

Left coast has right stuff to dominate

by Hank Wesch

Where should a college basketball follower's interest be focused for the start of the 2007-08 season?

Go West young fan. Go West old or middle-aged fan. Go West casual fan or hoopsaholic.

Tobacco Road and the talented teams and individuals on and around it will be given their props sooner or later, so help us Billy Packer. The same for those whose identifying thoroughfares might be the Dixie Highway, the D.C. Beltway, Pennsylvania or New Jersey turnpikes or the I-94 corridor.

But before getting wrapped up in all that give due attention to some teams loosely linked by I-5 and I-10 and conglomerated as the Pac-10 Conference. Listen to what Lute Olson of Arizona, a school that has made the NCAA Tournament 23 straight years, had to say at a recent media day.

"The conference, I said a year ago, was going to be the best it's ever been, but this year is even better because of all the guys coming back and the recruiting classes," said Olson. "It is far and away the best conference in the nation and by far and away the best conference top to bottom that it's ever been."

Olson, who announced on Sunday he is taking a leave of absence for unspecified personal reasons and turning the Wildcats over to assistant Kevin O'Neill, went on to say why the conference has become so strong.

"The coaches that have come into this league have been really good coaches with good experience," Olson said. "A while back, they used to hire an assistant from another program. Now they are getting the best coaches they can get. ... The quality of coaches that have come into the conference and their recruiting ability have changed things."

Ben Howland took over at UCLA in 2003 and has gotten the Bruins to the Final Four the last two years in a row. In his first year at Washington State, taking over from his father Dick Bennett, Tony Bennett guided the Cougars to 26 wins, 15 more than the previous season, a second-place finish in the league and the second round of the NCAA Tournament.

Ernie Kent's Oregon team compiled 29 wins and went to the Elite Eight. Tim Floyd's USC group won 25 and advanced to the Sweet 16. The initial Associated Press poll had six Pac-10 teams ranked in the Top 25 starting with UCLA at No. 2 and continuing through Washington State (10), Oregon (12), Arizona (17), USC (18) and

Stanford (23). No other conference had more than four.

With the exception of USC, they've all got significant numbers of players returning and the Trojans have a passel of newcomers capable of keeping their momentum going.

With the Div. I schedule now under way - the season began with four games Monday night - here are some things to look for this season:

THE NEWCOMERS

UCLA and USC are bringing in the consensus top two freshmen in the country.

The Bruins' 6-10, 260-pound Kevin Love from Lake Oswego, Ore., is the son of former NBA player Stan, the nephew of Beach Boys singer Mike and is being touted as potentially the school's best big man - overall and for the ability to make a fastbreak-triggering outlet pass - since Bill Walton.

USC has 6-5 guard O.J. Mayo, who amassed six years of high school experience (starting in the seventh grade) at three schools in three different states. Being the most watched-and-touted prep since LeBron James, Mayo is widely speculated to be doing the one year of college service required before becoming eligible for the NBA draft, but he says that's not necessarily true. Time will tell.

LOOKING ELSEWHERE

North Carolina has Player of the Year candidate Tyler Hansbrough and the No. 1 preseason rating. But the league the Tar Heels are expected to lord over isn't considered to have the strength in depth for which it has come to be known. The ACC has been without representation in the Final Four the last two years and while that's going to be big-time motivation when March Madness begins, there aren't an abundance of candidates besides the Tar Heels to get there this time.

Memphis has all five starters returning from back-to-back Elite Eight teams plus a super freshman recruit in 6-4 guard Derrick Rose. The Tigers have to overcome the fact that NCAA champions over the last four decades have almost entirely come from leagues that are BCS affiliates in football, but John Calipari's Conference USA crew has the talent, and a testing schedule, that will hone its capabilities.

If its new status as a football school doesn't prove too much of a distraction, Kansas figures to take its usual pre-eminent place in the Big 12 Conference; Georgetown has four starters back from its Final Four side and figures as the beast of the Big East; Michigan State with All-America guard candidate Drew Neitzel is the preseason pick in the Big Ten, but what were the Spartans doing losing to Division II Grand Valley State in two overtimes of a recent exhibition?

COACHING CHANGES

The wheel of fortune/misfortune stopped on the No. 60 when it came to Division I coaching changes. Some of the major ones:

Tubby Smith went from Kentucky to Minnesota and was replaced in Lexington by Texas A&M's Billy Gillispie, a good fit considering that horse racing is probably second only to hoops among Gillispie's passions.

John Beilein went from West Virginia to Michigan, replacing Tommy Amaker and creating a void with the Mountaineers that Bob Huggins left Kansas State to fill. Fitting in that leaving the school that hired him when so many others considered him taboo reinforced Huggins' reputation as a man lacking in class or principles but a heck of a good basketball coach.

Steve Alford departed Iowa and landed in New Mexico, one of four new faces in Mountain West places along with Tim Miles (Colorado State), Jim Boylen (Utah) and Heath Schroyer (Wyoming).

Dan Monson, who resigned early in the 2006-07 season at Minnesota, was hired at Long Beach State, replacing Larry Reynolds. The 49ers won the Big West and 24 games overall last season, but a cloud of NCAA infraction suspicions proved Reynolds' undoing.

Bill Grier, a former assistant to Monson and Mark Few at Gonzaga, replaced Brad Holland at the University of San Diego, portending a further spread of the Zags' hoops gospel.

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