



MARCH MADNESS, SPRING TRAINING AND A LOT OF NOT MUCH ELSE

By Kerry Schmidt March 22, 2009

Check this out. A bar in Boston has a new cocktail. They call it the A- Rod Special. It's a shot of tequila, a spicy tomato juice chaser, then mixed up and served in a syringe. Good stuff.

Well, as I have been saying for the last 3 weeks, there is not much too really talk about.

Yes, March Madness is here, along with Spring Training baseball.

This column is being written on Friday, March 20. Thus, only Thursday's MM games have been played. In other words, not much to report as of yet.

Unlike many years, there are no truly dominant teams this year. There are a half dozen teams that are groped near the top. Current rankings: North Carolina, Pitt, Connecticut, Duke, Louisville and Memphis. N.C. is a slight favorite to win it all, and Memphis is the dark horse in this bunch.

In the women's tournament, UCON is far and away the choice. They are unbeaten at 33-0. A rare situation: CONN has both their men's and women's teams at or very near the top.

In some ways, I find the women's games more enjoyable.

For the last 25 plus years, there has not been a multi-year winner. Yes, Duke, N.C. and a couple of others are usually in the mix each year, but even Duke has won only 3 titles.

I say this only because of a coach by the name of John Wooden. He coached UCLA for over 25 years. During his tenure, UCLA won 10 titles, including 7 in a row. That will NEVER happen again!

During his last 11 years at UCLA, his record was 259-12! At home (Pauley Pavilion) he was 149-2 during the 10-title period.

Other notes: Only coach to have 4 undefeated (30-0) seasons. Won 38 consecutive NCAA tournament games. Sports Illustrated said that is the single greatest coaching achievement in any sport, ever.

Had a regular season 88-game winning streak. 19 Conference championships.

He obviously had many good players. Most noted were two centers, Kareem Abdul Jabbar (Lew Alcindar during his UCLA days) and Bill Walton.

Great side story. Wooden was a quiet, soft-spoken man, and one who had strict rules on practice, dress code, appearance and making good grades.

During the incredible title runs, Walton, who was definitely caught up in the 60's peace and love era. His senior year, Walton showed up for the first practice with long, unkempt hair and a scraggly beard.

Wooden quietly reminded Walton of his policy and asked him why he was dressed this way.

Walton gave a very impassioned speech on what he believed in and why.

When he was finished, Wooden quietly said, "Bill, you seem to feel very strongly about this. Are these beliefs truly how you feel?"

Walton told him yes, he was very sure of his beliefs.

Wooden stayed silent for a short time, then quietly said, "Well, Bill, I'm glad you have thought these beliefs out and feel so strongly about them."

As Walton smiled and started to walk away, Wooden calmly said, "Bill, we're going to miss you!" Just like that, he was kicking the best collegiate player of his time and one of the best ever, off his team. Sans Bill, they would have likely not won another title.

Next morning, Walton showed up at practice, hair cut, beard shaved off and dressed in ironed pants and shirt.

Wooden simply said, "Glad to see you back, Bill."



OFF THE WALL SPORTS

Wooden married Nellie Riley in 1932. After 53 years of marriage, she died of cancer in 1985. To this day, he still lives in the condo they bought 35 years ago. And, every night for the past 23 years, he places a single rose on the pillow next to him where Nellie slept. When asked what was the greatest achievement or moment in his life, he simply said, “marrying Nellie.”

A few schools have had long tenured and successful coaches, Mike Krzyzanski (Coach K) at Duke, Dean Smith at N.C. and Bobby Knight at Indiana. But all of them combined don't have as many titles as Wooden does.

Back to today.

There were no “major” upsets as in years past, i.e., where a No. 16 seed would knock off a No. 1 or 15 beats 2, etc.

Closest one was 12- seeded Western Kentucky upsetting No. 5 seed, Illinois.

By next week, we will have quite a bit more to discuss in what is the ULTIMATE conclusion to a collegiate sport.

Yes, the college baseball World Series is fun, but MM is the best. Now collegiate football would be far and away the best IF the old farts would come up with some form of a playoff, so as to decide who truly is the national champ.

Yea, there are a few questionable picks in the 65 (one extra team is added and 64 and 65 played Tuesday, to get to the magical 64 teams).

The NCAA gives automatic bids to the winners of many of the conferences in the country. Now some of the smaller, not well known schools can cause a bit of argument. For example, two of said schools will be at the dance with losing records. Also, three more have only a .500 record, and another two are only 2 and 3 wins above .500 respectively.

As such, some far more worthy schools are left out.

St. Marys had a 26-6 record, but Radford (18-16) got in due to winning their conference game. Likewise, San Diego State, 25-6, did not get to go to the dance.

I think some of the virtually unknown – to many, nationwide – conferences should not get the automatic bid. They need to tweak this a bit.

But it is still much better than the s..t pile that is the BCS.

March Madness is, in some ways, THE ultimate finale to a college sport.

Yes, the NCS title game for football's championship is huge, but it is, more often than not, shrouded in controversy. Plus, it is just one game, one 3-hour show on a Monday night.

On the other hand, MM goes on for nearly 3 weeks, with the “sweet 16” being known after tonight, then to the “Final Four” by next weekend. Once the sweet 16 is ready, the interest really reaches fever pitch.

But, the interest in the MM is, perhaps, the most encompassing of any sports run to a title.

Why? Because of the pools!

It is guesstimated that as many as 8-10 million pools will be floating around.

As many as 90% of offices, schools, and any/all places of work and play will partake.

This year, there is one pool that will pay the winner \$1 million.

And, many people enter into several pools.

A goodly number of the people in these pools are, admittedly, not basketball fans at all. A good number know absolutely nothing about the tournament, but they can instantly change into rabid “fans,” and perhaps win some money. Many an office will have a 60-year old woman who knows absolutely nothing, but will check her pool every few hours. This is why MM is so much fun.

My youngest son, Brian, teaches jr. high school in San Diego, and is in charge of putting the pool together. He says that by the time all teachers, and friends/relatives, et al of same are involved,



OFF THE WALL SPORTS

there will be over 100 individuals therein. And not to be left out, most of the students are also in their own pool(s).

Another guesstimate is that over 130 million will be in one or more pools.

This has been going on – and growing – for over 20 years.

In years past, lunch hours became longer and tiny radios were plugged into many an ear.

But now, with every game on computer, most office cubicles do not show spreadsheets or business plans.

The gamut will run from some work places giving a good bit of leniency to some that will have black booting, goose stepping Nazi types checking on each cubical.

Most offices have a “special warning” system to alert workers as to when the nearest Nazi is approaching.

Many a happy squeal or “oh no” can be heard from cubicles far away.

Thus, not many phones are ringing, until at least after each game is decided.

I cannot think of any other, nearly 3 week sports event that garners as much attention as MM.

Yea, World Cup soccer, but not in the US.

Certainly, spring training baseball (ST) is greatly overshadowed by MM.

Then, when you add in the international World Baseball Championship that is taking place during ST, many of the top players on various teams are not in the line-ups for their own teams, thus further lessening whatever interest there is.

Most of the ST watchers are retired folks just getting some spring time sun. Like the ladies in the MM pools, granny may not know a strike from a home run.

A-Rod is sitting out a few games with the flu. Many are calling it the “million dollar steroid flu.”

This is addition to his ‘roid removal surgery.

Plus, the nearly 9-month NBA is winding down their regular season.

Teams have around 14 games left before the playoffs begin. Nearly half of the teams are in the playoffs, and each contest is now a 7-game affair.

Only the last 2 minutes of an NBA game mean much, and likewise with the playoffs. That’s really when the season starts.

You have 3 very dominant teams – Lakers, Cleveland and the Celtics. Then you have Orlando and San Antonio. After those teams, there is a drop off.

The best contest just may be between the Cavs and the Lakers, for home court advantage.

Cleveland, at 55-13, is one game ahead of L.A., 54-14.

The team with the best season record will have home court for as long as they remain in.

This can be huge. Cleveland has only lost one home game all year – to the Lakers. L.A. has only lost 5 at home. So you can see how important home court is. Should L.A. and Cleveland end up with the same records, L.A. would get home court, since they defeated Cleveland in both games.

Having bored you with MM and ST, time to move on to “the rest of whatever.”

Obama (when you type in his name, the spell checker does not recognize the spelling, and changes it to.....ta da...OSAMA! – appropriate.) has named Steeler’s owner Dan Rooney ambassador to England.

Why? No friggin idea, other than that Rooney was a big Obama supporter in the election campaign.

Only good thing I can see him doing over there is to ask G.B. and the Queen for a bail out. The NFL announced a couple of weeks ago that they are a few billion off tilt.

Dante Stallworth, a star receiver at Tennessee, drafted in first round by New Orleans. Since then, has played for three other teams, including Cleveland, with whom he just signed a 7-year, \$35 million deal.

His previous problems were that he was injured more than healthy.



OFF THE WALL SPORTS

Well now, he has a much bigger problem.

Driving his BENTLY in Miami last week around 7 A.M., he struck a pedestrian – 59-year old Cuban immigrant, Mario Reyes, and killed him.

Turns out, his blood – alcohol level was above the limit. Talk about an upcoming life change! Manslaughter can get you 15 years, in FL. I wonder if he can get into jail before Vick gets out. They can practice together.

Do you think that the poor family of the man he killed will be poor much longer? I can guess that over 100 attorneys have already camped outside this man's home, trying to "represent" him.

Scumbags!

Final worthless crap. The IOC wants the USOC to receive less than the 13% they now receive. Denis Oswald, IOC member, says the US must make concessions at a meeting in Denver next week.

Screw the friggin bastards! The US pays 60% of the total Olympic costs! Tell them that if they start paying 60%, then the US will take less than 13%.

Sans the US, the Olympics will be a total flop!

Enjoy MM. By this time next week, we will have seen a good bit more.

Me and my single malt will watch some games together.