

# College basketball ranks No. 1 in North Carolina

The Associated Press

College basketball is No. 1 in North Carolina. Weddings are rescheduled, top-rated network television programs are pre-empted, and a fan will fly through blizzards, two-thirds of the way across the country, for one game.

And North Carolina—the state, that is—is No. 1 in college basketball.

North Carolina won the national championship in 1982 and N.C. State won it in 1983. Two years, two championships, two schools, one state.

In the 45-year history of the NCAA tournament, only Ohio can top that. The Buckeye State not only produced national champions at Ohio State in 1960 and Cincinnati in 1961-62, it produced the two finalists all three years.

North Carolina, though, takes its hysteria to new heights. When ABC first broadcast "Roots," for instance, the network's Raleigh affiliate rescheduled one night of the series to televise an ACC basketball game.

ABC officials were reportedly irate that the audience-drawing miniseries was pre-empted—until the ratings showed the basketball game drew more viewers than "Roots."

Rick Ray of Raycom Communications, the company that televises ACC games, says people from outside the state frequently have a difficult time understanding that kind of fanaticism.



Dean Smith

DTH/File photo

"When I was working in Raleigh, I once took an ABC guy to a State game," Ray said. "On the way over, he was telling me that he'd gone to Georgetown, so he knew real cheering when he heard it."

"When we got in the arena and the teams came out, the crowd just went crazy. The other guy grabbed my arm and said, 'What's going on?' We didn't get any more complaints about pre-empting shows."

N.C. State coach Jim Valvano said he learned early that "mixed marriages" in North Carolina do not refer to spouses of different races or religions. Here it means one spouse graduated from UNC and the other from North Carolina State.

"I got a call one day from a woman wanting to check if there was a mistake on the schedule," Valvano said. "She wanted to check the date of the Carolina-State game. I told her what it was and she said, 'Well, we'll have to reschedule the wedding.' One of them was from State and the other from Carolina and they didn't want to get married the day of the game."

Valvano, whose Wolfpack team won last year's NCAA championship, said he can measure the depth of basketball interest from a weekly radio talk show he hosts not just during the season, but all year.

"It's on 52 weeks a year and I try to talk about other things... but invariably it comes back to basketball," Valvano said. "What amazes me is how closely the fans follow recruiting. We can have a kid at the campus on Saturday and the people that call in Monday night will be asking about it."

During basketball season, families often gather following a funeral in front of the television set to watch their favorite team play basketball.

Charlotte architect Bonson Hobson, an N.C. State graduate, fought the fever last year as long as he could. He resisted a friend's invitation to go the NCAA finals in Albuquerque, N.M., until the day before the Wolfpack faced Houston for the championship.

Then, 24 hours before the game, Hobson flew to El Paso, Texas, and drove through a blizzard with his friend to Albuquerque, arriving just 30 minutes before tipoff. The next day they drove back to El Paso and he flew home to Charlotte.

He said he's never regretted a minute of it. "It was heaven, the way it turned out," he said. "It was like a dream to leave here so quickly and get to see it."

There are a variety of explanations for the mid-winter fever that hits the state.

One is the ACC tournament, the season finale that gives the winning team an automatic berth in the NCAA tournament. For the conference, the tournament is like an extra season.

"I have seen some prime sporting events around the nation, but nothing like the tournament," said ACC Commissioner Bob James. "The thing that's amazing about it is that every seat is filled from the opening game to the finals."

"Since we divide the tickets eight ways for the eight ACC schools that means that 75 percent of the fans in that opening game have no stake in the schools that are playing," James said. "Other tournaments have people going in and out with who's playing, but not the ACC tournament."

Valvano, a native New Yorker, said people around the country sometimes perceive ACC fans as self-interested provincials who believe their conference is the only in college basketball. But he's found that's not true.

"People here are just unbelievable fans of college basketball and some of the most knowledgeable fans in my experience," Valvano said.

"They love it when we play schools from other parts of the



Jim Valvano

DTH/File photo

country, but there's nothing they'd rather see than a Big Four game."

The Big Four is UNC, N.C. State, Duke and Wake Forest—the state's four major college powers.

Ray, who admits spending all night waiting to get tickets to a regular-season Duke-State game, said television helped fuel the mania for basketball, overwhelming the conference's early fears that the sport would suffer from overexposure.

UNC coach Dean Smith agrees.

"My dad in Topeka, Kan., will be able to watch 22 to 25 of our games this season," Smith said. "I remember when one of our games was the top-rated show in the state over 'Happy Days,' and that was when 'Happy Days' was really going strong."

"If you're a basketball coach and love sports, there's not a better place to be," Valvano said. "The stats show that ACC basketball ranks No. 7 among all syndicated television shows. There isn't another sporting event even close in the ratings."

"People are incredibly loyal and aren't afraid to wear their school colors and stand up and cheer," he said. "It's just incredible."



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