Daily Sports

LOMBARDI LINEUP:

COLLEGE BASKETBALL HAS A SCHEDULING PROBLEM



Brant Beyers of the Miami University (Ohio) men's basketball team jumps up for a dunk. He is a member of the undefeated, yet No. 24 ranked Redhawks team. PHOTO COURTESY OF @MIAMI_REDHAWKS ON INSTAGRAM.

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After Nebraska's recent loss at Michigan, just two teams remain undefeated in college hoops.

Going over twenty games without a single loss, as conference play intensifies, is a rare feat, yet not all unbeaten records are viewed equally.

Both No. 1 Arizona and No. 24 Miami (OH) sit at 21-0, but the similarities seemingly end there. While one is the consensus top team in the country, the other is viewed as just a fringe tournament team. The contrast between these programs brings to light a massive underlying problem that goes into college basketball scheduling.

Arizona has left no doubt about their status atop the national rankings. The Wildcats have piled up five wins over top-15 opponents, winning their games by an average of more than 21 points.

Playing in a stacked Big 12 conference exposes them to high-level competition day in and day out and to remain perfect in this span makes them a shoo-in for the No. 1 team in the country.

Meanwhile, Miami (OH) finds itself in a much more complicated position. Despite entering late January undefeated and ranked No. 24 in the AP poll, the RedHawks have not played a single quad 1 team this season. As a result, tournament projections remain skeptical, with Miami still hovering around the bubble rather than being comfortably in the field.

RedHawks head coach Travis Steele has pushed back against these criticisms, arguing that they attempted to schedule stronger non-conference opponents, but was repeatedly turned down.

"Don't penalize us for people that aren't willing to play us," Steele said in a recent press conference.

Without access to high-profile games, Miami's record remains uncertain. 21-0 is impressive at first glance but is ultimately impossible to properly evaluate in national conversations.

Miami's situation is not unique, but an extreme case of a growing problem for mid-major programs. Non-conference schedules are currently shaped by incentives for top power conference teams: they gain either an opportunity for a high-profile win, or an easy matchup to boost their record. Scheduling mid-majors with strong upside does neither for those teams, as a win does little to boost their national perception, while a loss can severely damage it. As a result, highly ranked teams opt to schedule "buy-games", where they pay bottom-tier opponents to come and likely lose a blowout early in the season. Meanwhile, mid-majors are forced to schedule who's left, resulting in weak opponents that make it difficult to put together a tournament-level résumé.

The problem with this system is that when quad 1 opportunities are concentrated at the top, trying to compare mid-majors with power conferences relies on theoretical outcomes rather than actual results. If the difference in schedule quality continues to widen as it has, mid-majors will continue to get loss opportunities to show how they can perform against upper-echelon programs, while middling power conference teams will continue to get the benefit of the doubt for reasons beyond control. Many can speculate that top mid majors wouldn't stand a chance against highly ranked teams, but the sport should be based on games played on the court, not hypothetical betting lines.

Solving an issue like this, however, is not as simple as it may seem. Perhaps the NCAA could mandate matchups between mid-majors and power-conference teams, but this would come with significant pushback. Schools value their scheduling autonomy, and such a requirement would threaten their ability to schedule whoever they want.

Another relevant issue comes with the rapid changes in early season multi-team events, as it seems like the Players' Era festival, offering massive NIL incentives, becomes the standard going forward. The event, expected to expand to 32 teams, is quickly taking over non-conference schedules, but comes with a glaring lack of mid-major representation, except for Gonzaga and San Diego State, who are closer to power conference status than a typical mid-major.

Restructuring non-conference scheduling is not as simple as forcing more power conference versus mid-major games. However, as the landscape continues to change as it does, it's necessary to ensure that mid-majors receive more, not fewer quality opponents.

Perhaps that involves allowing more non-power five teams into events like Players' Era, or further incentivizing games against teams like Miami (OH). Either way, the current rankings show that the growing decline in schedule parity exists and needs to be addressed.

It's no secret that college hoops is changing fast, but that should not force us to lose sight of what makes the sport special. Everyone has a chance to be the next big surprise and become memorable stories that will be remembered for decades.

College basketball thrives off David versus Goliath matchups, but when Goliath never even steps on the court, we lose a piece of what makes the sport so special.