

Will March be madness after wild regular season?

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By RACHEL COHEN

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — College basketball fans with fond memories of the wild 2011 NCAA tournament may have forgotten this fact: A mostly tranquil regular season led up to it, with the four top seeds combining for just 13 loses.

Back in 2007, by contrast, the No. 1 seeds had 18 defeats among them. Then the tournament started and the familiar upsets of March were almost nowhere to be found.

College basketball analyst Clark Kellogg would love to be calling three weeks full of stunners this year. But he knows it's hardly inevitable — despite a season when the top-ranked team never seemed safe.

“I've already told a number of people I hope it plays out the way it did during the regular season but there are no guarantees,” Kellogg said Monday.

A chaotic season can turn into a tame tournament for many reasons.

Matchups are always part of the mystery. Some years, the top seeds find themselves up against a string of opponents they stack up favorably against. Other seasons, they run into a team in an early round whose strengths seem perfectly targeted for whatever their weakness.

Kellogg sounded another note of caution about why the regular season instability may not be a predictor of true March Madness: Tournament games are on neutral courts.

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“Much of the tumult you see during the regular season happens in conference play on the home court of the underdog,” he said.

Still, Kellogg is expecting a topsy-turvy tournament, evidenced by his struggle in picking the Final Four. He suggests that two of the top teams will make it to Atlanta, joined by a school from a power conference that had an unremarkable regular season, with perhaps a George Mason-esque squad to round out the field.

Kellogg bases that as much on the muddle in the middle of the brackets as on the vulnerabilities of the highest-ranked teams. He thinks the selection committee will struggle to differentiate programs for the fifth through 14th seeds.

“Because of that, you’re going to have some matchups that will create high drama,” he added. “And teams that come out of 8-9 games against certain 1s may be better positioned to move on.”

With most conference tourneys yet to start, the four No. 1 seeds will total at least 16 losses when this season’s NCAA tournament opens next week. The contenders for those spots certainly seem very beatable but perhaps they will roll through the tourney. Maybe Indiana will dominate once it escapes the brutal Big Ten. Maybe Duke is a powerhouse again with Ryan Kelly healthy. Maybe Gonzaga really is as good as its record despite playing outside a power conference.

The 2007 and 2011 NCAA tournaments — the two extremes of predictability in recent memory — prove that we’re all just guessing. Six years ago, Florida returned nearly everybody from its national championship team, yet hardly dominated during the regular season, losing five games.

The No. 1 ranking was held by five different schools. Yet this led to an NCAA tournament when perhaps the most surprising development was the lack of surprises.

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Not counting 8-9 games, there were just two upsets in the first round. The worst seed in the round of 16 was a No. 7 — not exactly Cinderella. Seven of the final eight teams were top-two seeds, with the lone exception a No. 3. And Florida repeated as champion.

Four years later came the Butler-VCU national semifinal. That season, Duke, Ohio State, Pittsburgh and Kansas were the top four teams in the fourth poll, and none strayed very far from there on the way to the No. 1 seeds.

They didn't stick around very long in the tourney, though. One lost in its second game; two others were knocked out in the round of 16. Four double-digit seeds made the round of 16 and no top-two seeds reached the Final Four.

For all the talk about the opportunity for teams from outside the power conferences to make a run this year, many of the schools being mentioned for top seeds are established winners: Duke, Indiana, Georgetown, Louisville, Kansas.

And while the executives at CBS and Turner who televise the tournament love those buzzer-beaters that spring major upsets, they wouldn't mind a few big names hanging around, too.

"Brands do matter," Turner Sports chief David Levy said. "It always good to have powerhouse brands that are in the tournament and that get themselves deep into the tournament."

The tournaments that inspire the most buzz seem to star both David and Goliath, CBS Sports Chairman Sean McManus said. The 2010 Duke-Butler title game was the classic example of that.

"It's a combination of the big national traditional powers," McManus added, "and the Cinderella stories." __PUBLIC__

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