

SPORTS

Playing the Field

Match-ups from across the Carolinas: College hoops await NCAA 'dance' hopefuls

by Jon Hoppel :: *qnotes* contributor

Happy Winter everyone! It has been a very cold and rainy month, which has derailed a few of your local sports teams' training in preparation for their season. But with March (/April) Madness just around the corner, this is one of the most exciting times of the year to be a sports fan.

Conference tournaments for college basketball will begin soon, followed by the best tournament in college sports, the NCAA tournament. Its size, unpredictability, and 24-hour news coverage is like the Holy Grail to many sports fans (and gamblers). Here in Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) country, we are predicted to get in as many as eight teams in the "dance," which would be extremely impressive if you do not consider how the

ACC has expanded in recent years. But the biggest question of the college basketball season, (as of when this was written), is whether the incredibly deep and talented Kentucky team can stay undefeated the entire way, which has not happened since the 1975-76 season when the Indiana Hoosiers pulled off the historic feat.

Following the always-exciting conclusion of the NCAA tournament, the NHL (National Hockey League) and the NBA (National Basketball Association) begin their post-season tournaments.

The race for the Stanley cup in hockey is always one of the most unpredictable contests in professional sports. Many teams over the years have gotten in sync at the right time or have rode a hot goalie all the way to the finals.

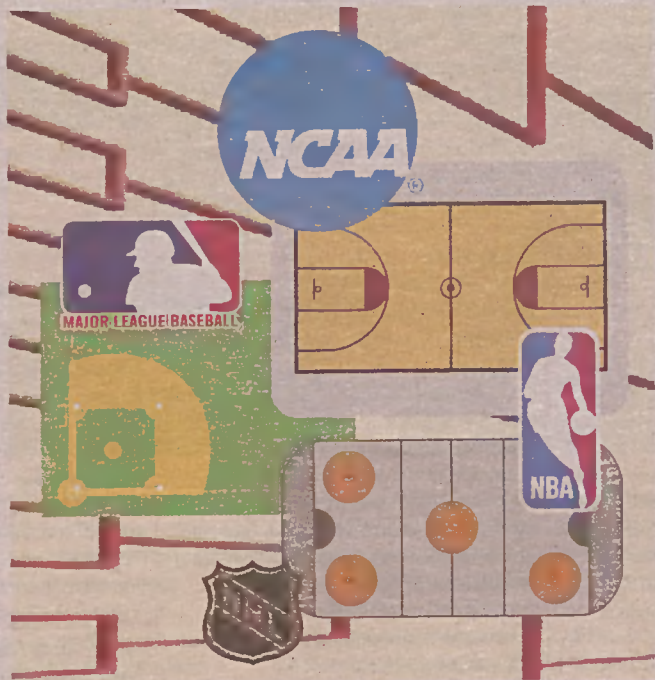
The NBA however usually holds to form until the conference championship round. But with the loaded Western Conference, any one of the top six seeds could advance to play for the Larry O'Brien trophy in the finals. The Hornets, however, are still fighting for one of the 6-8 seeds in the Eastern Conference. Hopefully, the recent acquisitions of Mo Williams and Troy Daniels will help Charlotte become more consistent and give them the ability to win all these close games that they seem to lose.

The main story line, as it is every year, is about LeBron James and whether or not he can win a championship in success-starved

Cleveland, which has not won a title in *any* sport since 1964. In the watered-down Eastern Conference, he and the Cavaliers definitely will have a shot to make it in the finals and get LeBron his 3rd ring.

And, you know what has *already* happened? Major League Baseball players have *already* reported to spring training. That is right, just three short months ago, MLB crowned their 110th champion, the San Francisco Giants, and the process to win the 111th title has begun again. The Hot Stove league has been cooking with so many transactions, that there are *way* too many to list here, but with the immense player movement comes hope for your favorite MLB team.

So, whatever your sport, the next couple of months should be extremely exciting. Check your local listings for times and dates!



Regional

Now for your local wrap up, here are some tournaments that you may be interested in seeing or participating in:

Southeast Round Robin — Rugby:
Charlotte, N.C., March 21

The Southern Shootout — Softball
Birmingham, Ala., April 3-5

The Colonial Cup — Rugby
Philadelphia, Penn.
April 25-26

Big Peach Softball Tournament — Softball
Atlanta, Ga.
May 22-24



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