

Big Ten and Big East top conference battles

By DOUG HOOGERVORST
Staff Writer

Coaches, writers and fans alike argue year in and year out about which conference is the strongest. Questions always come up like, "Did the Big East deserve six NCAA bids last year?" or "Is a small conference, like the ever-intimidating East Coast Conference, strong enough to deserve a bid in the NCAA tourney?"

This year, I plan to squelch all of that controversy mumbo-jumbo. The plan is to rate the nation's top conferences once and for all so no one can argue. So, here it goes, and the best conference is . . .

1. Big Ten

Yes, the Big Ten. For years over-rated and underachieving, the Big Ten has toooooo much talent to be denied this year. Plus, they seem to be adding some coaches who can coach and not just recruit. Iowa, Michigan, Illinois and Ohio State are the class of this classy conference.

Iowa returns three of their top players in point guard B.J. Armstrong, swingman Roy Marble and center Ed Horton — all seniors. The rest of the Hawkeye team is made up of relative unknowns, but that is just fine for the Dr. Tom Davis system. With Armstrong, Marble and Horton leading, Davis only has to fill the other spots with role players and the Hawkeyes could be conference and national champs.

Michigan has enough talent to give the Big Ten another team vying for a national title and make the mouths of NBA coaches water (yes, even Charlotte's Dick Harter). The Wolverines lost All-American guard Gary Grant to graduation, so now senior forward Glen Rice will lead the team while junior Rumeal Robinson gains the national prominence he deserves at the point. The only thing keeping the Wolverines from the title will be the "choke" collar they've worn each March. If Bill Frieder can actually coach them through that, look out.

Like Michigan, Illinois has the talent to be a national contender, but each year they wind up as a national pretender. The Illini sport a starting five equal to Michigan's but minus the coaching. Forwards Nick Anderson and Kenny Battle are one of the top pairs in the country. Add 1987 High School Player of the Year Marcus Liberty and the Illini can run anyone out of the gym. Coach Lou

ACC versus Division 1

Conference	Wins	Losses
Atlantic 10	3	3
Big East	2	2
Big Eight	2	4
Big South	11	1
Big Ten	3	2
Colonial	8	2
East Coast	2	0
ECAC-Metro	1	0
Ivy League	4	0
Metro	5	4

Conferences in 1988

Conference	Wins	Losses
Midwestern	1	0
Missouri Valley	1	0
Pacific Ten	4	2
Pacific Coast	1	1
Southeastern	6	4
Southland	1	0
Southwest	3	2
Southwestern	3	2
Sun Belt	2	2
Trans-America	4	0

Henson and his collection of ugly suits have held Illinois back in the recent past, but he can't hold this crew back.

Ohio State is the sleeper of the top teams in the Big Ten, but don't fall asleep when you play them. The Buckeyes will be led by baby-faced guard Jay Burson, who's tougher than Mitch Green and Robin Givens combined. What makes Ohio State even tougher is the fact that Gary Williams is a superb coach who always gets the most out of his players and the full-court game he employs.

The rest of the Big Ten could be called the Small Six. None of the teams will be exceptionally bad, and a few will make the NIT, but no one else can seriously challenge for the title. However, with the Big Four, the Big Ten is best.

2. Big East

The Big East closely follows the Big Ten sporting seven teams that could push for NCAA spots. However, only three teams are championship caliber.

Georgetown, Syracuse and Villanova are the Big East's best, each with the tools to win it all. Pittsburgh and Connecticut are a smidgen below, while St. John's, Seton Hall and Boston College are a step or two off the pace. Unlike the Big Ten, the Big East does have a bona-fide el stinko team in the Providence Friars.

The Hoyas put themselves among the top teams last spring when Alonzo Mourning signed his letter of intent to Georgetown. Any four players around the 1987-88 high school player of the year would be a threat for a national title, but add the senior leadership of Charles Smith and the

explosiveness of Mark Tillmon and teams fear the Hoyas now.

Coach John Thompson's full-court defense will be at its best since the Ewing days, maybe even better, so kick Georgetown now, because this is as low as they'll be as long as Mourning is a Hoya.

Syracuse won the Big East title last year and added better players than they lost, so how can they drop? Well, the Orangemen are definitely a national contender, but they have a weakness on the perimeter.

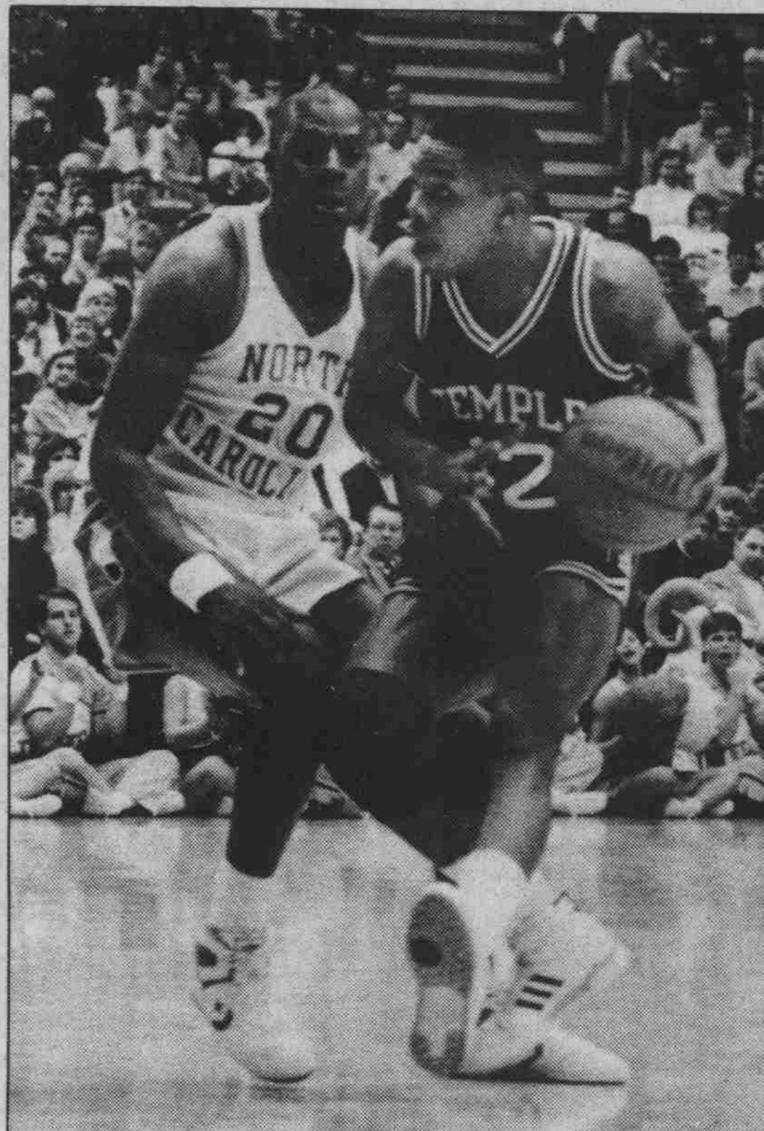
The leadership of the country's best point guard, Sherman Douglas; inside play of college's most explosive 6-foot-4 player, Stevie Thompson; the rebounding of Derrick Coleman; and the overall play of frosh Billy Owens can cover this weakness. Unfortunately, any coach that outsmarts Jim Boheim can beat them. But it will take a lot of outsmarting to beat this talent.

Villanova will always be the over-achieving bunch of kids under that little Italian guy whose shirt always seems to be untucked. The difference this year is that if this bunch over-achieves, it's national title time. Rollie Massimino is the best coach in the Big East and has actual talent this year to play with. Yes, they can beat the undisciplined talent of Michigan, Illinois or Syracuse, but it will depend on coaching and center Tom Greis.

Greis was probably the most improved player in the country last year, and if he continues at that rate, Massimino's boys will be tough. As it is, throw in silky Doug West, underappreciated Kenny Wilson and defensive whiz Gary Massey and there is a lot to handle.

Pittsburgh and Connecticut are going in opposite directions but are at the same place. Pittsburgh is reeling from the losses of Big East Player of the Year Charles Smith and Jerome Lane. The healthy return of medical redshirt Rod Brookin, along with the addition of Prop 48 casualty Brian Shorter and soph Sean Miller, gives the Panthers the talent to upset.

With a win of the NIT (National Insignificant Tournament), Connecticut comes into the season fired up. They have a certified big man in Cliff



DTH file photo

Sophomore Mark Macon leads Temple's bid for the Atlantic-10 title

Robinson and a strong backcourt with Phil Gamble, Tate George, and frosh Chris Smith but lack the talent at forward. They too are upset makers, but a tough early season schedule may make the NCAA tough.

St. John's, Seton Hall and BC are all two players away and NIT probables.

Phew! Those two are close. The ACC has its strengths but isn't the caliber of the 'Big-gies. After that, there are a bunch of strong and even conferences.

3. ACC

The ACC has two national contenders in Duke and UNC, a powerful team a point guard away in Georgia Tech, a playoff pretender in N.C. State and four other teams fighting amongst themselves.

The Blue Devils are the consensus pre-season No. 1 pick, and an early season schedule against patsies like East Carolina, Northwestern, Stetson and Davidson will give them a nice perfect record going into their ACC schedule. Still, Duke is the class of the ACC, and with '87-'88 ACC Player of the Year Danny Ferry returning, a title threat.

Ferry is a do-it-all type player, and the only question about him is how the Celtics will get him. Coach Mike Krzyzewski is a master tactician and with starters Quin Synder, a solid point man, and athletic Robert Brickey back, the Blue Devils will play with anyone.

UNC may have been blessed by the pre-season injury to J.R. Reid. Every year the Tar Heels peak too early. But this year, Reid will reenter the lineup in December. So, by the time he has worked into playing shape again and the team is in sync, UNC could be in the NCAAs peaking. Reid is the All-American Dean Smith will build around when he returns.

But until then Smith must make do with a talented but shallow cast. Seniors Jeff Lebo and Steve Bucknall will be the go-to guys along with Scott Williams. A new feature in the Tar Heel attack will be a quicker fast-break pace. If the Tar Heel legs don't get tired, who knows?

Georgia Tech strengthens the conference with a strong team which can make a run at the NCAA crown but will be stopped short. The Yellow Jackets are a point guard away from the title this year. Tom Hammonds is a nearly unstoppable force inside, and fat boy Dennis Scott is a explosive player outside and inside. The Yellow Jackets also added a juco star at center in Maurice Brittian. Brian Oliver is a solid player but not a point guard.

State is a playoff pretender this year. Without Charles "I'm amphibious" Shackelford, there is a large hole in the pivot. Soph Chris Corchiani and senior Chucky Brown will

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