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New Dukies could be another classic team

By Eamonn Brennan



KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- Kansas State fans came for a classic.

What they got was classic Duke.

Tuesday night's CBE final promised big things: The fourth-ranked [Kansas State Wildcats](#) -- a team that had just routed a solid Gonzaga squad -- would get a shot at the top-ranked [Duke Blue Devils](#), college hoops' defending national champions. They would do so in front of a packed, purple-clad Kansas City crowd.

OK, so maybe Kansas State wouldn't *win*, but how could this be anything but a great game?

Forty minutes and a 14-point margin of victory later, here's how: Duke is the best team in the country.

Actually, let's be more specific: Duke is the best team in the country by *a lot*.

Asked if he agreed, Kansas State coach Frank Martin didn't hesitate.

"They knocked the living piss out of us," Martin said. "If there's a team better than they are, I don't want to play them."

Fortunately for Martin, and unfortunately for that segment of the college hoops world that just can't help but hate the Dukies, there isn't a team better than Duke in college hoops this season. Not now. Not in April. And not anytime in between.

It's only a matter of time until someone makes the bold leap and predicts Duke to have an undefeated season. I won't go that far; college hoops is too upset-oriented, with road wins too hard to come by, to be sure the Blue Devils will make it to April without losing a single game. Eventually, they'll lose. It's bound to happen. (Lest we forget, Marquette wasn't far off.)

But after Tuesday's performance -- which basically amounts to a nonconference road win over the No. 4 team in the nation, Duke's biggest challenge of the nonconference schedule by far -- well, let's just say you can't confidently predict a Duke *loss* happening anytime soon.

There are plenty of reasons. For one, the Devils' next big test, a home date with No. 2 Michigan State next Wednesday, got a little less intriguing after the Spartans' disappointing performance in the Maui Invitational. MSU limped to an uninspired win over Division II Chaminade on Monday and then lost at the hands of a good-but-not-great Connecticut team Tuesday. By the time Tom Izzo's team arrives in Durham, it won't be ranked No. 2 in the nation anymore. And while Michigan State will no doubt improve over the course of the season, it certainly doesn't look capable of challenging the Blue Devils at Cameron Indoor.

Still, most of the reasons for predicting Duke dominance lie within Duke itself. The Blue Devils entered the season with tons of hype, but they've managed to exceed it by their fifth game. Freshman point guard [Kyrie Irving](#) might be the nation's best pure point guard, and he happens to be playing alongside another guard who can play a little, team leading scorer [Nolan Smith](#).

[Kyle Singler](#) is still a player-of-the-year-level talent, the most technically refined player in college hoops. [Andre Dawkins](#) and [Seth Curry](#) are knockdown shooters, perfect for Duke's spacing-oriented style. Even the team's bigs have looked impressive thus far, especially potential lottery pick [Mason Plumlee](#), who followed up a dominating effort against Marquette with a quality game (10 points, five rebounds, one block) against one of the deepest frontcourts in the country.

"You have to pick your poison," Kansas State guard [Jacob Pullen](#) said. "You can't help. No matter where you help on them, they're going to pick you apart."

This season, that picking-apart process starts with Irving, who was named the CBE Classic tournament MVP after his 17-point, five-assist, five-rebound, three-steal title game. Irving is as fast as any guard in the country -- he beat Pullen, no slouch himself, off the dribble repeatedly in the title game -- and his ability to beat the defense down the floor and finish at the rim with either hand is uncanny.

Irving is also an intuitive passer, and he has plenty of eager finishers around him.

"We have so many weapons on this team," Irving said. "It's a lot easier to become confident."

And then, of course, there's Coach K. It's practically pointless to list Mike Krzyzewski's accomplishments, because there's nothing about the coach's success in college basketball that you haven't already heard a thousand times. But Tuesday night was special in its own right for Coach K: The win was his 800th as head coach at Duke.



Senior Nolan Smith contributed 35 points and 14 rebounds in the two victories in Kansas City.

For all of the institutional advantages now available to him at that school -- among them, as Krzyzewski mentioned, the ability to recruit on a national level -- you don't get to 800 wins at a single school without a truckload of pure coaching know-how, and that was on display as vividly as ever at the Sprint Center.

"Mike did a lot more to get his players ready to guard Jacob than I did to get our players ready to guard Kyrie," Martin said. "That's why he's won 800 games at Duke and a gazillion national championships. Because he's good. He took me to school today."

"Coach K has this down to a science, people," Pullen said. "And it's a great science, man."

Science or not, Duke is almost certain to stumble at some point along the way. All great teams do. Over the long haul, there may be teams you'd pick to challenge Duke in the postseason -- Kansas with an eligible [Josh Selby](#), Ohio State with a dominant [Jared Sullinger](#) -- and, hey, you never know what can happen in March, right?

But what Duke has, as of Nov. 24, 2010, is this: a team led by a legendary coach coming off a national title (not to mention a FIBA World Championship), buoyed by two All-American candidates, captained by a brilliant freshman point guard, and filled out with deadly accurate shooters and athletic big men that just ran the No. 4 team in the country off the floor in a home-court setting.

And if *that* doesn't scare the rest of the country, remember this: *It's only Nov. 24*. The Duke Blue Devils could still get better.

Undefeated? Settle down. Rarely tested? Entirely possible. Classic Duke?

All signs point to yes.

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