

Seahawk Sports

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Window of Opportunity NCAA Tournament opens doors for mid-majors

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Two weeks ago, few sports fans had any idea who Kevin Pittsnogle of Martinsburg, WV was. Now, one could say Pittsnogle is a household name.

That is because of the glory and the popularity of the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament. One day you are an unknown, the next you are one of the most popular players or teams in the country.

All of America's eyes are fixated on the brackets and their office pools and when a team is able to win a game or two, everyone takes notice. A team can get press coverage that they only dreamed of during the season. Here in ACC country, everyone is aware of the stars at Duke, UNC, and NC State. It's not until tournament time that the smaller teams such as West Virginia, Vermont, Bucknell, Alabama-Birmingham and UW-Milwaukee become the focus of much deserved attention.

Some call it the Gonzaga effect. In 1999, the small Jesuit school from Spokane, WA battled and was a game away from making the Final Four. Gonzaga was the first school that relished in the attention of the tournament, and now six years later they are considered a basketball powerhouse instead of a basketball obscurity.

The NCAA tournament is that one chance for a smaller school to show the country that they are a great basketball team. If a team can manage to win in the extremely competitive tournament then they are guaranteed to be all over the television highlights.

This exposure leads to better recruiting, more endorsements, and national attention. All of which translates into more money for the

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Seahawk centerfielder storms back from injury

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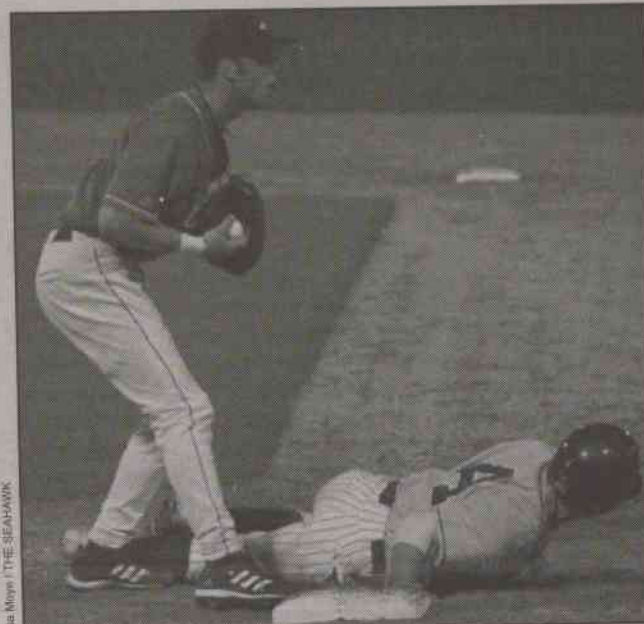
There was feeling of deja vu on Saturday night, as Seahawk outfielder John Raynor come racing around second base, trying to stretch a double into a triple in the sixth inning of UNCW's win over the Tribe of William & Mary.

Raynor had just put the ball in the left-field corner, when he saw base coach Randy Hood motioning down with his arms, the slide signal. During a similar play in the Seahawk's opening weekend, Raynor injured his hamstring.

This time, however, he did not come up lame.

Nor has he come up lame for the Seahawks during the team's recent hot streak, as the sweep of the Tribe made it nine wins in the last 10 games for UNCW (16-11, 3-0 CAA). Over the course of the last few weeks, Raynor has improved his performance at the plate, as he has brought his batting average up to .313, tying with fellow junior Matt Poulk for third best on the team.

"I'm seeing the ball right out of his (the pitcher's) hands, knowing whether it's going to be in the zone almost right out of his hands. That



First baseman Lee McLean attempts to pick off an opponent March 26. The Seahawks won all three games in the series and sit at 16-11 on the season.

is what's made all the difference," Raynor said.

"He has had some really good at-bats over the last two weeks and he has gradually gotten himself in a comfortable position," assistant coach Randy Hood said. "Hitting is all about feeling confident and

being in good rhythm. He's allowed us to get a little more depth in our lineup."

Coming back from the hamstring injury early in the season, ironically, has helped Raynor build confidence. As of Sunday, Raynor led the team with three triples, and

is tied for first in stolen bases with nine.

"I'm a guy who has to have my speed. Getting my hamstring back in good health and working with the trainers was really important. That gave me some confidence back," Raynor said.

Raynor's low number of strikeouts (13) has also played a role in his recent success.

"Confidence is built on top of confidence by not striking out and I just have to keep working to stay with that," he said.

Raynor hit his first home run of the season against William & Mary, and finished the series with five runs batted in and a .367 average.

"He's got a lot of talent and we have always thought that he was going to put it all together and he is starting to play pretty solid for us. We need that out of him because he is such a good athlete and he can make a lot of things happen," Hood said.

Raynor and the Seahawks will take their streaks on the road this weekend for a three-game series with Hofstra. It will be UNCW's second series against a conference opponent as the team continues its defense of its CAA crown.

UNCW softball exceeding expectations

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As the temperature rises with Spring's arrival, UNCW, currently standing at 18-23, are only one behind last year's win total. Voted to finish fifth in the CAA Preseason poll, the Seahawks are on par with expectations.

Head coach Melissa Jarrell, in her fourth year, anticipated the performance. "I expected us to be around the five hundred mark, considering the tournaments we've played and still trying to work some players in," she said. Jarrell is also looking to surpass the 22 win high she's established at UNCW.

"We've won a lot of the games we're supposed to," Jarrell said.

"We picked up three wins against [NC] State. Those were three really quality wins for us."

Krista Searle has led the way early for the Seahawks. Searle, a sophomore from Chesterfield, Virginia, is batting .344 with 10 home runs, 35 RBIs, and an impressive .986 fielding percentage.

Her breakout game came against Fairfield, in which Searle went 2 for 3, with a first inning home run and 5 RBIs.

Jarrell isn't happy with one offensive star though, saying "We need to stress that we need others to step up."

Freshman outfielder Whitney Knudsen has answered the call, swinging well lately. Knudsen batted in two runs in the CAA-open-

ing series against Drexel. On the year, Knudsen is batting .278 with 4 home runs, and has brought 20 runs across the plate. Searle and Knudsen have combined for 55 of the teams 125 RBI's this year, nearly 45% of the runs.

Standing at 18-23, going into the thick of conference play, the Seahawks are in good position to make a run at the league crown. Favorable scheduling has given UNCW Drexel last weekend, and Delaware at home this weekend before going on the road to face preseason favorite Hofstra. "We have the first two conference weekends at home, we need to get off to a good start and get ahead of the game," Jarrell said.



Sophomore infielder Krista Searle gets set at first before rounding the bases after a hit from her teammate.