

BIG XII SPOTLIGHT

A weekly look inside the Big 12 Conference

Wednesday, April 2, 2008

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NCAA TOURNAMENT

KU carries torch for conference yet again

Jayhawks own three of league's six all-time Final Four appearances

By Eric Sorrentino

Journal-World copy editor

If Kansas were to capture its third national championship this season, it wouldn't be a stretch to say it would be the most prominent victory in the history of the Big 12 Conference.

Since the Big 12's inception in the 1996-97 season, here's a list of national champions, starting in 1997: Arizona (Pac-10), Kentucky (SEC), Connecticut (Big East), Michigan State (Big 10), Duke (ACC), Maryland (ACC), Syracuse (Big East), Connecticut (Big East), North Carolina (ACC), Florida (SEC) and Florida (SEC).

All major BCS conferences are accounted for on that list, with the exception of the Big 12.

The conference certainly

has had its chances. Since 1996-97, six Big 12 teams have made the Final Four.

In fact, that's more than any other conference in the nation.

Kansas (2003, New Orleans) is the only Big 12 team to have played in a national title game.

Here are the other five Big 12 teams, to go along with the 2008 Jayhawks, to reach the Final Four:

2004 OKLAHOMA STATE

COWBOYS (2 SEED)

Lost to: Georgia Tech, 67-65, semifinals

Key players: Tony Allen (Boston Celtics guard), Joey Graham (Toronto Raptors guard/forward), John Lucas (Houston Rockets guard)

Record since Final Four: 82-52 (.612)



Nick Krug/Journal-World Photo

THE JAYHAWKS HOIST the Midwest Regional trophy following their victory over Davidson on Sunday in Detroit. Kansas is trying to become the first league school in the Big 12 era to win a national championship.

2003 KANSAS JAYHAWKS (2 SEED)

Lost to: Syracuse, 81-78, finals

Key players: Nick Collison (Seattle Sonics forward), Kirk Hinrich (Chicago Bulls guard), Keith Langford (NBADL), Aaron Miles

(Europe), Jeff Graves, Michael Lee (KU graduate student manager)

Record since Final Four: 140-32 (.814)

2003 TEXAS LONGHORNS (1 SEED)

Lost to: Syracuse, 95-84, semifinals

Key players: T.J. Ford (Toronto Raptors guard), Royal Ivey (Milwaukee Bucks guard/forward), James Thomas, Brandon Mouton, Brad Buckman

Record since Final Four: 131-43 (.753)

2002 KANSAS JAYHAWKS (1 SEED)

Lost to: Maryland, 97-88, semifinals

Key players: Collison, Drew Gooden (Chicago Bulls

forward), Hinrich, Miles, Jeff

Bosch

Record since Final Four: 170-40 (.810)

2002 OKLAHOMA SOONERS (2 SEED)

Lost to: Indiana, 73-64, semifinals

Key players: Hollis Price, Quannas White, Ebi Ere, Aaron McGhee, Jabbarri Brown

Record since Final Four: 131-62 (.679)

FINAL FOUR HISTORY

Here's a list of Big 12 teams and how many times they've made the Final Four:

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|--------------|-------------|
| Kansas: 13 | K-State: 4 |
| Okla. St.: 7 | Iowa St.: 1 |
| Texas: 3 | Colorado: 2 |
| Okla.: 3 | Baylor: 2 |

THE BIG 12 & THE BIG DANCE

The following is a look at the seasons in which a Big 12 Conference men's basketball team has reached the Final Four and how the last weekend of those seasons played out.

Although the conference has been around since the 1996-97 season, it has yet to see a basketball school crowned as champion.

Kansas, making its 13th Final Four appearance of all-time and third in the Big 12 era, has a shot to be the first this weekend in San Antonio, Texas.

2002

Big 12 Participants: Kansas and Oklahoma

Others: Indiana and Maryland

Outcome: Maryland defeats KU, 97-88; Indiana defeats OU, 73-64; Maryland defeats Indiana, 64-52, for title.

Most Outstanding Player: Juan Dixon, Maryland

2003

Big 12 Participants: Kansas and Texas

Others: Syracuse and Marquette

Outcome: KU defeats Marquette, 94-61; Syracuse defeats UT, 95-84; Syracuse defeats KU, 81-78, for title.

Most Outstanding Player: Carmelo Anthony, Syracuse

2004

Big 12 Participant: Oklahoma State

Others: Georgia Tech, UConn and Duke

Outcome: G-Tech defeats OSU, 67-65; UConn defeats Duke, 79-78; UConn defeats G-Tech, 82-73, for title.

Most Outstanding Player: Emeka Okafor, UConn

2008

Big 12 Participant: Kansas

Others: North Carolina, Memphis and UCLA.

Top teams have Big 12 ties

Memphis, Carolina and UCLA all have links to Kansas

By Matt Tait

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What has four teams, roughly 56 players and is watched by millions of sets of eyes around the globe?

The Final Four, of course. And this year, fans of the Big 12 Conference have an overwhelming number of reasons to pay attention.

For starters, the cream of the conference, Kansas University, is making its 13th appearance in the Final Four and its third in the last six seasons.

But the Jayhawks aren't the only team at this year's Final Four with ties to the Big 12. North Carolina, Memphis and even UCLA have links to the conference, the most notable being Carolina coach Roy Williams and his 15-year coaching stint at KU.

Williams was in his ninth season with the Jayhawks when the Big Eight Conference joined forces with four members of the Southwestern Conference to form a new "super conference" known as the Big 12. Already well established as one of the finest coaches in America, Williams often was considered the top coach in the conference even when names such as Bobby Knight, Eddie Sutton and Norm Stewart filled the benches.

Before leaving for North Carolina, Williams took the Jayhawks to four Final Fours and two national title games, the last coming in the form of a loss to Syracuse in 2003, the swan song to Williams' KU career.

“This is going to be a crazy Final Four. I've been in the tournament a few different times and I don't remember where it played out like this.”

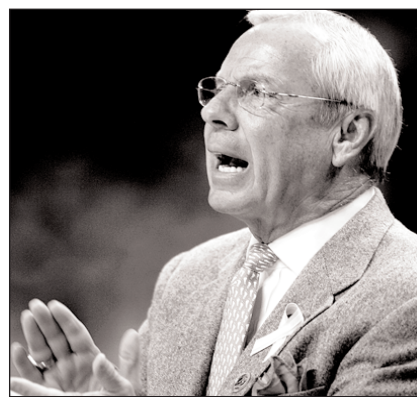
— Memphis coach John Calipari

While some of those connections might be a stretch, they can be made, and, for fans of the Big 12 as well as the coaches themselves, that gives this year's Final Four even more potential excitement than usual.

“This is going to be a crazy Final Four,” said Calipari, who also reached college basketball's final weekend with UMass in 1996. “I've been in the tournament a few different times, and I don't remember where it played out like this.”

It hasn't.

Prior to Williams, KU's program was in very capable hands with current Memphis coach John Calipari joining coaching legend Larry Brown for a three-year run as a graduate assistant from 1982-85. Before joining



Journal-World File Photo; AP Photos

KU COACH BILL SELF, TOP PHOTO, Memphis coach John Calipari, bottom left, UNC coach Roy Williams, bottom center, and UCLA coach Ben Howland, bottom right, will compete in the Final Four on Saturday in San Antonio. Memphis, North Carolina and UCLA all have ties in some way to Kansas University.

For the first time since the NCAA Tournament began seeding teams, all four No. 1 seeds have reached the final Saturday of the season, making the hype and hysteria surrounding the weekend reach frenzied proportions.

“The committee deserves a lot of kudos and credit,” UCLA coach Ben Howland said. “Obviously, they did good job seeding the tournament. It is amazing that this has happened, and it almost didn't happen.”

Almost, Howland clarified, because his team nearly lost to Texas A&M — a Big 12 school — in the second round. Almost, he added, because Kansas nearly fell to Davidson — the school that gave Larry Brown his first college coaching job — in the Elite Eight.

But the dust has settled, and the four teams who were picked first through fourth in the preseason polls are in position to battle it out for the national title.

“Memphis and Carolina, more so

CLOSE, BUT NO CIGAR

1The Big 12's six Final Four teams since 2002 are more than any other conference in the nation. The Big 12 has no title to show for it, though.

| | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Big 12: 6 | Pac-10: 3 |
| ACC: 5 | SEC: 3 |
| Big 10: 4 | Big East: 3 |
| C-USA: 3 | Colonial: 1 |

than us and UCLA, were consistent performers,” KU coach Bill Self said. “Memphis and Carolina have been in the top four or five from day one. There were hot teams that went in and out of there, but I think it's remarkable that the four teams ranked in the top four in the preseason made it through.

“I know it's a first, and certainly you have four high-level teams that have

maintained a pretty high level of play all the way through. I can't imagine a better scenario going in.”

Neither can Howland, a three-time Final Four participant and 2007 national runner-up who said this year's foursome features some of the most talented players in the game.

“You look at the experience of the teams, every one has a lot,” he said. “All four (schools) have names who've been in the Final Four before, but it's more about the players for me. We all have unbelievable players.”

Yet only one, UNC's Williams, has that coveted national title.

Will this be the year the Big 12 finally breaks through? Will the Pac 10 or much-maligned Conference USA take the crown? Or will Williams add another gem to his already sparkling resume?

“Roy has already won one at Carolina,” Howland said. “And the other three of us would love to get one.”