for consecutive victories. The UK teams of 1953-54 and 1954-55 also won 32 straight.

Kentucky will go for the record — and continue the quest to be college basketball's first unbeaten national champion since Indiana in 1976 — on Saturday. The Cats play the LSU-Auburn winner in the semifinals.

Karl-Anthony Towns and Aaron Harrison led Kentucky with 13 points each.

Florida (16-17) got 15 points from Jon Horford.

No surprises in the first half as Florida spread the floor and used pick-and-roll offense against Kentucky. Meanwhile, Kentucky got a much-more engaged performance from Willie Cauley-Stein (as he promised early

in the week) and used offensive rebounding to lead 31-27 at halftime.

The margin marked UK's largest lead of the half. So used to being ahead this season, the Cats led only 31 seconds of the opening 11-plus minutes.

As if to back up its uniminted words of Thursday, Florida took the initiative early. UK Coach John Calipari did not wait for the first television timeout before putting in four substitutes after calling a timeout at the 16:26 mark.

Florida twice led by five points inside the first seven minutes.

Cauley-Stein, who came into the game averaging six shots, took five in the first half. He made only one.

Kentucky did not relinquish the lead the rest of the half after going ahead 18-17 on Devin Booker's fast-break layup with 8:39 left.

Kentucky took its first double-digit lead six minutes into the second half. Holding Florida scoreless for more than three minutes, UK expanded its lead to 42-31 on an Aaron Harrison 3-pointer.

Horford, a 25-percent 3-point shooter this season, led a Florida rally by making a 3. He had not made a 3-point shot in 20 of Florida's 32 games this season.

The decisive 14-2 UK run began four minutes later and turned a 50-45 lead into a 64-47 form of cruise control.



PABLO ALCALA/LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER/TNS
Kentucky's Karl-Anthony Towns (12) scores in the second half against Florida in an SEC Tournament quarterfinal at Bridgestone Arena in Nashville, Tenn., on Friday. Kentucky advanced, 64-49.

DWU Men Beat Ashford 65-49 To Reach National Quarterfinals

POINT LOOKOUT, Mo. — It was a history making night for the No. 5 Dakota Wesleyan University men's basketball team, as the Tigers topped unseeded Ashford University (Iowa) 65-49 in the second round of the NAIA Division II Men's Basketball Championship Friday in Point Lookout, Mo.

After a scorching-hot shooting performance in the opening round, DWU used solid defense to stifle the Saints en route to its 30th win of the season. It is the first 30-win season in program history and sends the Tigers to their first-ever NAIA Division II Quarterfinal Round.

The night was made even more special when senior forward Jalen Voss scored his 2,000th-career point. Voss hit a pair of the free throws late in the second half, the second of which gave Voss exactly 2,000 in his four years at DWU. He is the fifth member of the 2,000-point club at DWU, joining Alan Miller (2,920), Scott Morgan (2,810), Greg Hansen (2,146) and Brady Wiebe (2,052). Miller

and Wiebe were in attendance for tonight's game to see Voss reach the milestone.

The game had a different flow than the opening round, with the Tigers having to fight for each point in the early going and in the second half.

"We knew it was going to be a different game," DWU Head Coach Matt Wilber said. "Ashford is a very good defensive team and I have to give those guys a lot of credit. They made things really tough on us."

Voss' 21 points was a game-high as he shot 9-of-17 from the floor, while grabbing five rebounds. Senior guard Kris Menning was the only other Tiger in double figures, finishing with 12 points and two 3-pointers. Junior guard Trae Bergh added nine points, seven rebounds and four assists.

The Tigers (30-4) play the winner of No. 4 College of Idaho and unseeded Cardinal Stritch University in the quarterfinals at 5 p.m. Saturday at Keeter Gymnasium in Point Lookout, Mo.

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