



Apologies to Andy Williams But...

It's the most wonderful time of the year right now if you're a sports fan.

I say that after watching more basketball in the past four days than a sane man should watch. But the NCAA tournament is just that good and just that compelling.

13th seeded Murray State knocks off #4 Vanderbilt with a buzzer beater. 14th seeded Ohio University takes down 3rd

seeded Georgetown. Underdog Cornell beats both Temple and Wisconsin to advance to the Sweet 16 next week. And in the shocker of the tournament thus far, 9th

seeded Northern Iowa leads nearly to wire and nips the #1 overall seed Kansas 69-67 on Saturday evening.

The tournament started on Thursday afternoon with a couple of overtime games as well as the Murray State buzzer beater and it hasn't slowed down much at all. Seven of the top 16 seeded teams went down in the opening two rounds and the final game on Sunday night saw Purdue advance over Texas A & M on an overtime lay up with just a couple ticks on the clock.

Thankfully for Buckeye fans, OSU played on Sunday, a day after watching Kansas go down in flames. Watching a #9 take down a #1 likely gets one focused and prevents a letdown. Ohio State had a relatively easy time with UCSB on Friday night but they came out sloppy against Georgia Tech on Sunday. Good thing for OSU that, despite a tremendous amount of talent, Georgia Tech might be the sloppiest and most dysfunctional team that made the field of 64.

The Yellow Jackets wanted nothing to do with prosperity and matched Ohio State turnover for turnover, mistake for mistake early on. That allowed OSU to go into halftime with a lead and come out after halftime firing on all cylinders. The Buckeyes opened up a 14-point lead over Georgia Tech and walked it home from there to advance to St. Louis where they'll take on Tennessee Friday.

“Survive and advance” is an over used cliché (more on a couple of those later) but in the NCAA tournament it's deadly accurate. You get nothing for style points and wins are all that matters.

Are You Effing Kidding Me?

There are a couple of clichés associated with March Madness that send me running for something to cover my ears or something sharp to stick in them. Never mind that ‘March Madness’ might be another one. But if I had a dollar for every time an announcer or analyst said, “And _____ is going to the big dance” or “He really knows how to coach ‘em up” I'd have bags of money.

First off, it's not a big damn dance. It's a basketball tournament and ‘The Dance’ analogy is tired and played out. Come up with something original or call it what it is, but shut up already with the clichés. Anybody watching Lehigh and Lafayette a couple weeks back already knows what's at stake and what that championship game meant. They don't want to hear some cheese ball announcer who's clearly below average given he's doing Lehigh vs. Lafayette screaming about the ‘Big Dance’. And anyone watching who's not an ardent fan has no clue what he's talking about anyway.

Put it away forever please.

And for the life of me I don't get the "coach them up" thing. What the hell else does a coach do? He takes kids who excelled at a lower level and refines their skills, teaches them other skills and molds the skills of all his players into a team.

That's it. Some are better than others and they tend to be employed even during rough economic times.

With the exception of Georgia Tech's Paul Hewitt, does any employed coach "coach 'em down"? No. They just teach, lead, strategize and coach.

While I'm on the soap box let me also note that Florida's Joe Haden ran a 4.45 at his Pro Day this past week. That comes after Haden posted a disappointing couple of runs at the combine a few weeks back.

What I want to know is whether that puts Haden back into everyone's top ten on draft day or whether he's now perceived as damaged goods. I don't pretend to know what kind of pro Haden will make. If you want uninformed opinions on that just check the message boards or call-in shows where everyone with ESPN Insider access considers themselves an expert and can help you out.

What I want to know is how one day in Indianapolis (provided you didn't get arrested with a transvestite prostitute or a body in your car) can change everything. By nearly every account, prior to Indy, Haden was a top ten pick and the clear choice as the best cornerback in the league. Check all the scouting sites (and I did) and you'll see nothing but accolades for Haden's ability, notably his 'burst' and 'top end speed'.

Granted, that analysis was all based on what the kid did on the field during games against the best competition in the country and not while in shorts, inside in Indianapolis, but apparently before he went to the big gym he was a tremendous football player. 4.58 seconds later he's not worth the risk?

Are you effing kidding me?

Stunning

Iron men Russell Branyan and Kerry Wood will likely open the season in familiar spots when the Indians break camp in a couple weeks. Wood will definitely start the season on the DL and Branyan's probably destined to join him.

Both Branyan and Wood have issues with their backs and while Wood's injury apparently occurred at the start of camp you have to wonder if the Indians did their due diligence on Branyan. He's had back issues for some time, arrived at camp unable to participate in drills and there's been no prognosis given as to when he'll be back.

Along with everything else you can now add 'inexperienced major league closer' to the bucket of cold water that keeps dampening my excitement as it pertains to the Indians. It would be nice to see Wood come back healthy and productive. If for no other reason than he'll fetch more at auction in July at the trade deadline.

Getting Down to It

Seemingly every time you turn around and look at the most recent NBA standings you see the Cavs at 10-0 or 9-1 in their last ten games. Go ahead. Take a look now. The Cavs have won seven in a row and nine of their last ten after a couple of weekend wins against the Bulls and Pistons.

I bring that up (reluctantly) only because I believe it's time to announce the time of death for Orlando's and LA's hopes of catching the Cavs for best record in the league and the home court advantage throughout the playoffs that goes with it.

The Cavs have a 6 ½ game lead over the Magic for the best record in the Eastern Conference and they lead the Lakers by three full games for the league's best overall record. That lead over the Lakers is essentially four games given the Cavs swept the season series from Kobe and his Merry Band of Tin Men.

With just 11 games to play the Cavs would have to suffer a collapse of epic proportions to lose their hold on home court.

Etcetera

- Expect Zydrunas Ilgauskas to be back in a Cavalier uniform sometime Monday. Danny Ferry will knock out a deal for the 7'3" Cavs center to return and Z will likely be available Wednesday in New Orleans or, at the latest, Friday against San Antonio.

Z's still got a little something to offer on the court but he'll be treated like a returning MVP in the locker room. He means much more in that capacity than he does matching up with the current generation of centers but he will knock down some open perimeter shots and lean that big body on opposing players when called for.

- Leon Powe scored 16 points Sunday night against Detroit. There were some garbage time minutes involved against a bad team but even so, Powe is showing glimpses of what excited the Cavs when they signed him this past summer. The man is a tough, physical rebounding machine who, like a few of the Cavs big men, gets his points and scoring opportunities only through position and hustle.

I also like the fact that a kid like J.J. Hickson sees how a veteran like Powe asserts himself and goes about his business. With Powe and Anderson Varejao doing what they do, Hickson should never be caught just standing around watching the action. And to his credit (as well as theirs) J.J. has been solid without the ball.

- If you see smoke billowing when you're looking eastward toward Perry, don't fret. It's not the power plant melting down but more likely my brackets still smoldering into ashes.