

Four ranked teams collide at MSG

By Dana O'Neil
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For the first time in the 13-year history of the Coaches vs. Cancer Classic, all four teams come to New York City nationally ranked: North Carolina is fourth, Cal 12th, Ohio State 15th and Syracuse 24th.

Which means the games at Madison Square Garden on Thursday and Friday night make for some basketball must-see-TV.

To help aid your viewing, consider this a hoops TV Guide:

Players to watch for the pure fun of it: These are the guys who will impact the game but also make your jaw drop or make you say 'Oh no he didn't' to the stranger sitting next to you.

[Wesley Johnson](#), Syracuse: The talent of the ballyhooed Iowa State transfer had been rumored for a year. When Johnson finally took the floor, he didn't disappoint, lighting up overmatched Albany for 12 points, 8 rebounds, 6 steals and 4 assists. After the mass early exodus to the NBA at Syracuse, Johnson became an even more pivotal piece for Jim Boeheim.

[Jerome Randle](#), Cal: Randle is quickly earning mention as the best point guard in the Pac-10, but his shooting is off this season. Of course, that's "off" as in down from last year's crazy 46.3 percent from behind the arc to this year's still-eye-popping 40 percent.

[Evan Turner](#), Ohio State: His numbers read like what Paul Bunyan might produce on the hardwood: In two games, the junior is averaging 19 points, 17 rebounds and 7 assists. He has stolen not just the league spotlight but the nation's.

[Ed Davis](#), North Carolina: NBA people would have welcomed Davis last year -- before he even played significant minutes for the Heels.

With three starts under his belt, his stock continues to rise. The power forward has been solid on the offensive end and a downright pest on defense.

Under-the-radar players to watch: Maybe not on the front line of team stardom, these guys nonetheless have an impact on their squad's success or failure:

[Brandon Triche](#), Syracuse: He was supposed to be the point-guard-in-waiting, but Jonny Flynn couldn't wait for the NBA. Consequently Triche, nephew of former SU player Howard Triche, has been green-lighted to front and center for the Orange. Through two games, he has handled the job well.

[Patrick Christopher](#), Cal: A sartorial wonderman who likes to earn style points with his fashion flair,



Don't look down or you might miss another 3 by Jerome Randle.

Christopher also likes to pop on the court. He's shooting 44 percent from behind the arc.

[David Lighty](#), Ohio State: Lost after seven games last season with a broken foot, Lighty is back -- as is the competitive intensity the Buckeyes lacked without him. Through two games, he's averaging 11 points and 5 assists, but it's his demeanor that is really changing how Ohio State plays.

[Marcus Ginyard](#), North Carolina: Forced to watch as his classmates rode to championship glory last season, Ginyard is out to make his own name. More aggressive offensively, he remains a good stat-stuffer, gobbling up rebounds, assists and steals. After a tight win against Valparaiso, Roy Williams said his team needed more leadership. Expect Ginyard to supply it.

Key matchups for Thursday

Cal's 3-point shooting vs. Syracuse's zone: Staking their program turnaround on it, the Bears led the nation in 3-point percentage last season and are shooting a blistering 41 percent from behind the arc in the early going. But the Orange's vaunted zone defense has a way of negating the 3. This season, opponents have hit just 11 of 51 attempts (21 percent) against the Cuse. Which statistic blinks?

Evan Turner vs. [Larry Drew II](#): Taking over for Ty Lawson, Drew has performed serviceably -- through three UNC games, he has 18 assists to just 10 turnovers and has chipped in 8.3 points per game. But Drew -- who gives up five inches to 6-foot-7 Turner -- hasn't come face to face with anyone like the OSU All-American candidate. Coach Thad Matta officially tabbed the junior his full-time point guard in August. In the opener, Turner promptly rewarded him with the second triple-double in school history. Williams indicated he might not put Drew on Turner, but what happens on the opposite end of the floor?



Ohio State's Evan Turner was virtually unstoppable in his first two games of the season.

Other things to watch

Home, sweet where am I? Syracuse is no stranger to Madison Square Garden. In one six-overtime game against UConn in last season's Big East tournament, the Orange logged more minutes than ushers who work at the Garden. MSG has been good to Syracuse over the years. The Orange have won five Big East titles there, including the stunning Gerry McNamara-fueled run in 2006. The Bears, meanwhile, haven't been to the Big Apple since 1999. That's as a program. Of the current crop of Bears, only one player has set foot inside the most famous arena on earth: Patrick Christopher was there in 2007, as Kevin Durant's guest at the NBA draft.

Watch out for the little man: In its first two games, Ohio State has started four guards and big man [Kyle Madsen](#). On the surface, that would seem to give Carolina an edge, what with its depth at the post in the form of [Deon Thompson](#), [Tyler Zeller](#) and Ed Davis. But unlike in the Aesop fable, slow and steady doesn't always win the race, at least not when quick can run circles around it. How will the Heels' big men handle stepping out on their smaller counterparts? On the flip side, how will the Buckeyes contend on the boards?

A borough for Carolina? She is to the Tar Heels what Ashley Judd is to Kentucky. Model, and wife of Andy Roddick, Brooklyn Decker is rumored to be coming to the Garden party Thursday night. Besides earning guaranteed TV time, could the aptly named Brooklyn throw some luck as her Heels try to take a

bite out of the Big Apple?

Six degrees of Kevin Bacon, basketball-style: The big world of basketball really isn't so big after all. It's actually one gigantic coaching tree that, with a little digging, can always produce a branch. To wit: When Mike Montgomery was head coach at Stanford, Barry Collier served as one of his assistants. Collier went on to become the head coach at Butler, where he hired Thad Matta as his assistant. Matta eventually became the Butler head coach before moving on to Xavier and now, Ohio State.

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