

Powerful Hoyas should take NCAA title

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What would any college basketball preview be without your obligatory Top 20 rundown? Boring, you say. Well, I agree, so here's my own personal stab at the impossible.

This is not an attempt to rank the teams as they stand now, mind you. Instead, this is how they'll be playing next March. The first four teams on my list, of course, are the ones who will face off in Seattle's Kingdome.

Though most of these preseason lists are just guesses, just remember I correctly forecast the recent national championships won by Louisville and Indiana, and had Kansas as my No. 2 team going into last season. Really. Just ask my roommates.

Hold on tight, folks, here we go:

1. GEORGETOWN — John Thompson may have come up empty in Seoul, but by next spring these guys will have their coach back on top of the world. An incredible assemblage of talent will allow Thompson to run 10 terrific players in and out for 40 minutes every night, with the end result being a second national title in the past five years.

Surprising scorer Charles Smith leads a group of four Hoya seniors, and overlooked junior Mark Tillmon joins him in the back court. Depth will come from Jaren Jackson, Dwayne Bryant and Bobby Winston, which means the Hoyas will once again be able to apply relentless defensive pressure.

Last year's team went only 20-10 and lost to Temple in the second round of the NCAA's largely because of deficiencies up front. Thompson solved those woes in the offseason in a very big way.

Alonzo Mourning, a harrowing 6-foot-10 prep phenom from Chesapeake, Va., spent his summer at the Olympic trials banging with the likes of David Robinson, J.R. Reid and Danny Manning, so he can't really be considered a freshman.

Completing the infusion of new talent are 6-7 frosh Milton Bell, 6-7 transfer John Turner and 6-11 Zaire native Dikembe Mutombo. Respectively, these three players are frequently compared to Reggie Williams, Armon Gilliam and Akeem Olajuwon. The nation, not to men-

tion the rest of the Big East, is understandably quaking.

2. UNC — Losing J.R. Reid until January was the best thing that could have happened to this team. The benefits of the mishap are obvious — 1) It forces the rest of the team, particularly Kevin Madden and Rick Fox, to improve quickly against one of the toughest non-conference schedules around, and 2) It gives the Monster Tot a much-needed respite from the daily rigors of the game, meaning he will be able to stay fresh well into March.

Yes, this team lacks speed and yes, the Tar Heels' only pure shooter is Jeff Lebo, but Scott Williams is ready to become a force inside and losing Ranzino Smith was addition by subtraction. What's more Dean Smith hasn't been back to the Final Four since winning it all in 1982. Overdue? Not after this year.

3. IOWA — Dr. Tom Davis has coached the Hawkeyes into the Final 8 and the Sweet 16 in his first two campaigns. This is the year he gets them over the hump. Three outstanding seniors lead the way — Jordanesque swingman Roy Marble, quiet center Ed Horton and irrepressible point guard B.J. Armstrong, who should never have been left off the Olympic team.

Plus, a couple of space-eating transfers, 6-10 Matt Bullard and 6-8 Michael Ingram, figure to help. The Hawkeyes' trip to Chapel Hill on Jan. 7 should be memorable.

4. OHIO STATE — A surprise pick, no doubt, but the Big Ten is an incredible conference and every Final Four has to have a Cinderella.

This is the year America will fall in love with Jay Burson, the Buckeyes' baby-faced, 6-foot senior scoring machine. Sure, he looks more like the kid your school bully used to beat up during recess than a basketball player. But in this age of air-headed, muscle-bound superstars, watching Burson maneuver his skinny frame through helpless defenders is wonderfully refreshing.

This is Gary Williams' third year in Columbus, which means this fine coach's program is well in place. Joining Burson as seniors in their last go-round are Jerry Francis (15.4 ppg), Tony White and Grady Mateen, a former Georgetown transfer. Prop

48 victims Eli Brewster and Treg Lee (a 6-8 Clark Kellogg clone) are back in business, too.

5. DUKE — Danny Ferry is a treat to watch and, next to Sean Elliott, is probably America's most complete player. It's no coincidence that if the Blue Devils make it back to the Final Four this season, it will be the third time they've done so in Ferry's four seasons in Durham.

But they won't. Robert Brickley and Quin Snyder are tremendous talents and freshman Christian Laettner will be the true center Mike Krzyzewski has been praying for all these years, but there are minuses. The graduation losses of defensive stopper Billy King and three-point bomber Kevin Strickland will hurt far more than anyone save Coach K seems to realize.

Moreover, Duke's perennially poor field goal shooting worries me. Perhaps the Devils expend too much energy on the defensive end, leaving them with nothing once they get the ball back. It's just a thought.

6. LOUISVILLE — Poor Denny Crum. All he does is recruit the pants off everyone else and get to the Final Four every other year. Then his Pan Am team gets scorched by Oscar and his Cardinals have an off year, and all of a sudden everyone's saying Denny can't coach.

Well, you can stop the madness now. Pervis Ellison (17.7 ppg, 8.3 rpg), who never really had the drop-off in performance the "experts" seemed to notice, is back for his senior year, as is quietly efficient Kenny Payne. But the top Card is 6-3 scoring machine LaBradford Smith, who is anything but bashful about shooting the rock.

7. ILLINOIS — It's a shame a bozo like Lou Henson gets to coach a team as talented as this one. The Illini are simply stacked with great athletes, players like Kenny Battle, Nick Anderson, Kendall Gill and Prop 48er Marcus Liberty.

Unfortunately, these guys are doomed from the start. They'll win a good 25 to 30 games this year, but as the spring thaw hits Champaign and the temperature rises with the level late-season competition, Loser Lou's team (not to mention his lousy orangish rug) will inevitably slide.

8. OKLAHOMA — Only Danny Manning's last-ditch salary drive

prevented the Sooners from winning the national championship last year. Coach Billy Tubbs (and yes, he does do some coaching) saw his team average 102 points a game last year and, despite the graduation losses of sharpshooters Grace, Grant and Sieger, no drop-off is expected. Six-foot-10 Stacey King (22.3 ppg) is an All-America center, while point guard Mookie Blaylock (232 assists, 150 steals) is quite a magician in his own right.

Oh, and one more thing. The television powers set up an Oklahoma-Loyola Marymount matchup for Dec. 17. Don't miss it, if only to see how many scoreboard operators faint from exhaustion.

9. SYRACUSE — Like the rest of the country, I hate Jim Boheim. He whines, he complains, he criticizes and he whines some more. But somehow — wonder of wonders — he recruits, too. Like a mad dog. Despite the graduation of Rony Seikaly (Boheim's favorite whipping boy), the Orangemen will be loaded again this year. Magnificent point guard Sherman Douglas (16.1 ppg, 8.2 apg) and moody big man Derrick Coleman lead the way. Then there's Billy Owens, the 6-8 freshman often mentioned in the same breath as Magic Johnson. Owens, you'll recall, spurned UNC, went to SU and ended up on the cover of Sports Illustrated's preview issue. That hurt.

10. UNLV — Changing the name of the PCAA to the Big West doesn't change the fact that the Runnin' Rebels still need to find themselves a real conference. I mean, really guys. Cal State-Long Beach? Pacific?

Granted, Jerry Tarkanian has 15 to 18 sure wins lined up each year within the league, but that shouldn't take away from this team's prestige. As usual, Tark the Shark will be towel-chomping well into March, thanks to players like Olympian Stacey Augmon and juco newcomers David Butler and George Ackles.

11. GEORGIA TECH — I'm still not convinced Bobby Cremins could coach a team out of a wet paper bag (that does make sense, doesn't it?), but he did coax Kenny Anderson into signing on the dotted line, so he can't be all that dumb. Six-nine senior Tom Hammonds and 6-8 gunner Dennis Scott are reason enough to respect

the Yellow Jackets, who seem forever relegated to that awful category tagged "underachievers."

12. MICHIGAN — Speaking of such, here's one of the ranking members of the Cotton (Mouth) Club. Like Henson and Boheim, Bill Frieder knows how to bring 'em in, but should leave the instruction to someone else.

Glen Rice (22.1 ppg) is exquisite, as are Terry Mills and Rumeal Robinson. But talent isn't the problem here, it's motivation. What a waste.

13. FLORIDA STATE — Don't look now, but Pat Kennedy is building one heck of a program down in Tallahassee. It won't be long before Bobby Bowden is regarded as the warmup act for hoops season. (O.K., O.K., I'm exaggerating again.)

All five starters return from last year's NCAA team, most prominently 6-6 guard George McCloud (18.2 ppg) and 6-7 forward Tony Dawson (17.9 ppg). Keep an eye on Irving Thomas, a 6-9 junior transfer from Kentucky, and Lorenzo Hands, a 6-3 frosh who can really do it.

14. CONNECTICUT — The Huskies capped a late-season surge by winning the NIT last year. With every starter back and an impressive group of new additions on hand, Jim Calhoun's boys should have no problem carrying that momentum over. The best in the group, undoubtedly, is Cliff Robinson, a 6-11 center who will vie for Big East player-of-the-year honors.

15. ARIZONA — Sure, Kerr and Tolbert are gone, but that means more shots for Sean Elliott, a 6-9 senior who could lead the nation in scoring if Lute Olsen let him. This year we'll get to find out if the Gumbies can play as well as they can cheer.

16. FLORIDA — If Norm Sloan doesn't shoot Dwayne Schintzius before the season ends, the Gators will probably win the SEC. Talk about your selfish, unmotivated, gawdawful head cases! UF's other Dwayne, Dwayne Davis, is a comer, while fellow 6-7 bookend Livingston Chatman is already there.

17. VILLANOVA — How Rollie Massimino brought this bunch to the brink of the Final Four last year is beyond me. This is what they mean by "Winning Ugly," but Kenny Wilson, Doug West and Company really don't care. Three seniors start for this team, but don't expect another 1985-like miracle.

18. STANFORD — If you don't know yet who Todd Lichti is, you will after this season. In fact, if you're in the Smith Center in 10 days when Mike Montgomery's Cardinal come to town, you'll find out much sooner.

19. UNCC — Sorry, Kelly, Muggsy and Kurt. The best player in Charlotte these days is Byron Dinkins, a silky-smooth 6-2 senior who is a good bet to improve on his 21.5 scoring average of a year ago. Only a lack of trees in the paint will keep this team from rising higher.

20. WICHITA STATE — Eddie Fogler, the longtime Dean Smith protegee responsible for so many recruiting coups, is working his magic for the Shockers now. You have to love these guys: not only do they play great D, their 6-10 big man is named Sasha Radunovich.

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