

Breakin' down the East

No. 1 North Carolina got a tough draw in the East bracket on Selection Sunday. They could face strong squads in two-seed Tennessee, three-seed Louisville, five-seed Notre Dame and even eight-seed Indiana, which has two potential NBA lottery picks. Here's a look at what the bracket has to offer.

No. 1 UNC

Record: 32-2, 14-2 in the ACC
Key Players: F Tyler Hansbrough, G Wayne Ellington
Why they could win: The Tar Heels are the No. 1 team in the country and the top overall seed in the tournament. UNC won 11 straight games en route to its 17th ACC Championship — its second in a row. Ellington has found his stroke at just the right time, lighting up teams for 15 or more points in 10 of the last 11 games — the winning streak is no coincidence. Hansbrough and the depth of the Tar Heels could lead them from Raleigh to the Final Four.

No. 16 Mount St. Mary's

Record: 19-14, 11-7 in the NEC
Key Players: G Jeremy Goode, G Chris Vann
Why they could win: The Mount Saint Mary's Mounts defeated Coppin State 69-60 in the NCAA Opening Round game for the right to face the Tar Heels on Friday. They're playing with heavy hearts for a fallen classmate — Dustin Bauer died from injuries resulting from a fall off a first-floor landing in a residence hall — and a 16-seed has to finally defeat a one-seed. Just don't count on it this time.

No. 8 Indiana

Record: 25-7, 14-4 in the Big Ten
Key Players: G Eric Gordon, F D.J. White
Why they could win: The Hoosiers won two big games against Michigan State and Purdue while former head coach Kelvin Sampson was embroiled in controversy, so they can handle pressure. Gordon and White are good enough to beat anybody on any given night — the Tar Heels should be wary.

No. 9 Arkansas

Record: 22-11, 9-7 in the SEC
Key Player: F Sonny Weems
Why they could win: The Razorbacks upset Vanderbilt and Tennessee in two days on the way to the SEC Championship game before losing to upstart Georgia. They also had a big win at tournament team Baylor, so big names haven't scared Arkansas yet this season.

No. 5 Notre Dame

Record: 24-7, 14-4 in the Big East
Key Players: F Luke Harangody, G Kyle McAlarney
Why they could win: The Fighting Irish finished second in a Big East conference that sent eight teams to the NCAA Tournament. Harangody has been as good as anybody in the country at times, averaging 20.8 points and 10.2 rebounds per game, and McAlarney can light it up from deep. This is a very dangerous No. 5 seed.

No. 12 George Mason

Record: 23-10, 12-6 in the CAA
Key Player: F Will Thomas
Why they could win: They beat UNC in the second round in 2006 on the way to a Final Four berth. Thomas, averaging almost 16 points and 10.5 rebounds, is a carryover from that team and can get his team ready for what is to come. George Mason could be this year's 'George Mason.'

No. 4 Washington State

Record: 24-8, 11-7 in the PAC-10
Key Player: G Derrick Low
Why they could win: The Cougars couldn't handle the big dogs in their conference — they lost two games to UCLA and three games to Stanford — but they started out the season 14-0. The Cougars certainly have talent, and they're a little hard to gauge right now, making them a potentially dangerous team in the tournament.

No. 13 Winthrop

Record: 22-11, 10-4 in the Big South
Key Player: G Michael Jenkins
Why they could win: The Eagles have proven to be a difficult team in the tournament in the past. This is Winthrop's eighth appearance in the NCAAs since 1999, and last year the Eagles knocked No. 6 Notre Dame out in the first round. They won the Big South title against 7-foot-7-inch Kenny George and UNC-Asheville, so WSU's puny 6-foot-10-inch center won't scare the Eagles.

No. 6 Oklahoma

Record: 22-11, 9-7 in the Big 12
Key Players: F Blake Griffin, C Longar Longar
Why they could win: The Sooners battled injuries all season but still managed to finish in the top five of a talented conference. Oklahoma's forte is its defense, highlighted by a March 1 game where they limited Texas A&M to 37 points. Yes, 37. Oklahoma is bruising inside and provides a tough matchup for a lot of teams in the tournament.

No. 11 Saint Joseph's

Record: 24-8, 14-4 in the Big East
Key Players: G/F Pat Calathes
Why they could win: The Hawks upset top seed Xavier in the A-10 Tournament, the second time they beat the Musketeers in three meetings. They also beat Villanova by 22 points and took Gonzaga to overtime, so they have the talent to do some damage. Calathes (17.8 ppg, 7.5 rpg) can hurt you in the post, but he also shoots a scary 40.3 percent from the perimeter. Keep an eye on the Hawks.

No. 3 Louisville

Record: 21-12, 9-7 in the A-10
Key Players: F/C David Padgett, G/F Earl Clark
Why they could win: Possibly the most dangerous No. 3 seed of the tournament, the Cardinals won 11 of their final 13 games of the regular season and provide a big challenge inside with Padgett. Louisville isn't the best 3-point shooting squad, but Clark, along with Edgar Sosa and Terrence Williams, is a solid playmaker who negates that weakness. And defense is the Cardinals' forte, as they're tied for sixth in the nation in field goal percent defense, holding opponents to 38.3 percent.

No. 14 Boise State

Record: 25-8, 11-5 in the WAC
Key Player: F Reggie Larry
Why they could win: The Broncos have three players averaging 14 or more points per game, and Larry led the WAC in rebounding with 9.3 per game. The Broncos are the second-best shooting team in the nation — they hit 50.9 percent of their shots.

No. 7 Butler

Record: 29-3, 16-2 in the Horizon
Key Players: G Mike Green, G A.J. Graves
Why they could win: The Bulldogs finished the season ranked No. 11, and spent several weeks in the Top 10. They got hosed a little on receiving a No. 7 seed, especially with media darling Drake as a five-seed. The Bulldogs could use that slight to their advantage. They beat Florida State, Ohio State, Texas Tech and Virginia Tech in the regular season, and practically this same team made it to the Sweet 16 last season. Butler is another sleeper in the East.

No. 10 South Alabama

Record: 26-6, 16-2 in the Sun Belt
Key Player: G Demetric Bennett
Why they could win: They might be overrated, but the Jaguars had a 37 RPI and ripped off a 13-game winning streak midway through the season. They lost to Middle Tennessee State in the semifinals of the Sun Belt tournament but put together a strong enough resume to receive an at-large bid.

No. 2 Tennessee

Record: 29-4, 14-2 in the SEC
Key Players: G Chris Lofton, F Tyler Smith
Why they could win: The Vols are UNC's toughest competition in the bracket. Before a loss to Arkansas in the SEC Tournament, UT was a virtual lock for a No. 1 seed. Lofton and the three Smiths — Tyler, JaJuan and Ramar — are the catalysts on an ultra-talented club that could give anyone in the country fits. The Vols beat an undefeated Memphis team in Memphis, a pesky Gonzaga squad in Seattle and talented Xavier and West Virginia teams at their places.

No. 15 American

Record: 21-11, 10-4 in the Patriot League
Key Player: G Garrison Carr
Why they could win: If the Eagles aren't America's Team, they should be. They play in the Patriot League and sport red, white and blue uniforms — and it's called American University, for goodness sake. The Eagles are making their first appearance EVER in the NCAA Tournament, which alone provides enough incentive to win to scare teams coming up against them. — COMPILED BY GRAY CALDWELL

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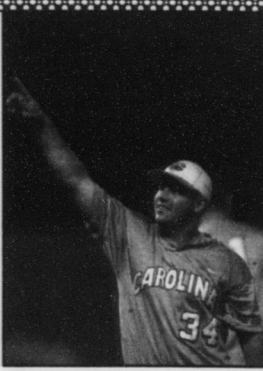
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