Devilishly good, times three

Jack Styczynski
Every five years since 1997, Basketball Times has evaluated the best of the best NCAA programs – those that have won two-thirds of their games over 10 seasons. And for a third time in a row, the winner is the one located in Durham, N.C.

Devilishly good, times three

By Jack Styczynski

The 2007 edition also hypothesized that Wisconsin, Ohio State, Winthrop, Nevada, VCU and Vermont might be new entries in this year’s version, and all but Winthrop were. They were joined by Belmont, BYU, Davidson, Marquette, Old Dominion and Saint Mary’s as maiden qualifiers. Louisville and UNLV also rejoined the party after having been absent since 1997.

UCLA, which had run of three straight Final Fours during the decade, did not qualify for the second straight time. The Ivy League is not represented for the first time, although the number of mid-major qualifiers continues to grow and has never been higher. With that, it’s time to rank 2012’s top programs using six equally weighted criteria.

The first ranking criterion is the 10-year winning percentage used to determine the project qualifiers. Kansas returned to the top spot it held in 2002, winning better than 83 percent of its games, a mark bested only by Duke in the past five years. The Ivy League is not represented for the first time, and in fact all three did, leaving Arizona, Connecticut, Duke, Kansas, Kentucky, Murray State, North Carolina, Syracuse and Xavier as the only schools that have qualified every time the project has been done.

Xavier coach Chris Mack called it “humbling” to be in such company.

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In the case of Arizona, the program would not have qualified had the 19 wins nullified by the NCAA in the 2007-08 season been discounted. Memphis also had 38 victories vacated that same season, but the Tigers would qualify even without them, just dropping down a couple of spots in the winning percentage rankings. Regardless, all the wins were counted for both teams as they occurred on the court.

For the third straight time, Duke tops the Basketball Times semi-decennial analytical ranking of Division I programs that have won two-thirds of their games over the past 10 seasons. A record 33 schools made the cut in 2012, with the nearest misses being Notre Dame and San Diego State. All four times the project has been undertaken since 1997, the “two-thirds criterion” eliminated no national champions from the previous decade.

The last installment in this series five years ago foresaw the possibility of Cincinnati, Oklahoma and Utah dropping from the ranks of the elite, and in fact all three did, leaving Arizona, Connecticut, Duke, Kansas, Kentucky, Murray State, North Carolina, Syracuse and Xavier as the only schools that have qualified every time the project has been done. Xavier coach Chris Mack called it “humbled” to be in such company.

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ficult to purge. I don’t envy Josh Pastner’s task as Memphis or Dave Rice’s at UNLV.

When it came to assessing coaches, Michigan State’s Tom Izzo outpolled Duke’s Mike Krzyzewski, knocking the latter from his perch atop the poll in 2007 and 2002. The two split all the first-place votes, with Izzo garnering six and Krzyzewski four. Izzo did not receive a single vote below third. One panelist said, “If I were a coach, I would want to be Tom Izzo. He’s a great coach. Give me two teams with equal talent in a must-win game, with only 24 hours to prepare, and I’ll pick Izzo to coach them. And he’s a genuinely good guy. He’s grounded. He remembers his roots. He’s thoroughly approachable. That’s where I give him the nod over K.”

Butler’s Brad Stevens also deserves recognition for finishing a solid third, far ahead of fourth place Bo Ryan of Wisconsin. Stevens was the only coach besides Izzo and Krzyzewski not to get a double-digit vote. As a relative

unknown five years ago before leading Butler to two national championship games, he placed 26th. When told of his leap to third, he joked that it was “bad voting,” but then said it “really means a lot” to be mentioned with a pair of highly respected coaches.

“Those two are light years ahead of me, and there’s a bunch more that are, too,” he insisted. “To even be in the same breath as those guys is flattering.”

At the other end of the spectrum was new Connecticut coach Kevin Ollie, which is to be expected given that he’s yet to coach a game. However, the poll was originally conducted before his predecessor Jim Calhoun’s retirement, and the three-time national championship winning coach also finished last before panelists were given a chance to adjust their votes for Ollie. When he learned both finished last, he responded, “Calhoun earned his low ranking. Ollie has a chance to dig out.” Obviously, voters didn’t much care for Calhoun’s suitability to guide young men.

Just as clearly, the same sentiment extended to the cleanliness poll, where Connecticut also landed at the bottom. Every vote for the team banned from 2013 postseason play was either last or next to last. One panelist summed it up by saying “it was heartbreakingly to see this program win a national title in 2011. From academic failure to rules violations to a long list of players with criminal behavior. The sleaziest major college program in the country.”

Mid-majors fared best in terms of cleanliness, with Butler edging Davidson for the top spot, which Stevens called “a source of pride.” Duke was tops among the majors, finishing third. Worth noting was Xavier’s drop from sixth place in 2007 to 23rd in 2012. An ugly on-court brawl last season undoubtedly didn’t help when voters consid-

ered the “upstanding citizens” criterion, but Mack defend-
ed his program. “We do it the right way,” he said. “It was an unfortunate incident, but it’s certainly one that’s in the rear-view mirror. No program’s gonna go without its hic-
cups.” Lastly, for anyone thinking Kentucky’s 52nd-place finish was strictly an “anti-Calipari” vote, consider that the program also finished in the bottom five the last two times the poll was conducted, pre-Calipari.

With the six ranking criteria compiled, the overall rankings were determined. Each school’s average rank was computed by adding together its rankings in the various categories and dividing by six. The 33 programs are ranked in order of lowest to highest average rank, and the Duke dynasty delivers again.

So as we conclude the 2012 edition and look ahead to 2017, many questions come to mind.

Will Connecticut remain among the top programs without Jim Calhoun at the helm? What about Arizona as the Lute Olson years fade from view?

Can UCLA and Indiana win enough to overcome some poor seasons and retake their places among the elite?

Will Tommy Amaker stick at Harvard long enough to get the Ivy League back in the picture?

How much effect will the recent conference shakeups have on college basketball’s power structure? Will teams fare better or worse in their new or reconstituted leagues?

And once again, can anyone overtake Duke?

Back in 60 months.

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