

ASU Denied a Ticket to the Dance

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This article in USA Today is the first of several national sports comments expressing disbelief that ASU is not invited to the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament.

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Selectors could say no to 25-7 Appalachian despite a mountain of impressive victories

They were down this week, way up in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Boone, N.C. There was no basketball, only seconds ticking like hours, days moving like months. Pins and needles served as seat cushions.

"I know I look like I'm 18," Appalachian State basketball coach Houston Fancher told me Thursday, "but after this weekend, I might be 41 going on 72. These last few days have been the longest in my life. We've been left to twist in the wind."



Commentary

By Jon Saraceno

The source of his consternation: Is it possible that a 25-win team — one with victories against Virginia, Vanderbilt and Davidson — won't be invited to the NCAA's big hoops dance by Selection Sunday? It is not only possible — it is likely. That's unfortunate because the NCAA needs the excitement of more mid-major entrants. Although the Mountaineers have an impressive RPI of 61, it might be a case of RIP when it comes to

making the highly competitive field of 65.

The Southern Conference never has had two teams in the tournament. (Davidson has an automatic-bid reservation.) Some particularly fearful Mountaineers fans also fret about a highly unlikely snub by the NIT, because of the school's limited national stature and lack of ticket-selling appeal. Appalachian, a Division I team since the 1971-72 season, has advanced to the NCAA tourney only twice, in 1979 and 2000, and never has been chosen by the NIT.

Come discussion time by the NCAA's tournament selection committee, Appalachian needs a strong, convincing advocate to lead the charge for an at-large.

For years, Appalachian wandered the college hoops wilderness. Only four years ago, the Mountaineers were 9-21. Last year, they were 14-16.

This season, they were a school-best 25-7.

"It's hard to get wins," Fancher said. "We're standing here with 25 of 'em at the end of the season. We feel like we did what we could do by stepping out of the conference and playing some of the big boys."

"There will come a time in that room or closet or wherever they're in that somebody's going to stand up and say, 'Do they deserve to be here — or does the eighth-place team in the ACC deserve to be here?' You can throw all the computer rankings and nitty-gritty sheets out the window. (College of Charleston coach) Bobby Cremins said if Appalachian isn't allowed into the tournament because of that one loss, he thinks there is a flaw in the system somewhere."

Keeping score

Jon Saraceno's column appears Mon., Wed. and Fri.

The Mountaineers are 4-0 against tournament teams Virginia Commonwealth and Davidson and likely entries Virginia and Vanderbilt. On consecutive nights in the San Juan Shootout they beat Virginia, Central Florida and Vanderbilt. They won at Wichita State when the Shockers still had a pulse. They were down 16 at VCU and won. Their strength of schedule in non-conference games: fourth most-difficult.

They are 5-2 against top-100 RPI teams. Since transfer Donte Minter became eligible in mid-December, they are 20-4, including 5-0 vs. RPI top-100 teams.

They never lost back-to-back games and lost only twice, both in overtime and on the road, since Jan. 29.

(Of course, Appalachian was blown out early on at Clemson by 30 and lost 69-37 at Virginia Tech. It also had losses to — yikes — Elon and Furman.)

What left the Mountaineers in a valley of near-despair was their semifinal ouster in the conference tournament last week. They had defeated the College of Charleston twice but lost the third 89-87 in OT.

The Cougars' Dontaye Draper had a career-night (38 points). Appalachian's top scorer, DJ Thompson, was lost in basketball's version of the Twilight Zone: He missed every shot (0 for 14) during regulation. Minter missed a free throw with two seconds left that, ostensibly, would have won the game in regulation.

"It was devastating," senior guard Demetrius Scott said. "We've worked so hard the last four years to get the program to a level where we get national attention. It all came crashing down in one night."

Goodbye automatic bid.

Hello horror show.

"Our biggest (challenge) was trying to get back on our feet emotionally — the kids were absolutely crushed," Fancher said. "I mean, they didn't eat for a couple of days. Obviously, I don't want them to fast, but I'm glad we're to the point where that game meant so much."

The waiting is nearly over. At stake is more than a game. It is about rewarding a deserving team. And national exposure. Some folks aren't sure how to say the North Carolina school's name. (App-a-lache-un or App-a-latch-un? It's the latter.)

"We win 25 games, and now everybody wants to know how it's pronounced," Fancher said, laughing.

We hope, by Sunday, the rest of the nation knows.

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