

UConn advances to Final Four

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

For the ninth year in a row, the Connecticut women's basketball team is headed to the Final Four.

NCAA WOMEN'S TOURNEY

The top-seeded Huskies dumped second-seeded Texas 86-65 in the final of the Bridgeport, Conn., region to earn a berth in the national semifinals. Connecticut (36-0) will face either Baylor or Oregon State on Sunday in Indianapolis.

UConn earned its 73rd win in a row as it closes in on what would

be a record fourth straight national title.

"I've always said this (Elite Eight) is the most difficult game to play in because after all this time, since September, you are that close to getting to the Final Four, and that is every kid's dream," UConn coach Geno Auriemma said on ESPN. "When you get there, anything can happen, but it can't happen unless you are there."

"(Our seniors) never cease to amaze me. The things that they've done their entire career here. What can you say to a group of players that have done this much,

and every time the bell rings, they answer it."

Morgan Tuck paced the Huskies with 22 points, while Breanna Stewart contributed 21 points and 13 rebounds. Moriah Jefferson compiled 11 points and nine assists, and Kia Nurse also scored 11 points.

Texas (31-5) got 19 points apiece from Ariel Atkins and Lashann Higgs. Brooke McCarty added 15 points.

The Longhorns trailed just 22-17 after the first quarter, but the Huskies padded the lead to 15 by halftime. Connecticut outscored Texas in each of the final two quarters as well.



DAVID BUTLER II | USA TODAY

Texas Longhorns guard Lashann Higgs (10) defends against Connecticut Huskies guard/forward Napheesa Collier (24) on Monday night during the women's NCAA Tournament at Webster Bank Arena. Connecticut won 86-65.



DAVID BANKS | USA TODAY

Syracuse Orange head coach Jim Boeheim is congratulated by his players after defeating the Virginia Cavaliers in the championship game of the Midwest regional of the NCAA Tournament at United Center on Sunday.

NCAA

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like a dark cloud. The NCAA may finally be ready to conclude its investigation.

NCAA President Mark Emmert told USA Today that "sometime in the relatively near future we'll move toward a resolution."

Syracuse, meanwhile, is still dealing with its own NCAA troubles. A year ago, the organization investigated Syracuse for alleged improprieties ranging from academic misconduct to impermissible benefits, booster activity and drug-test violations.

In February 2015, Syracuse decided to act. It self-imposed a postseason ban. Some observers found the timing suspect. Syracuse was in the middle of a down season, and might have missed the NCAA tournament anyway.

In March, on top of Syracuse's own penalties, the NCAA suspended coach Jim Boeheim for nine ACC games, took away 12 scholarships and vacated 108 wins.

In a twist, Syracuse may have sneaked into the NCAA tournament field this season in part because the selection committee took Boeheim's suspension into consideration. The Orange struggled in his absence.

"I've said from day one, we treat player availability and coach availability the same," said the committee's chairman, Joe Castiglione.

The Orange were seeded 10th, an underdog for a change. Only one of every 250 brackets filled out on ESPN.com picked Syracuse to make the Final Four.

But Syracuse didn't have to play a seed higher than No. 7 before Sunday's regional final. Against the No. 1 seed, Virginia, Syracuse looked overmatched. It trailed by 16 points early in

the second half, by 15 with under 10 minutes to play. But the Orange stormed Virginia with a 25-4 run to win, 68-62.

Syracuse is just the fourth double-digit seed to reach the Final Four.

"I've never been prouder in all my 40 years of a basketball team than I am of this one," Boeheim said.

On the other side of the bracket, Oklahoma's Hield has drawn comparisons to reigning NBA most valuable player Stephen Curry. His buoyant personality, and his rise out of childhood poverty in the Bahamas, have made him this tournament's star.

Hield was nearly unstoppable against Oregon on Saturday. He scored 37 points and made eight of 13 three-point attempts. Curry, while at Davidson, was rarely more impressive. His NCAA tournament high was 40 points.

"I was trying to go for 40," Hield said.

The Sooners' opponent, Villanova, took down the No. 1 overall seed, Kansas, in a game the Wildcats proudly said they made "ugly."

Villanova had gained a reputation for collapse. Two seasons ago, as No. 2 seed, it lost in the second round. It did so again last season as a No. 1 seed. The Wildcats hadn't won multiple games in the tournament since 2009.

Now it will have a rematch with Oklahoma. The Sooners won a meeting earlier this season in a 78-55 rout.

"The first time we played them we had a lot of young guys coming in that didn't know what we were completely about yet," Villanova forward Daniel Ochefu said. He added, with remorse, "The game was not ugly at all."

Villanova likes ugly. But a national championship banner? That might not look so bad at all.

NASCAR

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Yet, the TV ratings for all five of the season's races have been down. So, what else is new? Clearly the viewing habits are changing. Older fans may be dropping out and younger fans are not sitting in front of TVs for three-hour spans. Evidently, the NCAA Tournament, one of TV's all-time best sports properties, is suffering from the same trend — its opening round games also dropped in the ratings this year.

Some perspective is in order. The Fontana race drew a 4.0 final rating, according to Sports Media Watch, and a viewing audience of 6.8 million, certainly strong numbers. But those ratings are down 9 percent from 2014 and 7 percent from 2015. On the other hand, the NASCAR race was the highest-rated sports event other than the NCAA Tournament and the California race easily outpaced its competition from the NBA. The Warriors

vs. the Spurs, according to SMW, drew a 3.1 rating and viewership of 5.2 million.

The worst news for NASCAR might be that the NBA has enjoyed increased ratings on ABC, which is averaging a 3.7 rating and 6.37 million viewers — likely due to the rise of Stephen Curry and the final season of Kobe Bryant. That's nearly 50 percent better than last year on ratings and 57 percent better in viewership. It was the highest-ever average for NBA telecasts for ABC through February, according to SMW, since the network took over from NBC in 2002. Some of this may be driven by scheduling, but not everybody, it seems, is bleeding TV ratings due to changing viewing habits.

It could be worse for NASCAR. Formula 1, the world's longtime leader in motorsports TV viewership, is on the verge of crisis over dwindling TV ratings and poor ticket sales just one race into the season. Commercial rights holder Bernie Ecclestone, a billionaire, has been quoted saying the racing is so bad he

wouldn't buy tickets and take his family to see it. The teams are constantly bickering about rules, a process that includes sanctioning body FIA and its committees.

The Grand Prix Drivers Association has recently gotten into the act by complaining about the series' rules process. Former champions Sebastian Vettel and Fernando Alonso, plus current champion Lewis Hamilton have spoken out, too. None of the participating parties, it seems, believe Formula 1 has the right formula for sustaining its fan base following several years of downward trends and ever-shifting race locations.

By comparison, NASCAR has undergone a successful makeover of its rules by instituting a low downforce package that has drivers, teams and manufacturers working together effectively, possibly even happily. The statistical results in terms of the competition support that point of view. Granted, five races do not a season make, but why don't

the TV ratings follow suit?

One point of view is that NASCAR resembles the current political realm, where opinions about candidates are formed less by actual facts and evidence and more by perception.

Given the new charter system, which guarantees a starting spot to 36 drivers and teams, NASCAR and its drivers may no longer be perceived as an everyman sport. While the reduction of the field to a maximum of 40 cars and only four positions available for non-charter teams has added to the quality of competition, it's also added to the perception that the little guy no longer has a chance to go from rags to riches by showing more skill and bravery.

So the perception of deserved opportunity is one thing, popularity among fans another. It will be interesting to see if the actual racing begins to draw more fans on TV and in grandstands as the season progresses — or if NASCAR's popularity is tied to something more illusory than outstanding racing.

UMaine

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ters that have lost a little bit of their mojo and a little bit of their confidence," Trimmer said. "You can't play this game without confidence."

Senior first baseman Brenden Geary is among the veterans who have struggled mightily at the plate. In 22 games, he's batting only .164 with two home runs and eight runs batted in.

The mental side of the game sometimes can lead to physical issues, so the key is remaining resilient.

"I just think we show up to the field every day with a positive mind, a positive attitude," Geary said. "It's a difficult time, and guys are going through some ups and downs."

Complicating the scenario is the fact the hitters in the middle of the batting order are scuffling simultaneously. That contingent includes senior outfielder Brett Chappell, who was 0-for-12 against Binghamton and has just two hits in his last 23 at-bats, along with transfer junior outfielder Tyler Schwanz (2-for-21) and senior catcher Kevin Stypulkowski (3-for-25).

"This isn't about practice, it's about mentally getting over a hump and trying to make sure that each and every day you're going out there and playing pitch to pitch and not trying to press too much," Trimmer said.

Freshman infielder Danny Casals leads UMaine with a .310 batting average, while only Stypulkowski (.274) and



ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN

University of Maine's Danny Casals connects with a pitch from Binghamton University during their game at Mahaney Diamond in Orono on Saturday.

freshman outfielder Colin Ridley (.274) are above .265.

This year's UMaine ball club features significant youth with three freshman starters in the infield and another competing for an outfield spot. Geary has

been around long enough to experience how quickly things can turn around.

"Coach Trimp's been saying that we need that one game to turn the ship around, and I totally agree with him," Geary said.

"We're too talented of a hitting group to be not putting up runs during games."

UMaine heads to Long Island for a three-game series against perennial league power Stony Brook on Saturday and Sunday.

Amaro

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uniform, which he is wearing this spring for the first time since 1998. Larry Bowa applauded him for his weight loss. Amaro said he lost between 15 and 20 pounds as he geared up to be on the field again.

He trained this winter hitting balls with a coach's fungo bat and threw batting practice with both hands. Amaro is ambidextrous. He is still perfecting his toss and his work is limited to the indoor batting cage. His pitching, Amaro said, is "not very good."

"It's not easy," Amaro said. "Especially with big leaguers. But I'm aspiring to try to get there."

Amaro is unsure of his future plans. He said might consider trying to become a manager. But he said he still has to learn to be a coach. Amaro said people often ask him what he missed when he entered the front office. He tells them

that he missed being in the clubhouse. And this spring, Amaro said, is reminding him how much he enjoyed it.

"I'm just glad to get this experience and opportunity to be on the dirt with players and being out here," Amaro said.

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