



The glass slipper comes in many sizes and styles, but it always hurts like hell when it kicks you in the ass. Just ask Pitt, or Louisville, or Notre Dame-- or even a few schools not from the Big East. The first week of the 2011 NCAA tournament has shown us, yet again, what separates this postseason from any other in sports. And accordingly, it's inspired plenty of flashbacks to the feats of Cinderellas past, including the four historic teams that you've voted into our Fantasy Bracket Final Four as the Greatest Cinderellas of the modern era.

As it stands, there is every possibility than one of the emerging storybook squads from this year's tournament could eventually stake their own claim on this imaginary title. The city of Richmond alone has two worthy candidates in the making, with both the Spiders and VCU Rams stealing headlines and destroying brackets. And despite a seeding three spots lower than a year ago, the Butler Bulldogs are proving no less feisty in their quest for even more unprecedented March Madness glory. For the time being, however, those dramas remain on hold, as we turn our attentions back in time again to look at just how high the bar has already been set. Based on your votes, we've narrowed a field of 32 classic NCAA Cinderellas down to just four-- the best of the best from the world of basketball Davids. They include one ACC school, one Colonial Athletic school, and two teams that currently call the Horizon League home. Two are from the '80s, two are from the aughts. And by week's end, only two will be left standing. So, hey, let's vote already!

Reminder: the teams selected for this tournament only included schools that played in the modern seeding era, 1979-2010. Each team's been given a special seeding for this fake tournament (based on how far they advanced on their Cinderella runs), but their original real-life

seedings are also indicated.

## Greatest Cinderellas of the NCAA Tournament: Final Four



**(1) North Carolina State 1983**

**vs**

**(5) Cleveland State 1986**

**Match-Up:** Guess I should have seen this one coming. On one hand, the '86 CSU Vikings (Happy 25th Anniversary by the way) only got this far as a result of obvious regional biases. But looking at it from another perspective, how lame would it be to have a tournament full of Cinderellas and NOT have an actual Cinderella run in it? In other words, Cleveland State has wound up being the Cinderella story of the Cinderella tournament. As a mere #5 seed, the Vikings have sacked and pillaged their way to the Final Four, ousting the Xavier Muskateers of 2004 and two absolutely legendary teams-- the '85 Villanova Wildcats and the ever-inspiring Loyola Marymount Lions of 1990. Back in 1986, the real Vikings didn't have quite enough pixie dust to survive David Robinson and Navy. But through the magic of internet technology and Cleveland-centric sports websites, their miracle run has begun anew and actually kicked into another gear. Question is, can the same-named combo of Clinton Ransey and Clinton Smith give Cleveland State the fire power it'll need to stop the karma freight train that is the 1983 North Carolina State Wolfpack?

Based on their original real-life seedings, it's a #14 vs. a #6-- hardly beyond reason. But remember, this matchup is about STORY, not talent. Does the Vikings' unlikely pair of wins over

bigtime foes earn them enough Cinderella points to offset the resume of an unranked team that scratched and clawed its way all the way to the National Championship? Maybe the answer isn't so clear as it may seem. For as iconic as the Wolfpack's last second triumph may be, they were still an ACC team-- a big school with at least a fighting chance. We can get behind a team like that when they've been overlooked, but there's nothing quite like seeing a school half the country hasn't even heard of taking down one of the game's true giants (as CSU did when they bounced Indiana). So which miracle team from the Pacman era makes the cut? Choose wisely.

### **North Carolina State 1983**

1983 - Seed: #6 / Finish: National Champion

Cinderella Bracket: def. Bradley (2006), Davidson (2008), and Dayton (1984).

Jim Valvano's "Cardiac Pack" nearly lost to #11 Pepperdine in Round 1 and narrowly edged #3 Utah and #1 Virginia by one point each. But it was Lorenzo Charles' buzzer beater over #1 Houston (and the ensuing pandemonium) that has remained an indelible moment in NCAA history.

### **Cleveland State 1986**

1986 - Seed: #14 / Finish: Sweet Sixteen

Cinderella Bracket: def. Xavier (2004), Villanova (1985), and Loyola Marymount (1990).

For Clevelanders, this legendary CSU squad is practically synonymous with the word Cinderella. Making their NCAA tourney debut, Kevin Mackey's Summit League champs became the first #14 seed to reach the Sweet Sixteen, knocking off Bob Knight's #3 Indiana Hoosiers and #6 St. Johns. In the end, only an admiral could stop the Vikings (barely), as David Robinson and Navy prevailed 71-70 in round three.





(1) Butler 2010  
vs

(2) George Mason 2006

**Match-up:** If Cleveland State and N.C. State represent the dawning of the NCAA Cinderella as we know it, these two teams are the crown jewels of the current era of upset specialists. If anything, Butler's win over top-seed Pitt this past week may actually do retroactive harm to the general Cinderella-ness of their 2010 squad. Which is to say, it should now be painfully, blatantly clear that the Horizon League champs are a damn good team-- not a scrappy rag tag gang of nobodies. By reaching the Championship Game last year, Butler had overachieved more in the sense of breaking down expectations of what a mid-major could do. Their on-court performance was perhaps less startling to those who'd watched the team all year. To that point, even the selection committee had awarded the Bulldogs a very respectable #5 seed in 2010-- one seed higher than NC State in '83 and six spots better than George Mason in 2006.

Meanwhile, if we compare the runs of the '10 Bulldogs and '06 Patriots, it's hard to ignore that Butler beat a 12-seed (UTEP) and narrowly escaped a 13-seed (a Murray State team that had upset Vanderbilt) in the first two rounds, meaning that they hadn't even done anything that could be classified as "surprising" until the round of sixteen. From there, they won very tight contests over much stiffer competition and, of course, took Duke to the brink. Still, over the course of that run, Butler only beat two teams with a better seed than their own (1-seed Syracuse and 2-seed K-State). George Mason, meanwhile, had to run the gauntlet through four teams with superior seeds to reach the Final Four in 2006, starting with major upsets right out of the gate over Michigan State and UNC. They took down another juggernaut in Connecticut in perhaps the quintessential David-Goliath game of the past decade. Still, Mason couldn't get past the eventual champion Florida Gators in the semi-finals. Can they fare better this time, or will the 2010 Butler Bulldogs find themselves once again at the doorstep to immortality?\*

\*In this case, immortality merely means "Champion of the ClevelandFan Cinderella Bracket," which may admittedly rank a hair below NCAA National Champion on some people's lists.

### **Butler 2010**

2010 - Seed: #5 / Finish: Finals Runner-Up

Cinderella Bracket: def. Richmond (1988), Kent State (2002), and Penn (1979).

With a 28-4 record, the Bulldogs were given a decent #5 seed, but they were still a Horizon League school looking up at a glass ceiling. Consider the glass shattered. Butler took down #1 Syracuse, #2 Kansas State, and #5 Michigan State before coming one buzzer beater short of what would have been a monumental National Championship win in their own backyard of Indianapolis.

### **George Mason 2006**

2006 - Seed: #11 / Finish: Final Four

Cinderella Bracket: def. Ball State (1990), Wisconsin (2000), and Gonzaga (1999).

Jim Larranaga's club hadn't even won the Colonial Athletic conference title (they lost to Hofstra). And when they beat #6 Michigan State, most people still had no clue where George Mason was even located (Fairfax, VA). After the Patriots eliminated #3 North Carolina and #1 Connecticut to reach the Final Four, however, their status was sealed as all-time Cinderella legends.