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Bedeviled, four times in a row

Jack Styczynski
Basketball Times has evaluated the nation's top programs — those that have won two-thirds of their games over 10 seasons — every five years since 1997.

The challengers have changed, but the champions continue to reside at Duke.

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By Jack Styczynski

You might think the coordinator of this project is a Duke fan.

Not true.

Like, really not true.

For the fourth 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 35 schools made the cut, with the nearest miss being Creighton, an agonizing one win short of qualifying. All five times the project has been undertaken since 1997, the “two-thirds criterion” has eliminated no national champions from the previous decade.

This time, that includes the 2010 and 2015 champ. As one project contributor put it, “Although Duke has sold out to the one-and-done culture in order to compete for championships, the academic/basketball combination is still the best.”

There remain a “fine nine” programs that have qualified for every edition of the project. Along with Duke, they are Arizona, Connecticut, Kansas, Kentucky, Murray State, North Carolina, Syracuse and Xavier.

Conversely, eight schools qualified for the first time in 2017. Three more — New Mexico, Purdue and UCLA — returned to the ranks after being absent since 2002. Creighton was one of nine dropping off the list.

With that, it’s time to rank 2017’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 held on to the top spot, winning better than 84 percent of its games, a mark bested only by Duke in the 2007 edition. The Jayhawks have finished either first or second in this category in each of these projects.

Perhaps most surprising is how far some first-time qualifiers rocketed up the list. Stephen F. Austin, Wichita State and Villanova each ranked in the top 10, all winning closer to three-quarters of their games.

For Arizona, Memphis and Syracuse, their winning percentages include victories vacated by the NCAA over the past decade. Had the wins been subtracted, all three still would have qualified for the project, but their rankings in this category would have been lower.

The second-ranking criterion is the number of former players in the NBA, as listed on team rosters on Oct. 12. Not surprisingly, Kentucky was the leader for the second straight time, but the “one-and-done” era has had a huge effect on the number at the top.

In the first three editions of the project in 1997, 2002 and 2007, North Carolina led the way with 14 players, whereas Kentucky doubled that in 2017. This is the one category where it’s understood that major programs will normally have a decided advantage over mid-majors, and it’s accepted — even valued — since players often choose a school based on its ability to produce professionals.

For all categories, ties are awarded the preferable ranking.

The third ranking criterion is the four-class team graduation rate for incoming freshmen, as listed in the 2017 NCAA graduation rates report. Data are only for the four classes of freshmen on athletic scholarship who entered from 2007-10 and indicate the percentage graduating within six years. Incoming transfers are not included. The numbers ranged from 100 percent (Belmont) to 7 percent (UCLA).

Given that time frame, it’s probably too soon to assess the full effect of the “one-and-done” era on graduation rates. Programs embracing the recruiting strategy might still see their rates decline in future years.

Absent a coaching change or scandal, this is the only category where Duke seems even the bit least vulnerable going forward.

The fourth ranking criterion is the academic peer assessment score, as listed in the U.S. News & World Report 2017 analysis of America’s Best Colleges. This criterion complements a school’s graduation rate with the (perceived) value of its diploma. A peer assessment score of 5.0 is the highest possible.

Aside from determining which schools have the 10-year winning percentage necessary to qualify, the final two ranking criteria comprise the most anticipated part of the project. A panel of 10 writers from Basketball Times and the USBWA ranked the
head coaches and the perceived “cleanliness” of the programs.

Coaches were assessed both on their ability to win and their suitability to guide young men. There’s no contention these are the best 35 coaches in America, although it should be noted that the nine active coaches who’ve won a national championship are all included.

“Cleanliness” was defined as a program’s ability to avoid run-ins with the NCAA (or practices considered risky in that regard) and produce upstanding citizens amongst its players.

The criteria are subjective, but discreet polls are designed to reduce individual bias. Points were awarded on a sliding scale, from 35 points for a first-place vote to one point for a last-place vote, with 350 being the highest possible cumulative score.

Special thanks to Nicole Auerbach, Rick Bozich, Ken Davis, Blair Kerkhoff, Angela Lento, Mike Lopresti, Randy McClure, Kevin McNamara, Mike Waters, and Dick “Hoops” Weiss for serving on the 2017 panel. Four of them were first-time participants.

Kerkhoff and McNamara each participated three times before, Bozich, twice, and Davis, Waters and Weiss once.

In the coaching poll, Duke’s Mike Krzyzewski reclaimed the top spot he lost to Michigan State’s Tom Izzo in the 2012 edition, garnering seven of 10 first-place votes. “The Blue Devils may be easy to hate by fans across America, but there can be no argument regarding Coach K,” commented one panelist.

First-time entrant Jay Wright of Villanova actually pushed Izzo down one more spot, placing second. “The new king of the Big East is getting the job done the right way,” said one voter. “As a bonus, maybe he could pass along his sense of fashion,” quipped another.

Another debut entrant, Notre Dame’s Mike Brey, finished fourth, including a first-place vote. “The program is classy, and so is he,” said that panelist. “It’d be a good place for a son to spend four years.”

Kentucky’s John Calipari and Xavier’s Chris Mack made the biggest leaps in the last five years, jumping 13 and 12 spots respectively. For the former, it might be an indication the “one-and-done” recruiting strategy is becoming less controversial.

Louisville interim coach David Padgett finished last after the panel was asked to adjust an earlier vote that put predecessor Rick Pitino 20th prior to a federal bribery investigation that prompted the switch. Most felt Padgett didn’t have enough of a track record to place anywhere else. One put him at the bottom with an asterisk, believing there was nothing to base it on.

“Two years ago, he was the director of basketball operations,” another said. “He may end up being a very good coach, but there isn’t much of a sample size to rate him very high at the moment.”

“This isn’t meant as a personal indictment of David Padgett,” added a third panelist. “I just think he’s been thrust into a terrible situation. I have grave concerns for how the administration has responded to recent scandals. If Padgett were at another school, maybe I would allow my son to play for him, but Padgett’s at Louisville, and between the stripper scandal and the recent FBI revelations, I can’t think of a program where I’d have more concerns for my son’s welfare.”

In the cleanliness poll, Davidson and Butler swapped the top two positions from the previous edition.

Most notable in this category was the precipitous drop of North Carolina. Once ranked among the cleanest programs qualifying for this project, the Tar Heels had fallen to mid-pack by No.12 and are now near the bottom of the list, no doubt due to the school’s much-publicized academic scandal and subsequent NCAA investigation.

Louisville finished last, which was no surprise given that the Cardinals face having many wins – and possibly a national championship – vacated by the NCAA. In fact, that placement came even before additional recruiting infractions were alleged as part of the aforementioned federal investigation. While Louisville had no further to fall in the poll, Arizona dropped from 12th to 29th after the panel was permitted to adjust rankings following the arrest of Wildcats assistant coach Book Richardson on bribery and fraud charges as a result of the same investigation.

Prior to that, one prescient panelist admitted to ranking on the theory that championship-caliber programs must get their hands dirty to recruit the best players in the country, looking very wise when the FBI news broke. And more headlines are expected, maybe even by the time you read this.

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 35 programs are ranked in order of lowest to highest average rank, and once again, Duke left everyone else “bedeviled,” this time by the largest margin in project history.

So as we conclude the 2017 edition and look ahead to 2022, several questions come to mind.

With its investigation ongoing, will the FBI totally scramble the college basketball power structure? Or will this merely reinforce the conference structure?

Either way, who’s most susceptible to falling from the “fine nine” programs? Syracuse, as the conference program is 22nd in the nation. No other team with a better overall record since the 1993 NCAA tournament made the list. Duke was third, with a perfect 37-0 record, followed by Virginia, Kentucky, and Villanova.

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