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Top 5 teams with most room to improve

By Miles Simon

With conference play upon us, it’s about the point of the season where we know what to expect out of most teams. For some, however, that's not exactly the case. Certain groups have the potential to go from merely good to great -- from a fringe tournament team to a high seed in March.

Which teams boast the capability of performing at a higher level for the rest of the season? Let’s take a look.

Harvard Crimson

Harvard did things last season that no other team in program history had done by going to the round of 32 in the NCAA tournament. This season, the Crimson have a chance to accomplish more. They are 14-3 with their only losses coming on the road against Colorado, Connecticut and Florida Atlantic.

Brandyn Curry and Kyle Casey, two of Harvard's best players, sat out last season due to an academic scandal but are back. Both Curry and Casey are All-Ivy players who now blend in well with budding stars Siyani Chambers and Wesley Saunders.

Curry, a point guard, is playing off the ball more because Chambers has really taken command of this team. Curry and Chambers form a dangerous combo when playing together, but it’s happened only seven times this season (due to injury issues). If Curry can get healthy and find a good rhythm with Chambers, this will give the Crimson an experienced backcourt with two really good playmakers.

Casey has seemed to fit in seamlessly after not playing last season, as he is the team’s third leading scorer at 10.8 points per game.

The player who benefited most from Curry and Casey being gone in 2012-13 was Saunders, who many expected to be a nice role player. He was thrust into the spotlight and ended up shining brightly. Saunders went from 3.3 points per game as a freshman to 16.2 points per game and a first-team All-Ivy selection as a sophomore.

If Kenyatta Smith, who started 15 games last season and was a factor in the paint, returns from a left foot injury, this team could make more noise than ever before.

Michigan Wolverines

When the Wolverines went 6-4 in their first 10 games and then lost one of their star players in Mitch McGary to season-ending back surgery, things in Ann Arbor weren't looking very
bright. However, it's been a month since they lost at home to Arizona, and the Wolverines are on a seven-game winning streak.

John Beilein's team has a chance to continue to improve for a few reasons. The first is that the Wolverines are learning to play without McGary in the middle. Jon Horford and Jordan Morgan are splitting the minutes in the post area and are doing a great job of holding down the paint. In Saturday's win at Wisconsin, they went a combined 6-for-6 from the field with 15 rebounds and five blocks in 38 minutes.

Another reason is the play of freshman point guard Derrick Walton Jr., who has greatly improved since the start of the season. He has scored in double figures in three of the past four games and seems much more comfortable running the team. In their four losses, he never played more than 26 minutes. But in the past three games, he has averaged 32 minutes per game. As his confidence continues to grow, this team will get better.

Lastly, Nik Stauskas has shown that he's a legitimate Big Ten Player of the Year candidate. He is scoring at a high level but has also become a playmaker for this team with 24 assists and only seven turnovers in league play.

The Wolverines are getting contributions from a lot of guys, which bodes well for the rest of the season.

Kentucky Wildcats

Everyone knows that Kentucky is a young team, and with any inexperienced group in basketball, there are going to be some bumps in the road during the season. Most coaches would say the hardest thing to teach freshmen is defense at the college level, and in saying that, this team knows how to guard. The Wildcats rank No. 13 in the nation for effective field goal percentage defense (43.3 percent, according to KenPom). It may not be perfect every game, but the effort is there. Add in the fact that they are a dominant rebounding team, grabbing 13 more boards than their opponents each night, and you can see that they have a will to win.

Andrew Harrison and Aaron Harrison haven't been spectacular, but they’re showing improvement. Andrew, following one of his worst games in the loss at Arkansas, bounced back against Tennessee with a career-high 26 points. James Young and Julius Randle have been excellent throughout most of the season and have the capabilities of putting a team on their back for stretches. John Calipari has one of the best rim protectors in the game in Willie Cauley-Stein, who can change a game on the defensive end. Kentucky’s group of young players has had to grow up in a hurry, but if it can continue to find some continuity on the offensive end, look out come March.

Florida Gators

Billy Donovan has arguably his toughest team in the past few seasons down in Gainesville. The 2012-13 Gators were 0-6 in games decided by nine points or fewer, but this season there is a turnaround in that category, as they are 7-2 in such games.

Florida, though ranked No. 6 in the nation, has room to get even better. The Gators have
had to deal with suspensions (Scottie Wilbekin, Dorian Finney-Smith and Damontre Harris) and injuries (Kasey Hill and Casey Prather) and still find themselves as one of the best teams in the country.

Wilbekin has become the leader of this team and really matured as a person through his suspension. He is as tough as they come. A great example came against Arkansas, where he was a game-time decision but played. He hit the tying basket to send the game into overtime, and the Gators ended up pulling out a tough road win.

Prather recently missed two games with a bone bruise in his knee, though Florida didn't miss a beat. In his first game back against Auburn, he scored 21 points off the bench.

There is still the possibility that heralded freshman Chris Walker could play this season (eligibility issues), and he would add frontcourt depth behind Patric Young.

With the Gators already having faced a lot of adversity and having the ability to stay together throughout the first half of the season, I imagine them getting better as time goes on. As long as health problems don't derail this team, expect the Gators to go far.

**Kansas Jayhawks**

Bill Self probably has some regret over playing the toughest nonconference schedule in the country, but it's paying dividends as the Jayhawks start league play.

Let’s start with freshman center Joel Embiid and his emergence as a star. Embiid didn't even start the first eight games of the season, and now he is being touted as the No. 1 pick in the NBA draft. He is dominating games on the defensive end, but his offense is coming around so quickly that he commands double-teams any time he touches the ball in the post. Not many college players get that type of attention.

Andrew Wiggins could be more aggressive, but he seems to put the team above all else. He rebounds really well and is the Jayhawks’ best perimeter defender.

Point guard play is still the biggest concern for this team going forward, but Naadir Tharpe has played well of late. Against top-10 teams Iowa State and Oklahoma State, he averaged 22 points and five assists while missing only three shots. The one drawback is that he turned the ball over 10 times in those games.

He wasn't the only one, though, as Kansas as a whole had 43 turnovers in those wins. Tharpe and Frank Mason are better than they were at the beginning of the season, but they’ll need to have a steadier hand going forward.

With depth in the frontcourt from Perry Ellis, Tarik Black and Jamari Traylor, Kansas has a lot of options. Self's teams always seem to get better in February and March, and it looks like this group will be no different.