

Final Four Showdown in Minnesota

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After a wild weekend where the Sweet 16 slowly dwindled down to four teams, there was no shortage of action with March Madness living up to its name. Some notable moments include Zion Williamson playing his last college game at Duke, a pair of 2-seed SEC teams losing in OT, and all but one 1 seed being eliminated from the tournament. Although only .4% of the 18 million brackets on ESPN predicted this combination of Final Four teams, all four teams have been featured in the AP Top 10 at some point during the regular season. In addition, all four teams have elite coaches that have elevated their programs into elite powerhouses in their respective conferences in recent years.

The question moving forward is how well these teams will perform in a stage most have never experienced before. Outside of Michigan State, the remaining three teams haven't been to a Final Four since Virginia did 35 years ago. Nonetheless, the rare senior leadership found on these teams should help carry the load in an age that's been taken over by the one-and-done era. The chemistry prevalent in this group of programs enables the ability to spread the floor with multiple threats, rather than depending solely on one star for production. Looking forward, I will discuss the outlook for each of these teams going into the most important weekend of the season.

Virginia



Just one year after becoming the first 1-seed to lose to a 16-seed in tournament history, the Cavaliers have flipped the script in 2019. They find themselves in the Final Four for the first time since Jump by Van Halen was sitting atop the Billboard Music Charts. Entering the final weekend of the NCAA Basketball Season, Virginia has earned the title of betting favorite according to Las Vegas Sportsbooks, and sits as the highest remaining seed in the tournament.

The road to their current status started out smooth in the first two rounds, defeating Gardner-Webb and Oklahoma both by double digit margins. Since then, it has been anything but smooth sailing for the Cavaliers, duking it out in a low scoring affair with Oregon, and edging out Carsen Edwards and Purdue in an overtime thriller in the Elite 8. The postseason success thus far for this team has been impressive but not surprising, as their dedication to discipline on the defensive side of the ball has been unmatched amongst their competitors. One thing that shouldn't go unnoticed is how heavy of reliance that head coach Tony Bennett has used on a 6-man rotation through the first four rounds of play. This strays from his style of coaching used in the regular season and historically, opting to give 8 or 9 guys double digit minutes.

A week of layover between games should serve the team well, allowing players like Guard Ty Jerome to get some needed rest, after averaging over 39 minutes per game during the tournament. Jerome's performance has been vital the last 2 games, as he's averaged 18.5 points and 6.5 assists per game. Another key player to keep your eyes on is his counterpart in the backcourt Kyle Guy. He not only led the team in scoring, but also logged a double-double in the team's overtime win over Purdue. As for how they matchup against Auburn in the Final Four, there isn't any team that has the personnel to overwhelm Virginia outside of the juggernaut of Duke, who was sent home by Michigan State last round.

Auburn



Auburn is perhaps the most surprising team that worked their way into the Final Four, after suffering the devastating loss of forward Chuma Okeke in the second half of their Sweet 16 victory over 1-seed UNC. After completing the upset, Coach Bruce Pearl who is known to be fiery and loud was especially emotional about the injury, tearing up in an interview about the loss of his star player. Defying the odds, the team went on to win its next game a couple of days later against SEC rival Kentucky. The Tigers are definitely not your typical 5-seed, winning 14 of their last 15 games, and claiming their first SEC Tournament Championship since the mid-1980s.

As the lowest seed remaining in the tournament, Auburn has been quite an impressive Cinderella story, knocking off storied programs in Kansas, North Carolina, and Kentucky. Eliminating names like Bill Self, Roy Williams, and John Calipari is unheard of in itself, but the fashion they have done so has been astonishing. After a nail biter to start the tournament off, the Tigers have been all business and defeated each opponent by a minimum of six points. The loss of Chuma Okeke caused many to count out this team last weekend, however they proved everyone wrong as the rest of the team stepped up in a big way to win the Midwest region.

In response to the odds being stacked against them, the guard tandem of Jared Harper and Bryce Brown recorded their best games of the tournament, combining to score 50 of Auburn's 77 points last Sunday. Big scoring nights like these will be the X factor going forward for the Tigers, as they are currently the highest scoring team in the tournament through the first four rounds of play. This will be tough however, as they take on the top scoring defense of the tournament, only allowing an average of 52 points in their first 3 games of the tournament.

Michigan State



Spartan took down goliath last weekend, as they defeated a Duke roster loaded with future NBA talent. Coming off the biggest upset of the tournament, Tom Izzo has proven once again why he is regarded as one of the best coaches in the country and has been for so long. His excellence has been expanded upon in recent years, managing to earn 6 berths as a top 4 seed in the last 8 NCAA tournaments. This figure is especially impressive considering the rise in popularity of the one-and-done ideology taking away some of the team's best recruits to the NBA after just one season.

Just a short couple of months ago, it appeared as if the Spartans were falling apart, dropping three straight games to unranked opponents. The Big 10 Champions have peaked at the right time, defeating Michigan, LSU, and Duke all in their last 5 games. Michigan State has been no stranger to deep postseason runs, winning 13 NCAA tournament games since 2014. However, they have historically struggled to advance beyond the invisible barrier of the Final Four, last doing so back in 2009 when they lost the National Championship Game in their home state to North Carolina.

Thus far in the tournament, Cassius Winston has established himself as the leader of this squad, averaging 19 points and 7.8 assists per game in tournament play. This has come to surprise no one, as these stat lines almost perfectly mirror his regular season average in each category. As for the most clutch performance of their postseason run, Forward Xavier Tillman played his best game of the season against Duke, with 19 points and 9 rebounds against the team no one thought could be beaten. Michigan State will need a great week of practice and film study to prepare for a hot Texas Tech team with an arsenal full of shooters and speedy perimeter players.

Texas Tech



Just a few short years ago, Texas Tech held the reputation of a bottom feeder and the laughing stock of Big 12 Basketball. Since hiring former assistant Chris Beard in 2016, the program has switched trajectories entirely, becoming one of the top teams in the conference each year. Coming off an improbable Elite 8 run in 2018, Texas Tech continues to shock the college basketball world, sealing their first Final Four bid in school history. This is an accomplishment that not even coaching legend Bob Knight could achieve in his eight years with the team in the early 2000s.

The Red Raiders just delivered the most important weekend in program history, destroying Michigan and taking down Gonzaga in Anaheim to punch a ticket to Minnesota. Perhaps an extra source of motivation spurred from the surprise of Davide Moretti's family coming to watch him play from overseas in Spain. Not to knock the team's success, but Tech definitely benefitted from being placed in the weakest region of the bracket in my opinion, with the easiest road to the Final Four relative to the remaining teams.

Carrying the largest portion of the load for the Red Raiders is 2nd-Team All-American Jarrett Culver. The hometown product is averaging 21.5 points and 7.3 rebounds per game in the tournament. One thing that differentiates this team from the others in the Final Four is Chris Beard's use of an eight man rotation, giving a larger number of guys double digit minutes and keeping his starters fresh for big moments rather than burning them out 35 minutes plus a game.