

COLLEGES

MAKING SOME SENSE OF THE COMING MADNESS

With Selection Sunday nearly two weeks away and conference tournaments starting next week, Scott Gleeson of USA TODAY Sports helps you catch up on teams and players to know for March Madness.

FIVE EMERGENT TEAMS

Teams that weren't expected to be where they are now

Michigan: John Beilein should be at the top of the list for coach of the year candidates. The Wolverines (20-7, 12-3) lost Mitch McGary for the season to a back injury in November and rebounded to become one of the country's most surprising teams. Behind the hot shooting of sophomore guard Nik Stauskas, Michigan started 8-0 in Big Ten play and is contending for the Big Ten regular-season title.

Texas: The Longhorns (21-7, 10-5) weren't able to keep Kansas from a 10th consecutive Big 12 title, but the fact they were the Jayhawks' top challenger highlights the night-and-day difference in Austin from last season. Coach Rick Barnes went from the hot seat to garnering coach of the year consideration, and it's well deserved. Each of Texas' losses is to an NCAA tournament-bound team.

Southern Methodist: Coach Larry Brown, 73, has turned SMU (22-6, 11-4) into an NCAA tournament team after a 15-17 finish in 2012-13. The Mustangs, led by spark plug point guard Nic Moore, are third in the American Athletic Conference and have the ingredients to be a dark horse in the NCAAAs.

Cincinnati: Another AAC squad that's overachieved, Cincinnati has a chance to win the league thanks to a 15-game winning streak that included an 11-0 start in conference action.

Coach Mick Cronin always has his teams playing smothering defense, but this season's team executes his philosophies best — ranking fourth nationally in scoring defense. On offense, All-America candidate Sean Kilpatrick paces the Bearcats.

Virginia: The Cavaliers (24-5, 15-1) were projected to have a strong season, but contending for an Atlantic Coast Conference title — Virginia hosts Syracuse on Saturday in a pivotal showdown — shows just how far coach Tony Bennett's veteran-laden group has come since last season. Led by guards Joe Harris and Malcolm Brogdon, this Virginia squad runs one of the most stifling defenses and disciplined offenses in the country. The Cavaliers rank 288th nationally in scoring, but they invariably find ways to win by controlling the game's tempo.

FIVE MUST-WATCH PLAYERS

Players who have compiled the best seasons in 2013-14 and are poised to up the ante in March

Doug McDermott, Creighton:

The two-time All-American saved his best season for last and leads the nation at 26.0 points a game. McDermott is the main reason for the Bluejays' success in the Big East after moving from the Missouri Valley Conference. The 6-8 forward draws plenty of double-teams to free his teammates, who shoot the ball accurately. Creighton ranks fifth in the country in field goal percentage at just a tick less than 50%.

Jabari Parker, Duke: He stands atop the star-studded freshman class, averaging 18.8 points and 8.9 rebounds for Duke (23-6, 12-4). The 6-8 for-



JEFF HANISCH, USA TODAY SPORTS
Doug McDermott has been a driving force for Creighton, which this week cracked the top 10 in the coaches poll.



DAK DILLON, USA TODAY SPORTS
Jordan Clarkson and Missouri are in perilous position.

ward hit a minor slump after starting the season with seven consecutive 20-point outings but has rediscovered his groove. Versatility sets him apart; Parker has the ability to score on the perimeter and possesses an ultra-quick first step.

C.J. Fair, Syracuse: The senior forward has been the Orange's offensive catalyst for the last two seasons, but he's playing at an elite level this season, averaging 16.5 points and 6.1 rebounds.

Shabazz Napier, Connecticut:

The do-everything guard returned for his senior season despite his NBA readiness, and he's proved to be one of the best players in the country, leading his team in points, rebounds and assists. Napier also has been clutch, including in a buzzer-beating win Dec. 2 against Florida.

Russ Smith, Louisville: Another player who chose to put a pro career on hold and come back for his senior season, Smith has redefined his game, averaging 17.7 points and 4.5 assists. He is also taking smarter shots, making 46% of them, and limiting the turnovers that used to frustrate coach Rick Pitino.

FIVE X FACTORS

Underrated players on top 25 teams

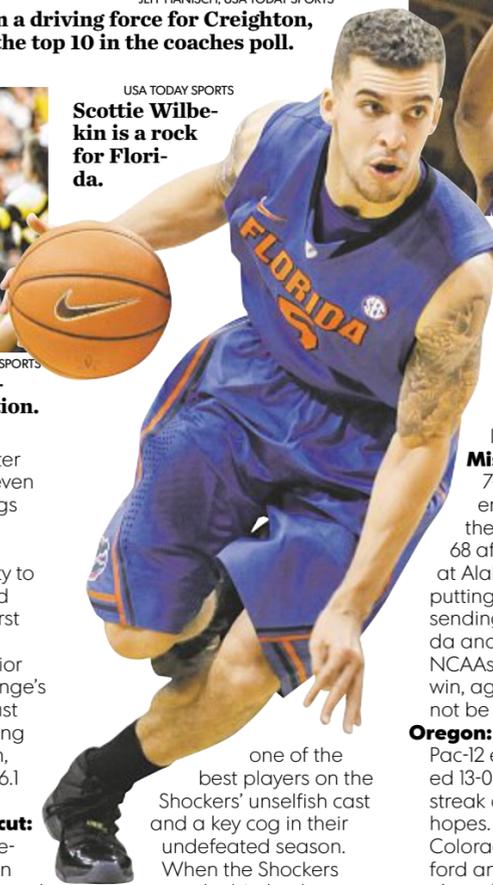
Scottie Wilbekin, Florida: The senior point guard is a ballhawk defensively and runs the team with poise while scoring when necessary.

T.J. McConnell, Arizona: One of the best defenders in the country, McConnell has been instrumental in the Wildcats' success. His transfer from Duquesne gave coach Sean Miller the true point guard for which he's been longing.

Ron Baker, Wichita State: The sophomore sharpshooter is

USA TODAY SPORTS

Scottie Wilbekin is a rock for Florida.



MARK DOLEJS, USA TODAY SPORTS
Jabari Parker has delivered for Duke.

Georgetown is dueling with three other Big East teams — Xavier, Providence and St. John's — for an at-large bid.

Missouri: The Tigers (19-9, 7-8 Southeastern Conference) seem to be playing their way out of the field of 68 after back-to-back losses at Alabama and at Georgia — putting the SEC in jeopardy of sending only two teams (Florida and Kentucky) to the NCAAAs. Missouri has one key win, against UCLA, but it might not be enough.

Oregon: The Ducks (18-8, 6-8 Pac-12 entering Thursday) started 13-0, but a five-game losing streak derailed their Pac-12 title hopes. In their conference, Colorado, Arizona State, Stanford and California have better résumés for tournament consideration. That great start, though, gives Oregon an RPI of 43 and SoS of 45.

Nebraska: The Cornhuskers (16-11, 8-7 Big Ten) have an RPI of 52 and SoS of 26 but résumé-staining losses to Alabama-Birmingham and Penn State.

Dayton: The biggest win for the Flyers (vs. Gonzaga) seemed a lot bigger in November. Losses to Illinois State, Southern California and Rhode Island, plus an SoS of 56, also hurt. It will take a deep run in the Atlantic 10 tournament for this squad (19-9, 7-6) to get an at-large bid.

FIVE PLACES TO FIND THE NEXT FLORIDA GULF COAST

Small-conference tournaments harboring Cinderellas

Horizon League: Wisconsin-Green Bay (23-5, 13-2) is one of the best midmajors in the country, having beat Virginia in a non-conference clash, and has a great Cinderella recipe behind Keifer Sykes, a 5-11 guard who averages 20.1 points and 5.0 assists. Wright State is a veteran-laden squad that could also wear a glass slipper should the Phoenix falter.

one of the best players on the Shockers' unselfish cast and a key cog in their undefeated season. When the Shockers need a big bucket, Baker's clutch from the perimeter.

Rodney Hood, Duke: The Mississippi State transfer has been overshadowed by Parker's great season. Hood, a 6-8 sophomore, gives the Blue Devils another lengthy wing player who stretches the floor with his three-point shooting.

Jordair Jett, Saint Louis: On a veteran squad, Jett has the ability to put the team on his back and get to the rim at will. Yet Jett is as unselfish as they come, dishing out five assists a game. Should the Billikens make a deep NCAA tourney run, Jett could take over and become a breakout star.

FIVE BUBBLE TEAMS TO WATCH

Teams that will be sweating until Selection Sunday

Georgetown: The Hoyas (16-12, 7-9 Big East) are in unfamiliar territory on the bubble. They have a strength of schedule (SoS) of 27, having beaten Michigan State, Kansas State and Virginia Commonwealth. But a disastrous five-game losing streak and glaring losses to Northeastern and Seton Hall hurt their chances.

Committee to reconsider 10-second proposal

Rule change to slow hurry-up offenses met with resistance from many coaches

George Schroeder

@GeorgeSchroeder
USA TODAY Sports

A controversial proposal to slow hurry-up offenses will be reconsidered by the NCAA Football Rules Committee next week, before it would go to a final vote.

Members of the committee plan to discuss the proposal, which would require a 10-second delay before offenses could snap the ball, before it goes to the Playing Rules Oversight Panel on Thursday. Rogers Redding, the NCAA's coordinator of officiating and secretary-rules editor of the rules committee, said members

would communicate via conference call or e-mail by midweek.

Although the process is routine, according to Redding, he said, "It's going to look out of the ordinary" because of the attention focused on the proposal since it was announced Feb. 12. The blowback has been loud and sustained by coaches who run fast-paced offenses.

The rules committee will consider feedback from coaches that has been received by the NCAA during an official comment period that runs through Monday. The committee could choose to modify or withdraw the proposal.

It's likely the rules committee also will consider unofficial feed-

back, including the results of an anonymous survey of Football Bowl Subdivision head coaches conducted by ESPN.com. The survey of 128 coaches showed overwhelming opposition to the proposal. Ninety-three coaches (72.7%) were opposed, 25 (19.5%) were in favor and nine (7%) were undecided.

"It's a piece of information that people are going to be interested in," Redding said. "Whether it would sway anyone, it's another data point. I wouldn't be surprised if it (had an impact)."

The stated reasoning behind the proposal was safety. This year, which is considered an off-year for rule changes in NCAA sports, it's the only way such a change could be considered. If approved by the Playing Rules Oversight Panel, which has a teleconference

scheduled for March 6, it would take effect this fall.

Many coaches, while sounding their opposition to the proposal, have denied there is increased injury risk from playing fast-paced football. Auburn coach Gus Malzahn said there was "absolutely zero evidence." Air Force coach Troy Calhoun, chairman of the rules committee, backpedaled last week, saying the proposal should not become a rule unless data show increased injury risk. There's no hard data.

Some coaches who oppose the proposal have noted the participation of Alabama's Nick Saban and Arkansas' Bret Bielema, two vocal critics of the trend toward ever-faster offensive tempo. Texas A&M's Kevin Sumlin told USA TODAY Sports the proposal is "an attempt to limit the creativity

Western Athletic: New Mexico State (21-9, 10-4) is best known for 7-6 center Sim Bhullar, but Daniel Mullings (16.9 points, 5.1 rebounds a game) is an underrated catalyst. The Aggies will need to win the WAC tournament to get a bid, but they are capable of a big upset if they get in the field and draw a better matchup than last season against Saint Louis.

Atlantic Sun: Although Florida Gulf Coast became the NCAA tourney darling last year, Mercer (22-8) won the regular-season title last season and has its sights set on an automatic bid this year. Langston Hall (15.1 points a game) paces a balanced offense. But don't count out Joe Dooley's FGCU squad yet. If the Eagles reach the field, #dunkcity could live on another year.

Ohio Valley: Belmont (22-8, 13-2) has put together a five-game winning streak and is a favorite to win the league. Longtime coach Rick Byrd lost a majority of his production from last season, but the Bruins have the pieces to upset a school from a power conference. Belmont ranks fourth nationally in shooting percentage, and guard J.J. Mann (18.4 points a game) could become a March star.

Sun Belt: Remember Ryan Harrow? He's the former Kentucky point guard who transferred to be closer to home. Along with R.J. Hunter, Georgia State has one of the best backcourts in the country and would be a surefire sleeper if it can win the conference tournament. The top challengers to the Panthers will be Western Kentucky and Arkansas State.

FIVE DEFINING MEMORIES

Moments and story lines that have marked the college hoops season.

Wichita State's 30-0 start: The Shockers might play in the Missouri Valley, but their accomplishments this season have been nothing short of amazing. Coming off a Final Four season, coach Gregg Marshall has helped this team avoid complacency and play with signature toughness.

Marcus Smart's confrontation with a fan and subsequent suspension: The Oklahoma State All-American shoved a Texas Tech fan who called him a "piece of crap" at the end of a loss Feb. 8. Oklahoma State lost all three games while Smart was suspended, part of a seven-game skid that put the Cowboys on the bubble after starting as Big 12 title contenders.

The freshman surprise: Joel Embiid, not Andrew Wiggins, stole the spotlight among top freshmen, at least for the month of January. The 7-foot center at Kansas has drawn comparisons to Hakeem Olajuwon for his upside and footwork. He's a potential No. 1 pick in the NBA draft in June.

Jim Boeheim's ejection: The Syracuse coach went berserk at an official Feb. 22 in the Orange's loss at Duke, leading to his first career ejection.

Barry Hinson's tirade: The Southern Illinois coach made national headlines for a rant during a postgame news conference Dec. 18 in which he called his player's "a bunch of mama's boys."

of the game." In an interview last week with USA TODAY Sports, South Carolina coach Steve Spurrier referred to the proposal as "the Saban Rule."

Saban has not commented publicly. Last week, Bielema's first public comments on the proposal sparked a spinoff controversy when he referred to the recent death of California player Ted Agu during a workout as a reason for the rule. When asked about data linking increased injury risk to up-tempo offenses in games, Bielema responded, "Death certificates. There's no more anything I need than that."

That led to a rebuke, issued on Twitter, by Cal athletics director Sandy Barbour, who called the comments "beyond insensitive." Bielema issued a statement of clarification moments later.