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WISCONSIN MEN'S BASKETBALL

Badgers need to make most of NIT



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Wisconsin's Chucky Hepburn steals the ball from Ohio State's Bruce Thornton during Wednesday's Big Ten Tournament opener at the United Center in Chicago.

Missing NCAA tourney disappointing, but different opportunity is still valuable

MADISON — The Wisconsin State Journal produced a 20-page special section in 1989 when the University of Wisconsin men's basketball team was selected to play in the National Invitation Tournament. That may sound like overkill, but the Badgers ending a 42-year postseason drought was a big deal at the



JIM POLZIN

time.

My, have times changed for this program. (And sadly for the newspaper business, too, but I digress.)

UW (17-14) is back in the NIT for the first time since 1996 and will host Bradley (25-9), the regular-season champion of the Missouri Valley Conference, on Tuesday night. I'll be curious to see what the turnout is like at the Kohl Center to mark this, umm, occasion.

It's one thing for fans to check out on a season before it's over. The bigger issue for me: Can UW coach Greg Gard get his team motivated to play in this event after it was left out — rightfully so, by the way — of the NCAA Tournament?

That inevitability was something Gard began preparing the



UP NEXT

WHAT: National Invitation Tournament, first round
WHO: Wisconsin (17-14) vs. Bradley (25-9)
WHEN: 8:30 p.m. Tuesday
WHERE: Kohl Center, Madison
TV: ESPN

Badgers for Thursday after they returned home from Chicago, where their brief stay in the Big Ten tournament ended a day earlier with a 65-57 loss to Ohio State in the first round.

"It's another opportunity for us to play a really good team," Gard said late Sunday night, "and we have to prepare as

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NASCAR

Byron emerging as star

Wins adding up for Hendrick's deep lineup

DAVID BRANDT
Associated Press

AVONDALE, Ariz. — Kyle Larson is widely considered to be the most naturally-gifted driver at Hendrick Motorsports and there's little doubt that Chase Elliott is the most popular.

But as of March 2023, William Byron might just be the team's best driver.

It's been a slow, steady rise for Byron, who has won two straight NASCAR Cup Series races after pushing past Larson in overtime on Sunday at Phoenix Raceway during a pair of frantic restarts. The 25-year-old won in remarkably similar fashion last week at Las Vegas.

"We have four capable teams and four capable drivers of carrying the banner every weekend," Byron's crew chief Rudy Fugle said. "Pretty amazing."

Byron got a relatively late start in racing as a teenager, but has been a quick study. The North Carolina native won twice last season and now looks like a weekly threat while teaming with Fugle.

This is Byron's sixth season with Hendrick Motorsports and he received a contact extension last season after winning two races early in the year at Atlanta and Martinsville. He had a mid-season lull before closing with seven top 10s in his final 11 races and finished sixth in the Cup standings.

It's part of a progression that's slowly pushed him among NASCAR's elite drivers. He was 21st overall in his first full Cup season in 2018, before improving to 11th, 14th, 10th and then sixth in the ensuing years.

Now with two wins in the season's first four races, it's clear

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COMMENTARY



TODD SOMMERFELDT, LA CROSSE TRIBUNE

Aquinas girls basketball coach Dave Donarski talks to his daughter Macy during a game at Central this season. With Dave coaching and Lexi and Macy playing on the team the past seven seasons, the Bugolds have won 178 of 189 games and qualified for six WIAA championship games.

A legacy tough to top

Donarskis teamed for incredible seven-year run at Aquinas

GREEN BAY — Macy Donarski hugged her dad and told him not to break down, but they were both already sobbing.

She knew the questions that Dave was about to answer because she just answered some of them.

The Donarskis expected tears at the Resch Center on Saturday, but they expected most of them to be of the happy variety. With the kind of season the Bugolds had, that was realistic.

A 64-51 loss to Laconia in the WIAA Division 4 championship game made what could have

been a day of mixed emotions much tougher.

The next time Dave coaches a basketball team, it won't have one of his daughters running the offense.

The next time Macy suits up to play a basketball game, Dave won't be her coach.

That reality was difficult to accept.

"I don't like it," Macy said with those tears running down her face. "I'm definitely excited for the future, but it's going to be a really different dynamic without my dad there."

"The way he was able to challenge me, bring out different parts of my game and just teach me the love of basketball and how that works ... I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Dave joked that his "encouragement" might land Macy in



M. Donarski



L. Donarski

therapy one day because he was so hard on her. He was. Older sister Lexi dealt with it, too, but the sisters understood the source of the expectations he had for them.

That relationship makes sense. It might be difficult to navigate, but it makes sense. Despite the bond that he has created with all of his past and current players, there are none exactly like those he shares with his daughters.

Don't forget Pam Donarski in any of this, either. She coached the girls as much as Dave did, especially when they were younger.

When Lexi graduated and moved on to play at Iowa State University, Dave knew he still had Macy for three years and it softened the blow to an extent.

He wasn't psyched about turning Lexi loose on the world, and he isn't ready for Macy to leave for the University of Montana yet, either.

Any parent can relate. But basketball has always meant so much to this family, and that was a side of them that the community was able to experience, too. Some didn't like it, and some didn't appreciate it. Winning so often can do that.

The only reason they were able to do that was through the work they did together and with friends over the course of nearly 20 years.

"When you've coached your kids since they were 2, and you know how much time you've spent working on the craft, becoming a great ball handler, making 10,000 or 15,000 shots a summer, essentially brainwashing them into loving

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COLLEGE MEN'S BASKETBALL

Madness teams bring talent

Baggage also an issue for top qualifiers

EDDIE PELLIS
Associated Press

Kansas and Alabama are no strangers to playing for national championships.

For the Jayhawks, another high-expectations trip to March Madness is a rite of spring. For the Crimson Tide, well, this path to glory travels through some unfamiliar ground — the basketball court.

Alabama rolls in as the top

overall seed in an NCAA Tournament that feels both familiar and foreign this season. Yes, there are plenty of heartwarming stories and unbelievable upsets to come when the action begins Tuesday with the first of four play-in games.

But this was also a season clouded with police blotters at Alabama and Texas, injuries at Houston and UCLA, some unsightly losses at Kansas, and enough twists and turns at the top of the field to make this as unpredictable a bracket as ever.

"I'm not sure we would've

predicted this," Alabama coach Nate Oats said of the top seeding that belongs to the Crimson Tide for the first time.

Alabama's ability to set aside distractions — namely, the inevitable questions that will be directed at its star, Brandon Miller, and others about an ongoing murder case against a former member of the team — could have as big an impact on the Crimson Tide's chances as anything.

But all these teams, especially

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

Alabama forward Brandon Miller (24) reacts as Texas A&M guard Dexter Dennis (0) looks on in the final minutes of Southeastern Conference Tournament game on Sunday.

WHAT'S ON TAP

COLLEGE

BASEBALL: Nonconference—UW-La Crosse vs. Southern Maine at Davenport, Fla., 3:30 p.m.

SOFTBALL: Nonconference—Tucson Invitational: UW-La Crosse vs. Dickinson (Pa.), 10 a.m.; UW-La Crosse vs. Webster (Mo.), noon; Viterbo vs. St. Clair, 1 p.m.; Viterbo vs. Friends (Kan.), 3:30 p.m.

MEN'S TENNIS: Nonconference—UW-La Crosse vs. Mary Hardin-Baylor (Texas) at Orlando, Fla., 7 a.m.

BRIEFLY

NFL Vikings sign tight end Oliver

While the Minnesota Vikings continue to clear salary cap space in advance of the 2023 league year on Wednesday, they're working to improve their roster on the open market.

A league source confirmed they've agreed to a three-year deal with Ravens tight end Josh Oliver, who figures to give the Vikings a blocking complement to T.J. Hockenson. NFL teams could begin negotiating with unrestricted free agents on Monday, but cannot officially sign players until Wednesday.

According to Pro Football Focus, Oliver played 324 of his 513 snaps on run plays last year, and spent another 30 in pass protection. He caught a career-high 14 passes for 149 yards and two touchdowns, but the 6-foot-5, 249-pound Oliver stood out most in his blocking work, and he could play a similar role for the Vikings.

Hockenson is under contract for the 2023 season, but Irv Smith is set to hit free agency this week and Johnny Mundt (who worked primarily as a blocking tight end last year) has just \$100,000 of dead money on a deal set to count for \$1.23 million against the cap this season. Oliver's addition figures to come with a significant role in the Vikings' offense in 2023.

ON TV

TUESDAY

BASEBALL: World Baseball Classic Pool Play: Nicaragua vs. Venezuela, Pool D, Miami, FS2, 11 a.m.; World Baseball Classic Pool Play: Canada vs. Colombia, Pool C, Phoenix, FS2, 2 p.m.; World Baseball Classic Pool Play: Israel vs. Dominican Republic, Pool D, Miami, FS1, 6 p.m.; World Baseball Classic Pool Play: Great Britain vs. Mexico, Pool C, Phoenix, FS1, 9 p.m.

BASKETBALL AFRICA LEAGUE: Kwara vs. Stade Malien, Dakar, Senegal, NBATV, 11 a.m.

COLLEGE BASEBALL: Georgia Tech at Auburn, SECN, 6 p.m.

COLLEGE MEN'S BASKETBALL: NCAA Tournament: SE Missouri vs. Texas A&M-CC, First-Four, Dayton, Ohio, TRUTV, 5:40 p.m.; NIT Tournament: Toledo at Michigan, First Round, ESPN2, 6 p.m.; Hofstra at Rutgers, First Round, ESPN, 6 p.m.; Villanova at Liberty, First Round, ESPN2, 8 p.m.; Yale at Vanderbilt, First Round, ESPNU, 8 p.m.; NCAA Tournament: Pittsburgh vs. Mississippi St., First-Four, Dayton, Ohio, TRUTV, 8:10 p.m.; NIT Tournament: Bradley at Wisconsin, First Round, ESPN, 8:30 p.m.; NIT Tournament: Seton Hall at Colorado, First Round, ESPN2, 10 p.m.; Eastern Washington at Washington St., First Round, ESPN, 10 p.m.

COLLEGE WOMEN'S LACROSSE: Yale at Duke, ACCN, 6 p.m.

COLLEGE SOFTBALL: Syracuse at UCLA, PAC-12N, 9 p.m.

MLB: Spring Training: Seattle vs. LA Angels, Tempe, Ari. (Taped), MLB, 5 a.m.; Washington vs. NY Mets, Port St. Lucie, Fla., MLB, noon; LA Angels vs. Cleveland, Goodyear, Ari., MLB, 3 p.m.; Cincinnati vs. Kansas City (Split Squad), Surprise, Ariz. (Taped), MLB, 8 p.m.; Atlanta vs. Philadelphia, Clearwater, Fla. (Taped), MLB, 11 p.m.

NBA: Denver at Toronto, NBATV, 6:30 p.m.; Milwaukee at Phoenix, NBATV, 9 p.m.

NHL: Washington at NY Rangers, ESPN, 6 p.m.

MEN'S SOCCER: CONCACAF Champions League: Violette AC at Austin FC, Round of 16, Leg 2, FS2, 6:55 p.m.; CONCACAF Champions League: CD Olimpia at Atlas, Round of 16, Leg 2, FS2, 9:05 p.m.

TENNIS: BNP Paribas Open-ATP/WTA Round of 16, TENNIS, noon

Sommerfeldt

From B1

basketball ...” Dave said as his voice cracked. “This (the end) doesn’t feel real.

“I can’t believe that’s done.”

Lexi and Macy were the starting point guards for the Blugolds for seven seasons.

Their tenure included a record of 178-11 for a winning percentage of .942. They won 95.4% of games played against teams from Wisconsin with a 167-8 mark.

They won all 79 MVC games they played and seven championships. They won seven regional championships and six sectional titles. They won eight state games and lost three.

They were denied a chance to three-peat when the 2020 title game against Melrose-Mindoro — the team they had beaten in championship games the two previous seasons — was called off due to the announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic.

They played the biggest roles in adding two gold balls and three silver ones for basketball to the Aquinas trophy case.

They traveled together to play against current national collegiate stars Caitlin Clark (Iowa) and Paige Bueckers (UConn) when they played for Dowling Catholic (Iowa) and Hopkins (Minn.), respectively.

Lexi scored 2,106 points and had 560 assists, 388



PETER THOMSON, LA CROSSE TRIBUNE

Aquinas' Macy Donarski, left, helped the Blugolds to a 96-9 record, three state championship games and two second-place finishes during her four-year career.

steals, 374 rebounds and 153 3-pointers. Macy scored 1,734 points to go with 698 assists, 471 steals, 413 rebounds and made 106 3-pointers.

Those chapters for this family — as pieces of the bigger story of father coaching daughter(s) — are now closed.

As Macy walked off the court for the last time, Dave met her as she reached the bench area, and the two shared a long embrace as reality set in.

“When she came off the court and said, ‘I’m sorry I played so bad; it hurt,’ Dave said of Macy, who scored 18 points on 7-for-14 shooting and added 11 assists, five rebounds and four steals against the Spartans.

Lexi scored 2,106 points and what she did in that

game, anyone would say that she played pretty well.”

Macy clearly appreciated the response that followed.

“He just said, ‘I’m proud of you,’” she said, struggling a bit to get the words out as the emotion engulfed her. “We both knew at that moment that it was really the end. Neither of us were ready to give that up yet.”

But they have to because everyone has a new path to take.

Dave will now start putting together plans for a new team built around Sammy Davis, whose freshman season showed plenty of promise. Her impact will be much different for an inexperienced team that will take the court in November.

Macy will begin preparation for her career with Montana, and Lexi is about

to turn her focus to a third NCAA Tournament with the Cyclones after they won the Big 12 championship on Sunday.

The Donarskis, by the way, were there to watch Iowa State beat Texas 61-51 in Kansas City less than 24 hours after the conclusion of the Aquinas title game. That’s commitment.

Macy’s will be the most significant with a move and completely new situation surrounding her.

But she can leave knowing that she helped put the finishing touch on a seven-year run that will be hard for any family to duplicate.

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Polzin

From B1

that happens the rest of this month — whether the Badgers’ NIT stay lasts one, two, three, four or five games — will erase that sour taste. Those what-ifs will linger.

UW could have elected to say thanks, but no thanks, and end its season. It could have pulled a North Carolina, which decided not to play in the NIT, and taken its ball and went home.

Gard had to decide early last week, before the Big Ten tournament even had begun, whether the Badgers wanted to be in consideration for the NIT if it came to that. He said

he didn’t bring it up with his players, consulting instead with his staff.

I think this is the right move. The NCAA Tournament is the standard around here, but turning down the chance at a consolation prize would have reeked of arrogance. You can’t bring up the team’s relative youth at key positions, as Gard did earlier this season, and limit its postseason experience to one game without looking like a hypocrite.

Look around and it’s hard not to notice other prominent programs in the 32-team field. Villanova and Oregon are in the same eight-team pod as the Badgers, and the other side of the bracket includes Michigan.

Tony Bennett and Virginia, a program three years removed from winning an NCAA title, accepted an NIT bid last year.

That 2022 event also showed programs can use a deep run as a springboard into the next season. Xavier, the reigning NIT champion, returned a significant chunk of its roster and is a No. 3 seed in the NCAA Tournament (albeit with a new coach). Texas A&M, which lost to the Musketeers in the final, finished second in both the SEC regular-season standings and conference tournament.

“We’re in this thing to try to win,” Gard said. “I’ll play the lineups that give us the best chance to

have success on the court. We wouldn’t be in it if we didn’t think we could try to go win it. We’re not doing this as a recreational activity.”

There will be no hoopla and certainly no special section to commemorate this appearance, but this is a chance to learn and grow, and UW should view it as such.

It’s far from ideal for a program with goals far bigger than the NIT, but the only thing the Badgers can do now is try to make the most of it. There have been far too many wasted opportunities this season. Don’t add another one to the list.

Contact Jim Polzin at jpolzin@madison.com.

NASCAR

From B1

Byron is aiming for the No. 1 spot.

“This level is so different. Took a lot of homework, a lot of details,” Byron said. “I think the fact that I started later than most driving was

a little bit — it took some time to bridge that gap at this level.

“Now that gap is bridged obviously.”

Jeff Gordon — one of NASCAR’s most successful drivers who is now vice chairman of Hendrick Motorsports — knows a little about winning for Hen-

drick. His 93 victories are the most in team history.

Gordon sees Byron as a growing driver just now realizing his potential.

“I see a progression with William ever since he came to Hendrick,” Jeff Gordon said. “Got to remember how young he was coming into the Cup Series, so much

to learn. Young in racing in so many ways.

“When Rudy came to Hendrick, the instant connection and chemistry between these two was so obvious. It just took the whole team up to another notch. I think now they’re just building on that. It’s a lot of fun to watch and see.”

Madness

From B1

at the top, have their issues.

It starts with Houston, the 1 seed in the Midwest, which was cruising along until Saturday, when its star guard, Marcus Sasser,

fell awkwardly and left the game with a groin injury.

Sasser didn’t play in his team’s conference title game and Houston lost. How quickly he gets back to form could dictate whether the Cougars make the Final Four, which will take place at NRG Stadium, not far from their home arena.

NBA Eastern and Western Conference standings table with columns for Team, W, L, Pct, GB.

Wednesday's games table listing matchups and times.

HOCKEY

NHL Eastern Conference Atlantic Division standings table.

NHL Western Conference Central Division standings table.

NHL Eastern Conference Metropolitan Division standings table.

NHL Western Conference Pacific Division standings table.

NHL Western Conference Central Division (continued) standings table.

NHL Pacific Division (continued) standings table.

NHL Western Conference Pacific Division (continued) standings table.

NHL Western Conference Pacific Division (continued) standings table.

NHL Western Conference Pacific Division (continued) standings table.

NHL Western Conference Pacific Division (continued) standings table.

Advertisement for Monsoor's Sport Shop. Text includes 'Serving the La Crosse area since 1949', 'OPEN ONLY Tuesday and Wednesday 10-6', 'Roger and Patty are Now Semi-Retired', 'NICE SELECTION OF SAFES JUST ARRIVED NEW SHIPMENT OF RHINO SAFES', and '517 Copeland Ave., La Crosse, WI • 608-784-0482'.

Advertisement for River Valley media group. Text includes 'River Valley media group Local Media Consultant', 'Your role in our story: The River Valley Media Group is on the search for a driven and dynamic Local Media Consultant...', 'Position Summary: The Local Media Consultant drives digital-first multi-media account growth for large local accounts...', 'PRIMARY FUNCTIONS AND DUTIES: Partner with sales leader to identify new business opportunities by segment...', 'Key Competencies: High level of accountability to sales metrics + performance and adoption expectations...', 'Education and/or Experience: College degree required or equivalent combination of education and experience...', 'Certificates, Licenses, Registrations: Maintains a valid driver's license...', 'Apply online at www.lacrossetribune.com/workhere, Location: La Crosse.' The page number 90 is at the bottom right.