

ACC

Vs.

BIG TEN

By DAVID POOLE

It used to be that one of the quickest ways to become part of a big argument around here was to say that some conference—any conference—was a better basketball league than the Atlantic Coast Conference.

But that was before the Big Ten started confusing things by piling up cold, hard facts on its behalf. In 1976, Indiana and Michigan played a glorified conference game in March that also happened to be for the national title. The last two years, six Big Ten teams have been to the Final Four of the NCAA tournament or to the last two rounds of the National Invitation Tournament and a seventh, Purdue, has been to both. No other league—including the ACC—has had more than one team advance that far.

The ACC's claim as the nation's best basketball conference, a claim once considered fact, has been shaken. Now, even some of the people who pay the rent and feed the kids by writing about ACC basketball are beginning to concede that, on the court and in post-season play—when it really counts—the Big Ten has become the best.

"To be honest, especially about NCAA play, the Big Ten has beaten up on the ACC pretty badly in the past few years," says Ivan Mothershead, publisher of the *ACC Basketball Handbook*.

"If you use NCAA play, the Big Ten has definitely gone ahead of the ACC," says Smith Barrier, a veteran basketball writer for the *Greensboro Daily News*. "The only way you can compare conferences is how far the teams go in the NCAAs and, on that, the Big Ten has to be the best."

Clearly, the Atlantic Coast Conference and the Big Ten have the most right of any conference to claim supremacy in the college game. Six Big-Ten teams won 20 or more games last season, six of eight teams did the same in the ACC. The third- and fourth-place teams in the Big Ten, Iowa and Purdue, went to the Final Four last year and Minnesota lost in the finals of the NIT. Five ACC teams went to the NCAA playoffs in 1979-80 and a sixth, Virginia, beat Minnesota to win the NIT title.

What, then, are the differences and similarities between the nation's best leagues and which, if it is possible to determine, is truly the better conference?

Among those who frequently discuss the matter, few have as broad a perspective as those who make a living based on their basketball knowledge. Reporters who cover the ACC and the Big Ten offer a view of the two leagues that is quite different from the one most fans have.

"It's tough to say who's better," says Jack Torry, who covers Ohio State for the *Columbus (Ohio) Citizen-Journal*. "If you go by what happened last year, you'd have to say that the Big Ten was better top to bottom."

"The Big Ten definitely showed, on the court, that it was the best conference in the country the last two years," says Roy Damer of the *Chicago Tribune*. "What it will be this year, I can't say."

"The ACC has had the best non-conference record in the nation, but that has included games with such tough teams as UNC-Asheville," Mothershead says. "There are some lightweights on the schedules, but I'm sure it's the same in the Big Ten. Nobody ever accused Northwestern of being a powerhouse."

It's hard to find a consensus about who is No. 1. Mainly, it seems, the difficulty comes in deciding on what basis, if any, a just comparison can be made.

"To compare the leagues, you'd have to play each other in a home-and-home series," says Lou Bello, former ACC referee and now a sportscaster for WKIX radio in Raleigh. "There's really no way to compare."

ANOTHER reason comparisons are difficult to make is the fundamental difference in the style of basketball played in the two leagues. The ACC is known as a finesse league and the Big Ten is known as a power conference.

The dispute continues between the nation's top leagues; but there may not be any true comparison.

"I would go along with the statement that the Big Ten plays a more physical brand of basketball," says Bill Brill, sports editor of the *Roanoke (Va.) Times & World-News* and president of the U.S. Basketball Writers' Association. "That's essentially true because that's the way they choose to call it."

"The style of play is very different," Torry says. "For example, it's questionable whether Ohio State would have beaten Virginia last year if the game had been played at Charlottesville with ACC referees. (Jeff) Lamp and (Lee) Raker both told me that if they had played that game with ACC refs that Ohio State's guards would have fouled out."

"There is no question that the ACC leads the country in the technical aspects of the game," Mothershead says. "Everybody around here watches a more sophisticated brand of basketball. The Big Ten plays football without shoulder pads."



Carolina's cheerleaders say they're No. 1 ...but is the Atlantic Coast Conference?

Brill relates the differences in playing styles to the history of the ACC. "It goes back to the '60s when the tensions used to be tremendous," he says. "There were a lot of rivalries with bitterness and hatred."

"The student bodies were terrible and sometimes you were lucky to get out alive. Jim Weaver was the commissioner and he told the referees to crack down so things wouldn't get out of hand. As that developed, the coaches started recruiting a different type of player and learned to coach in a different way."

"The geography led to the intensity," he adds. "You couldn't have had Big Ten-style basketball in the ACC or somebody would have gotten killed or a riot would have broken out."

Brill also attributes a lessening of tensions to an increased number of camps and clinics in the area. As players from different teams met at these camps, Brill feels, they became friends and some of the bitterness disappeared.

Brill's comments touched on another big difference—the geographic proximity of the ACC schools, particularly the Big Four, as opposed to the spread-out nature of the Big Ten.

"Around here, everybody you meet either went to one of the schools or is for one of them," Bello says. "It's like no place else in the country. Take my family. I went to Duke, my wife went to Duke, my daughter went to Duke, my son went to State, and my other son went to Carolina—there are a lot of families like that."

"Your neighbor in Columbus, Ohio is not going to be from Michigan or Iowa, in most cases," Brill says. "If you move anywhere in the Triangle, there are likely to be people living down the street who went to Duke and some who went to Carolina."

"I don't think the intensity of the rivalries in the Big Ten (in basketball) are anything like they are football," Torry says. "Ohio State and Indiana might be a rivalry now because both teams are good, but it might not go that way in a few years. Some of the ACC games I've seen on TV get pretty wild. I could be totally wrong, but I just don't see that in the Big Ten."

That intensity leads to the fan mania that is more closely associated with the ACC. "I have the only conference magazine in the country," Mothershead says of his ACC handbook, which is not connected to the league in any way. "I know, because I'm looking for another conference. I sell 100,000 magazines—50,000 in North Carolina. ACC fans will watch other ACC teams to see how their team stacks up. That's a part of the conference spirit you don't see in the Big Ten."

"People in the Midwest are very supportive of basketball," Damer says. "But there is so much going on (such as professional sports) that people just can't sit back and talk about Big Ten basketball all the time."

THE recent success of the Big Ten and the corresponding lack of success of the ACC in post-season play has caused people to search for reasons why. One of those that most frequently is discussed is the ACC Tournament.

"I think the conference tournament hurts," Damer says. "You just can't play the pressure-packed games night after night. These kids are human—they're 18, 19, 20 years old—and there's a limit."

Bello agrees that the tournament is a draining event. "They start practice on Wednesday and they're there until Sunday and it's life and death out there," he says. "But the schools make a lot of money."

"The argument about the tournament has been going on for a long time," Mothershead says. "It might have hurt years ago when it was for all the marbles, but when you know when the tournament starts that four teams are going to the NCAAs, what's the pressure?"

"In spite of all the criticism of it in non-ACC areas, the tournament has been and is being duplicated," Brill says. "The Big Ten and Pac-10 are big enough and stubborn enough not to go that route. But a lot of new leagues have patterned themselves after the ACC."

The agreement, then, seems to be that the Big Ten has the record to back up its claim that it has played the best basketball at least in the last few years. The ACC, though, still seems to be the leader if the question is taken off the court and other factors are considered.

As far as deciding who's best, well, that seems to be a bit of a cage conundrum.

"The nice thing is that people care," Brill says. "It doesn't really matter if the ACC is as good as the Big Ten or the SEC. I don't think that there's any question that the ACC, as a league is unique."

"The ACC has been the best and still is one of the best," Damer says. "We'll just have to wait and see who is the best this year. The Big Ten will be a good league and the ACC will be very, very good. Let's just toss up the ball and see what happens."