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Illinois' central focus, inauspicious coaching debuts and much more

Story Highlights

Curtis Kelly's benching at K-State is the latest of many off-court issues in this sport
 Many freshmen had impressive debuts, but what's taking so long with Josh Selby?
 Lamenting the end of The Radiators; plus a few changes in my AP poll

When Illinois players walk into their locker room, a simple question greets them on the greaseboard: Boys or men? The words were put there by Illini coach Bruce Weber last spring after his team's season ended ignominiously with a quarterfinal loss in the NIT. Weber recognized that his players had talent. What they lacked was toughness, physical and especially mental. That's why they folded down the stretch, dropping five of their last seven games to miss out on the NCAA tournament.

"Talent doesn't mean anything," Weber said. "When we played good teams last year, especially on the road, we just couldn't defend well enough to win. Part of defense is toughness and pride and just wanting to fight. We didn't always have that."

Weber didn't waste a moment addressing that deficiency once the offseason began. During summer conditioning, fall practice, exhibition tuneups and the first three games, Weber has focused almost exclusively on defense -- so much so that the Illini's offense looked incoherent at times. The results through three games have been impressive (the Illini won all three by an average of 25 points), but given the caliber of the competition, they are also inconclusive.

We won't have a final answer to Weber's written question until March, but we'll get a pretty good idea this week when Illinois comes to New York City's Madison Square Garden for the 2K Sports Classic benefiting Coaches Versus Cancer. For the Illini to win the championship, they will have to go through Texas and probably No. 5 Pittsburgh, two programs that have exemplified toughness the last several years. (Maryland, which plays Pittsburgh in Wednesday's semifinal, is the fourth team in the field.) Is this really a team of men? Or do they still have some growing up to do? "We know we can score with anybody in the country," 6-foot-3 senior guard Demetri McCamey said. "Now we need to show we have that mental toughness where if times go bad, you don't put your head down and start thinking the game is over."

Illinois was ranked next-to-last in the Big Ten in scoring defense last season, and it was ninth in steals. Weber is hoping those problems were simply a matter of emphasis. Two seasons ago, Illinois struggled mightily to score, bottoming out when they tallied just 33 points against Penn State. (The Nittany Lions weren't much better, scoring 38.) Weber admits that he probably listened to fans and the media too much and entered last season intent on teaching his team to put more points on the board. By the time he realized how fatally deficient they were on defense, it was too late to instill a new culture.

The most palpable change can be seen in the physiques of Illinois' two senior big men, 7-1 center Mike Tisdale and 6-9 power forward Mike Davis. They are finesse players who would rather face up than post up, but now they are carrying considerably more muscle. Tisdale added 30 pounds in the weight room in the offseason. Davis gained 15. Both were by design. "Tisdale can shoot it, but midway through the Big Ten season he quit posting up," Weber said. "Same thing with Mike Davis. He'd get his double-double, but it was a quiet double-double. You never watched him and thought, 'Wow, he just took that rebound away from somebody.'"

Toughness is also a matter of leadership. That's where McCamey comes in -- and goes missing. Last season, he ranked second in the nation in assists per game (7.1), and he was 11th in the Big Ten in scoring (15.1). However, he was also 11th in minutes played at 34.5

per game, and that took a toll. "We depended on him so much. He had to handle the ball every time, make every play, play almost every minute," Weber said. "He tended to rest a little bit on the defensive end."

Like Davis, McCamey put his name in the NBA draft and then returned to school. The scouts and general managers McCamey talked to were all impressed with his offensive abilities. The two things they wanted to see from him were more consistent effort on the defensive end and evidence that he can lead a winning team. Now, Weber reminds McCamey at every opportunity that playing D won't just help the Illini. It will also help his future.

McCamey, who through the first three games is leading Illinois in scoring (14.7 ppg) while dishing out 24 assists to just six turnovers, will be helped more than anyone by the influx of three promising freshmen. Six-foot-eight swingman Jereme Richmond (20.3 minutes per game), 7-foot center Meyers Leonard (16.7) and 6-5 guard Joseph Bertrand (8.7) have all played significant minutes off the bench so far, enabling Weber to play McCamey just 25.7 minutes per game. (Though McCamey will obviously play more as the competition gets tougher.)

Illinois clearly has all the tangible components to make a run at a Big Ten title and the Final Four, and they have become a trendy sleeper pick to do just that. This week at Madison Square Garden, we'll find out if they have the intangibles. If they want to turn Weber's question into a statement, this week is a great opportunity. It's time for them to man up.

Hoop Thoughts

- I've grown accustomed to describing the top six leagues in college basketball as the BCS conferences. But after reading the book *Death to the BCS*, I am officially banishing that term from my vocabulary. I've used "power conferences" in the past, but I think I'll just stick with the "big six." Of course, since the Big Ten will soon have 12 teams and the Big 12 could soon have 10, "big six" could mean anywhere from four to eight leagues.
- Mike Rice had a tough start at Rutgers (lost to Princeton at home), but the award for worst debut for a new coach has to go to Wake Forest's Jeff Bzdelik. Not only did the Demon Deacons lose at home to Stetson, but their starting point guard, freshman Tony Chennault, broke his foot in the first half and will be out for more than two months. Dino Gaudio got fired last spring after coaching Wake Forest to the second round of the NCAA tournament. Think Deac fans would sign up for that right now?

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- Kansas State coach Frank Martin told me over the weekend that he was not sure whether Curtis Kelly, the Wildcats' fifth-year senior forward who was benched for the opener against James Madison, will play against Virginia Tech on Tuesday. Martin benched Kelly because of what he perceived to be immature and undependable behavior on and off the court. Sounds to me like a classic case of Senioritis, when a player becomes more worried about improving his NBA stock than going to class and helping his team win games.

"He has not done a good job accepting his responsibilities of being a team leader," Martin said. "He probably has people in his life pressuring him to perform at a certain level, and he hasn't handled the pressure well. And academically, he got his degree last June, so maybe he felt like he's on vacation now."

- Speaking of Kelly, is it me, or are there an inordinate number of players being benched these days for off-court transgressions and attitude problems? Memphis freshman Jelani Kendrick was dismissed from the team by coach Josh Pastner. Wake Forest center Tony Woods was kicked out of school following assault charges. Baylor's LaceDarius Dunn, Villanova's JayVaughn Pinkston and UNLV's Tre'Von Willis are all sitting out because of assault charges. Minnesota coach Tubby Smith indefinitely suspended Devoe Joseph for unspecified off-court problems. Seton Hall coach Kevin Willard sat several players, including Keon Lawrence, during an exhibition game, and Kansas coach Bill Self benched sophomore Elijah Johnson for the Jayhawks' opener. Guys, guys ... you do know it's just November, right?
- It's a great sign for UCLA that junior college transfer Lazerick Jones started at point guard and had 15 points, four assists and two steals in the Bruins' opening win over Cal State Northridge. The fact is, junior point guard Jerime Anderson has really struggled during his first two seasons. Anderson can still help by coming off the bench, but if Jones couldn't beat him out for the opener, it would have been a bad sign.
- I can't remember if I've ever seen a Jim Calhoun team start three freshmen like he did last week against Stony Brook. It's not like these

guys are the Fab Five, either. Those young fellas are gonna face a hard reality once Big East season gets underway.

- You remember Jeremy Tyler, the California kid who gave up his senior year of high school so he could play in a war zone in northern Israel -- and then flamed out? Turns out there's going to be a documentary about him. Here's my suggested title: *Here's The Story Of A Foolish Teenager Who Got Swindled By Adults Giving Dumb Advice*.
- A few words on [Oregon's new home-court design](#): Atrocious. Abominable. Pathetic. Embarrassing. Am I being too vague?
- Siena was one of the top mid-major schools in the country the last few years. Now the Saints lost their best two players plus coach Fran McCaffery, who is at Iowa. They also lost their season opener at home to Vermont. I suggest the Saints should title this season *The Hangover*.
- I still think the NCAA is going to issue its ruling on Kansas freshman Josh Selby sometime this week. If you've been wondering (**as I have**) what is taking so long, remember that Selby is also wrapped up in the NCAA's investigation into Tennessee. He was one of the players who was at Bruce Pearl's house during an unofficial visit in violation of NCAA rules -- the incident which Pearl later lied about. So besides having to defend himself regarding his relationship with Carmelo Anthony's business manager, Selby is also a witness for the prosecution in the Tennessee case. I'm told that has added some time to the process.
- Pitt coach Jamie Dixon told everyone within earshot that nobody else opened the season against a quality opponent like Rhode Island. But there's one team in Dixon's league that did Pitt one better -- namely Georgetown, who overcame an eight-point second-half deficit to pull out a three-point road win at Old Dominion. John Thompson III ought to have his head examined for scheduling such a hard road game for his opener. At least Pitt got to start its season at home.
- I was a little surprised to see that Purdue sophomore guard Kelsey Barlow did not start and played just 12 minutes against Howard on Sunday. With Robbie Hummel out, I thought the 6-5 Barlow would be more of a primary focus in the Boilermakers' offense. He shot 1-for-6 in the game, so it's hard to make the case he deserves to start, but he is a big, smooth athlete, and Purdue is going to need a solid year from him.
- Whenever I hear a broadcaster say a player went "over the back," I'm reminded of what my CBS colleague Clark Kellogg likes to say: "You're allowed to go over the back. You're not allowed to go *on* the back."
- I don't know if Luke Winn and I are the only people who truly appreciate this, but in case there's any doubt, let's end the debate right here: Michigan State's Draymond Green is the best passing big man in the country.
- Alongside the impressive freshman debuts of Ohio State's Jared Sullinger (19 points, 14 rebounds vs. North Carolina A&T), Tennessee's Tobias Harris (19 points vs. Chattanooga), Duke's Kyrie Irving (17 points, nine assists vs. Princeton) and N.C. State's C.J. Leslie (21 points vs. Tennessee Tech), there were some lesser-known freshmen who had impressive starts last week. Sullinger's teammate, Deshaun Thomas, scored 24 points in the win. Marquette forward Davante Gardner had 17 points in 13 minutes against Florida A&M. Most memorable of all, Maryland point guard Pe'Shon Howard had 14 points, including a game-winning 17-foot jumper with three seconds left, against the College of Charleston. (That was technically the Terps' second game, but since it was on ESPNU it qualified as a coming-out party.) On the flip side, Syracuse's Fab Melo fouled out twice against Northern Iowa and Canisius, and it only took him 18 and 13 minutes, respectively. Some people say we scribes pay too much attention to freshmen, but I disagree. They keep college hoops exciting and, well, fresh.
- It will be interesting to see the games in the early season NIT experiment with the semicircle under the basket. They want to see if that will help the referees apply the rule requiring a blocking foul to be assessed against a player who attempts to take a charge under the basket. I was among those who criticized the rules committee for implementing the rule last season without adding the arc, but it turns out I was wrong. The intent of the rule was to deter coaches from teaching their players to take those charges in lieu of playing actual defense. It worked. Adding the arc is a hassle, and it's complicated because now you have to figure out how big to make it. I think there are already too many lines on the court, but I'll keep an open mind as I watch the games.
- The season is a week old, and I've already begun my Erving Walker Three-and-Free Meter. In Florida's season-opening home win over UNC Wilmington, the 5-8 junior point guard attempted five three-pointers (making three) and zero free throws. That's not how you get Capone.
- Here's a sleeper player on a sleeper team: Ravern Johnson, a 6-7 senior swingman at Mississippi State. While the Bulldogs wait for Dee Bost and Renardo Sidney to get eligible, they got a big performance out of Johnson, who had 32 points (on 13-for-14 shooting from the foul line) against Tennessee State. Johnson has always been a bouncy but wire-thin athlete who demonstrated a nice outside touch. It's encouraging to see him attacking the rim so aggressively. Are you paying attention, Erving Walker?
- The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that the NCAA made a bad decision in setting the format for the four opening-round games in the newly expanded tournament. As of now, there will be two games featuring the last four at-large teams playing each other, and another two featuring the last four automatic qualifiers. But fans don't want to see evenly-matched games in the early rounds. They want to see underdogs taking on favorites. My idea was to have all four games pitting one automatic qualifier against one at-large team. That's four times watching Cinderella get a bite at the apple. (You don't mind if I mix metaphors, do you?) The four winners would then get slotted as No. 13 seeds in the first round. I'm sure the members of the basketball committee will heed my wisdom next spring and make the requisite changes. They always do exactly as I say.

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Say it ain't so: The Radiators are pulling the plug

Regular readers of this column know that aside from college hoops, one of the great passions of my life has been the music of *The Radiators*, the legendary rock and blues band from New Orleans. The Rads, as they're known to their fans, are a remarkable story. The five musicians who comprise the group came together 32 years ago and have never stopped playing. Think about it: That's three-plus decades yielding more than a dozen studio albums, some 4,500 live gigs, and more schleps through airports and hotels than anyone could count. Over all that time, this fabulous quintet has never split up, changed its lineup or even taken a break. It seemed the music would never stop.

Now, alas, we know it will. Two weeks ago, Ed Volker -- the keyboard player, lead vocalist and primary songwriting force behind the band -- told his mates that he had had enough. The travel has worn him out, and he wants to build his solo career. The band will still honor all the commitments on its schedule, including at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival next May, where it has traditionally closed down one of the main stages on the final day. But the train will grind to a squeaky halt next June with a final, three-night stand at Tipitina's in New Orleans.

"You know it's going to end sometime, but you're still not prepared to hear it," Dave Malone, the lead guitarist, co-songwriter and co-vocalist, told me late Saturday night. "Ed is tired of the travel, but he also doesn't want to have the responsibilities of being in a band anymore. He wants to be Ed Volker. This traveling circus thing is a lot, you know?"

There is a possibility that the circus will go on in some form. The other three members -- guitarist Camile Baudoin, bass guitarist Reggie Scanlan and drummer Frank Bua -- have indicated they would like to keep playing together, possibly under the same name. That would be a lot more feasible if Malone would agree to join them, but Malone told me he is still digesting the news and is unsure as to what he wants to do next. In the meantime, if you are a hard-core Rads fan (or a Fishhead, as we call ourselves), a casual fan or you just love hearing great live music, go to the band's website, TheRadiators.org, and check out their schedule so you can catch them while you can. (They're playing two nights this week at New York City's Sullivan Hall.) Remember, in New Orleans they bring in brass bands to play at funerals, so you know this burial is going to be one great party.

"This is our last New Years' run, our last Jazzfest appearance, our last anniversary shows, so we want to make them enjoyable events and not be mopey," Malone told me. "I've been getting so many calls from people, it's incredible. It's great to hear how much you mean to someone and how much your music really is the soundtrack to their lives. It's a weird deal to realize, but it's awesome. I mean, there's nothing like Rads fans."

This week's AP ballot

(Preseason ranking on my ballot in parentheses)

1. Duke (1)
2. Michigan State (2)
3. Kansas (3)
4. Kansas St. (4)
5. Villanova (5)
6. Florida (6)
7. Pittsburgh (7)
8. Ohio State (13)
9. Gonzaga (8)
10. Syracuse (9)
11. North Carolina (10)
12. Purdue (11)
13. Baylor (12)
14. Illinois (15)
15. Missouri (16)
16. Butler (17)
17. Georgetown (18)
18. Memphis (19)

19. Wichita State (20)
20. San Diego State (21)
21. Kentucky (14)
22. Tennessee (22)
23. Temple (23)
24. Virginia Tech (24)
25. Washington (25)

Comments: Since no team on my preseason ballot has lost yet, I only made two tweaks. The first was moving Kentucky down seven spots in reaction to the news that **Enes Kanter will be permanently ineligible** (pending appeal). I had Kentucky rated a little lower than my fellow voters (they were 11th in the actual poll), so they didn't have as far to fall. My guess is because they are so young, the Wildcats will lose a few games in the early going and fall out of the rankings, but if they do, they won't be out for long. They're still really talented. They're just really young.

Elsewhere, I had a bit of a change of heart about Ohio State, so I bumped the Buckeyes up five spots. I remain concerned about the Buckeyes' point guard problems, but I've seen enough of them in the preseason to get a sense of just how solid they are across the board. I'm curious to find out if freshman Aaron Craft eventually moves into the position as a starter. I'm also a bit more bullish on Florida than my voters, so I'm looking forward to heading to Gainesville to watch those two teams go at it Tuesday night. Did I mention how much I love my job?

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