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Valparaiso coach who takes over at Baylor. The program is reeling after the murder of Patrick Dennehy allegedly at the hands of teammate Carlton Dotson and the tape of former coach Dave Bliss telling assistants to cover up violations by falsely telling NCAA investigators that Dennehy was dealing drugs.

15, Bill Cosby was the guest speaker at a Baylor pep rally attended by 20,000 students. Why Cosby? "It had to do with the fact that I'm 66 years old and I have love for each and every one of you," he told them.

16, The NCAA waived the 1-year ineligibility rule for players wishing to transfer from Baylor. The Bears' top three returning scorers (John Lucas III, Oklahoma State; Lawrence Roberts, Mississippi State; and Kenny Taylor, Texas) all bolted. Taylor's Longhorns visit Baylor on Feb. 10, with Lucas making his return 2 weeks later.

17, Scott Drew's father, Homer, has returned from retirement to retake the reins at Valpo.

18, "The strange thing to me is we've lost 36 games the last 2 years. We only added one freshman (Reyshawn Terry) and he was second-team all-state.

The fans need to understand that ol' Roy ain't that good," said new North Carolina coach Roy Williams.

19, The Tar Heels have enough talent that they'd win 15 games with Larry Fine as head coach. Throw in Williams, who should be worth five to seven victories, and this is a 20-win team with realistic Sweet 16 expectations.

Point guard Raymond Felton was named the ACC's preseason player of the year.

20, Duke (yawn) has been pegged to win the conference. The Blue Devils have won an unprecedented five consecutive ACC Tournaments. 21, The most intriguing player on the Dookies' roster is 6-8 freshman forward Luol Deng, considered the best high school player in the land last year not named LeBron James. 22, Michigan's biggest win in years came in September when it successfully appealed an NCAA postseason ban in 2004. The Wolves return four starters, including Big Ten freshman of the year Daniel Horton, as coach Tommy Amaker continues to try to bail out of the Ed Martin/booster scandal.

23, "We have to do what we're supposed to do and that's make it to the NCAA Tournament," said Amaker.

24, The Big East has returned to one division for its 14 teams. Only the top 12 qualify for the conference tournament.

25, Connecticut is the Big East coaches' preseason pick to win the conference.

26, Junior Emeka Okafor, UConn's shot-blocking machine, is on pace to graduate with a degree in finance this semester. "Certainly, he's enriched our teams, our coaching staff," said coach Jim Calhoun. "We're a better university because of him."

27, Connecticut's Charlie Villanueva, who withdrew his commitment from Illinois after Bill Self bolted for KU, is the pick for Big East preseason rookie of the year.

28, Villanueva and Duke's Luol Deng were high school teammates at Blair Academy in Blairstown, N.J. They were coached by Joe Mantegna. No, not THAT Joe Mantegna.

29, Notre Dame's backcourt of junior Chris Thomas and sophomore Chris Quinn should make the students quickly forget about the dreadful football team.

Thomas, one of the best point guards in the nation, reversed his decision to enter the NBA draft. 30, Another Sweet 16 berth will be a challenge for the Irish, who lost perimeter threats Matt Carroll (Hatboro-Horsham) and Dan Miller (Rancocas Valley). They play Villanova at the Wachovia Center on Jan. 10.

31, The NIT's third-place game has

been discontinued. Hearts are heavy everywhere.

32, After Jim Harrick, Georgia needed discipline and that's exactly what it got in new coach Dennis Felton. "I knew he was demanding," said athletic director Vince Dooley, "I didn't know he was quite as demanding as he is. But that's OK."

33, Georgia's leading rebounder, Steve Thomas, couldn't hack Felton's style and was promptly kicked off the team. If any player breaks a rule, the entire team gets to go for a 6 a.m. run.

34, Beginning next season, the three-point line will be 20 feet, 6 7/8 inches, a shade more than 9 inches farther than the current mark of 19-9. 35, Yes, there still is a Conference USA and Cincinnati, Louisville and Marquette are its best teams.

36, Cincinnati should get better as the season progresses if transfers Robert Whaley (center), James White (forward) and Nick Williams (guard) jell. They should create space for Jason Maxiell (11.7 ppg), the Bearcats' leading returning scorer.

37, Louisville once again will be good. But how good depends greatly on freshman point guard Brandon Jenkins and junior-college transfer Nate Daniels.

38, How old does this make you feel? Patrick Ewing's son, Pat Ewing Jr., is a freshman at Indiana.

39, Big things are expected at Wichita State, which hasn't been to the NCAA Tournament since 1988. (Eddie Fogler was the coach. God, I need a life.) Junior forward Jamar Howard is the kind of midmajor player who nobody knows about until the middle of March.

40, Arizona's Isaiah Fox added to his steals total when he pocketed \$2.58 worth of grub from a campus store. Fox was charged with misdemeanor shoplifting for grabbing a bagel, some cream cheese and a candy bar.

41, The real story in Arizona is freshman Mustafa Shakur (Friends Central), who will start at point guard for the Wildcats, who return only two starters (shooting guard Salim Stoudamire and center Channing Frye).

42, Shakur is being compared to former Wildcat Mike Bibby, who also was a freshman when he guided Arizona to the national title in 1997.

43, Illinois sophomore guard Dee Brown on the media's choice for preseason player of the year: "I wasn't expecting it. If someone would have told me I would be the preseason player of the year, I would have laughed and told them they were lying."

44, The league's coaches tabbed Wisconsin junior Devin Harris. Michigan State was the consensus preseason favorite.

45, Ever heard of Belmont College? It's in Nashville, Tenn., and has never been to the NCAA Tournament. The reason you're reading about it is that it returns the nation's leading field goal shooter (Adam Mark, 67.0 percent) and leading free throw shooter (Steve Drabyn, 95.1).

46, Penn's Jeff Schiffner, a senior, led the nation by shooting 49.3 percent from three-point range. Cornell and Princeton will be the Quakers' top challengers in the Ivy League.

47, Columbia hired Villanova assistant Joe Jones in an attempt to revive its dormant program. His brother,

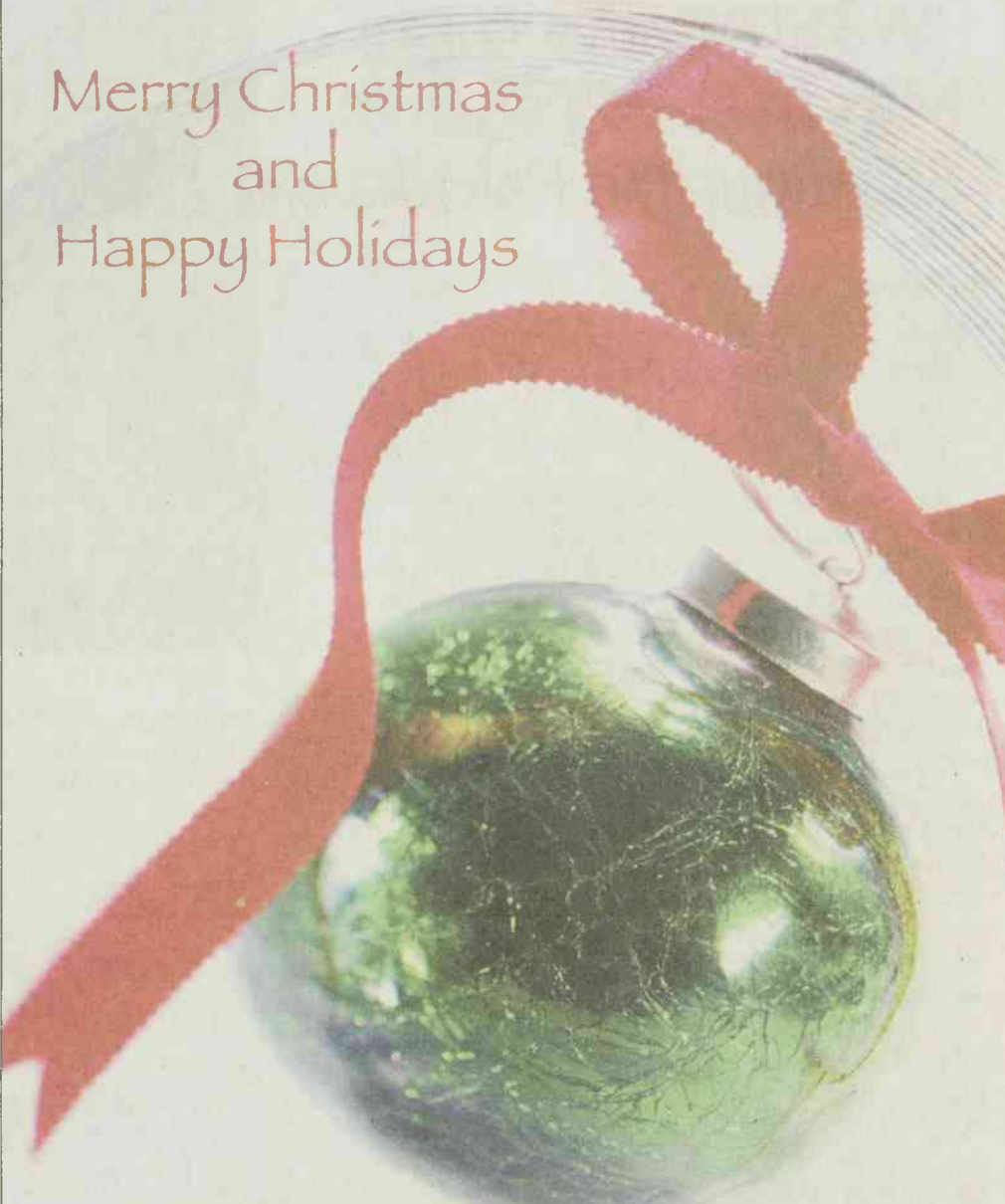
James, is the Yale coach. Their first meeting is Jan. 16 at Columbia.

48, New Mexico State's James Moore might be the best player in the Sun Belt Conference, but the best name belongs to Middle Tennessee's Tommy Gunn. Naturally, he's a shooting guard.

49, Selection Sunday is March 14 and the play-in game is 2 days later at Dayton. The regionals are March 25 (East and West) and March 26 (South and Midwest). The Final Four, in San Antonio, begins April 3.

50, The national champion pick: Connecticut. The Huskies' biggest question is how well (or even if) senior point guard Taliek Brown develops into a floor leader. UConn has more tools than Home Depot and a reasonable schedule that should keep the Huskies fresh.

Merry Christmas
and
Happy Holidays



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