

CHAMPION: HOUSTON COUGERS

It has been an outstanding season for the Cougars with Head Coach Kelvin Simpson, finishing the regular season with a 30-4 record. Houston has one of the better all-around teams in the tournament. The Cougars will be headed into the dance with a Big 12 regular season title and the #1 ranked defense. The six foot senior guard, Jamal Shead, has been an amazing piece for the Cougars, earning the award Big 12 Player of the Year. Shead is the only student-athlete in the nation to rank among the Top-20 individual leaders in assists per game, steals per game, and assist-turnover ratio. In conference games, Shead ranked sixth in scoring, sixth in field goal percentage, second in assists, third in steals, and first in assist/TO ratio. Shead was also a two-time Big 12 Player of the Week selection, and brings a lockdown man to man defense while being able to be a huge part of the offense as well. Head Coach Kelvin Simpson, who has led the Cougars to a Big 12 regular season title and Tournament Championship, finished with a 15-3 conference record and was named Big 12 Coach of the Year. He brings a smart defensive mind to the table, and it will be hard to out-coach him on the defensive side of the ball in the tournament. Baylor transfer L.J. Cryer is leading the team in points per game, averaging 15.3 points, and was named All-Big 12 Second Team. The Cougars are the team to beat, but it won't be easy with Cryer and Shead on the court. Houston finished last season with a 33-4 record, losing to No. 5 seed Miami in the Sweet 16. With Big 12 Player of the Year and Coach of the Year, the Cougars have the best chance of winning it all this year.

SLEEPER: NC STATE WOLFPACK

The Wolfpack have had one heck of a season, boasting a 22-14 record. North Carolina State had a great run in the ACC Tournament, beating out No. 11 Duke and No. 4 North Carolina to win their Conference Tournament. This team's resume may not seem like the sleeper kind having a 9-11 conference record, but the Wolfpack have some outstanding players and have proven to outlast good teams in close games. Star Senior Guard D.J. Horne has been an excellent player for the Pack, speeding up the game while leading the team with 16.7 points per game and was honored with the All-ACC Third Team. Horne is headed into March helping the Pack win a big game against No. 4 North Carolina racking up 29 points and will be the guy to not let get hot in March. Standing at six foot nine 275 pounds D.J. Burns Jr. the absolute freak of an athlete has been the difference for the Pack averaging 12.8 points per game and 4.1 rebounds. State is ranked 58th in fast break points averaging 12.34 points per game, 88th in Steals averaging 7.3, and 91st in Scoring averaging 76.5 points per game. Those numbers may not seem like the best, but in March those numbers can increase rapidly with one shot. The Pack didn't have many players win an award but the depth on their team is what will get them far in the tournament having four players average 11 plus points per game. The Wolfpack are headed into the tournament hot with a 5-0 record in March. The Wolfpack are the No. 11 seed and will face a tough No. 6 seed Texas Tech team but should push through the Red Raiders with their big fellas and D.J. Horne making key plays for the Pack.

NCAA MARCH MADNESS PREDICTIONS
BY: MITCHELL GRANDJEAN
STAFF WRITER

OVERRATED: ALABAMA CRIMSON TIDE

The Crimson Tide finished the regular season 21-11 with a 13-5 conference record, which is impressive for a team in the SEC. Alabama also has the No. 1-ranked offense in the nation, putting up an average of 90.8 points per game. The problem is that Alabama's defense allows an average of 81.1 points per game, and the Tide have not shown up in big games recording a 2-7 record against top 25 teams such as Tennessee, Auburn, Kentucky, Arizona, Purdue and Creighton. The Crimson Tide defense has cost them the win in many of those games. Alabama has the 3rd hardest schedule but only has 4 Quad-1 wins out of 14. Yes, Alabama has been challenged by good teams, but only pulling out two wins of nine games against the top 25 teams shows that Alabama doesn't have the toughness to win in March. Alabama only had one player to win an award this season, Mark Sears, who was honored with All-SEC First Team and has been phenomenal for the Tide. Sears leads the team in points per game with 21.1 and shoots 43.1% from three, which is a big factor for the Tide and will be huge for winning games in March. Although, even with Sears doing good, his teammates have not backed him up in big games, shooting 29% from three without Sears. Alabama is also ranked 336th in fouls per game with an average of 19.9, which No. 13 seed, Charleston, looks to take advantage of shooting 72% on free throws. Although having the first-ranked offense, if a team can't get rebounds or stop a team from getting hot from three, the Tide won't make it far this March.

CINDERELLA: JAMES MADISON DUKES

Anytime a team can win 30 games, it shows that you're a very special team. The Dukes started the season off great, beating No. 4 Michigan State in their own house. Following that game, they scored two 100+ point games, putting them in the AP Top 25. All-SBC Player of the Year, Terrence Edwards Jr., has been the difference for the Dukes. Edwards Jr. scored in double figures in 28 of James Madison's 31 games while registering at least 20 points on 10 different occasions during the regular season. Edwards Jr. is also ranked seventh in free throw percentage (.819), eighth in field goal percentage (.431), and ninth in assists per game (3.3). A three-time Sun Belt Player of the Week honoree will be the spark for James Madison in the tournament. T.J. Bickerstaff can do it all as well; he led the Dukes with 8.4 rebounds per game and was second in scoring with 13.9 points per game. T.J. was named Newcomer of the Year and All-SBC Second Team. Bickerstaff has recorded 11 double-doubles throughout the season so far and will be the man alongside Edwards Jr. to get the Dukes going. James Madison has a 2-2 Quad 1 record but don't be fooled because the Dukes can get hot at any moment. The Dukes have had a great start to March, winning their conference and are headed into the tournament with a 13 game win streak. The Dukes will face No.5 Wisconsin in the first round, but they should pull it off with their outstanding execution on offense.

