

Empire 8 Tournament

Analyzing the Cardinals and their competition

ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR
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MTV could never duplicate St. John Fisher's "Sweet 16."

Its playoff time and the usual suspect is firmly in the driver's seat. After winning eight of their final nine regular season games, the Fisher men surged past Utica College in the Empire 8 conference to capture home court advantage in the four-team tournament. It's the 16th straight year Fisher earned a post-season bid and the fourth consecutive season they've hosted the Empire 8 tournament.

There's no need to wait for another George Mason to break the scene in Division I's March Madness. The final four schools standing in the Empire 8 are set to ignite a "February Frenzy." In their eight combined meetings this winter Fisher, Ithaca College, RIT and Utica College have reached overtime on three occasions (six times if you count all of the extra sessions in the Cards' quadruple OT marathon two weeks ago).

Looking to crash the party at Manning-Napier Gymnasium Friday night, are the fourth-seeded RIT Tigers, while third-seeded Ithaca College faces the Pioneers in the semifinal. The winners will reconvene on Saturday to vie for something even bigger, a ticket to the NCAA Division III championships.



#1 St. John Fisher Cardinals

20-5 overall, 11-3 E8

Top Guns: Dan Mueller (sr., 13.4 ppg, 3.3 apg), Dan McSweeney (sr., 12.6 ppg, 7.4 rpg), Justin Beigel (jr., 12 ppg, 6.4 rpg), Chris Baltz (fr., 9.6 ppg, 3.7 rpg).

X-Factor: The Cardinal Crazies. Nothing beats the comfy confines of your own rims, locker room and of course, your own rambunctious rowdies in the bleachers. No team exemplifies home court advantage better than the Cardinals. Coach Rob Kornaker's team has only lost three times in

their last 57 regular season home games. Just ask the University of Rochester, Alfred and Utica about the maroon and gold at home. Away from East Avenue against this trio, Fisher went 0-3 including a 29-point thumping to UR. In front of the Crazies? Fisher went 3-0, winning by a combined 55 points.

Outlook: Dozens of Fisher students, parents, players, and alum are probably still wondering who set the fire alarm off at halftime of the Fisher-Utica blowout last Friday. It's really not a secret. Mueller and Baltz should be held solely responsible. No hose could put these two out as of late. Their sizzling hot shooting is the main reason St. John Fisher surpassed Utica as the E8 frontrunner. They've combined for 115 three's through 25 games. As an entire team Utica only has 119. In the Cards' semifinal clash against RIT, they need Mueller and Baltz to continue their tag team assault from downtown. Their outside touch has opened up the paint where McSweeney, Beigel and Isaiah Smalt have punished opponents. Against RIT's huge lineup, Fisher will need to impose this domino effect.



#2 Utica Pioneers

18-6 overall, 10-4 E8

Top Guns: Ray Bryant (sr., 16.3 ppg, 9.5 rpg), Doug Herring (so., 15.8 ppg, 5 apg), Jack Lighthall (sr., 12.4 ppg, 5.6 rpg), Brian Collier (sr., 9.7 ppg, 5 apg).

X-Factor: Bryant's bum ankle. Early on in Utica's 79-66 loss at Fisher, Bryant landed awkwardly on his ankle and missed the second half. The next day he sat out of Utica's one-point loss to Alfred, which increased Utica's state of emergency to code red. Bryant is Utica's heartbeat and a double-double waiting to explode each night. A week off before facing Ithaca should help, but it's hard-pressed to think that Bryant will be 100 percent by tip-off. As evident by their total discombobu-

lated offense in the first half vs. Fisher, Utica isn't the same without Bryant.

Outlook: For most of the season, the Pioneers have had luck on their side, i.e. two one-point wins and a double overtime triumph over Fisher. But luck tends to run out. Heading into the E8 tourney on a three-game skid, coach Andrew Goodemote's squad is reeling to say the least. Without Bryant, their offensive and defensive rhythm is totally disrupted. Against Ithaca, Goodemote's team must continue its stingy defensive play. The Pioneers only surrender 61.5 points per game, by far the best in the conference. If Utica faces Fisher in the finals, they can't afford another dreadful start. UC played the Cards dead even in the second half, 42-42. Unfortunately, the Pioneers dug themselves a 33-13 hole out of the gate.



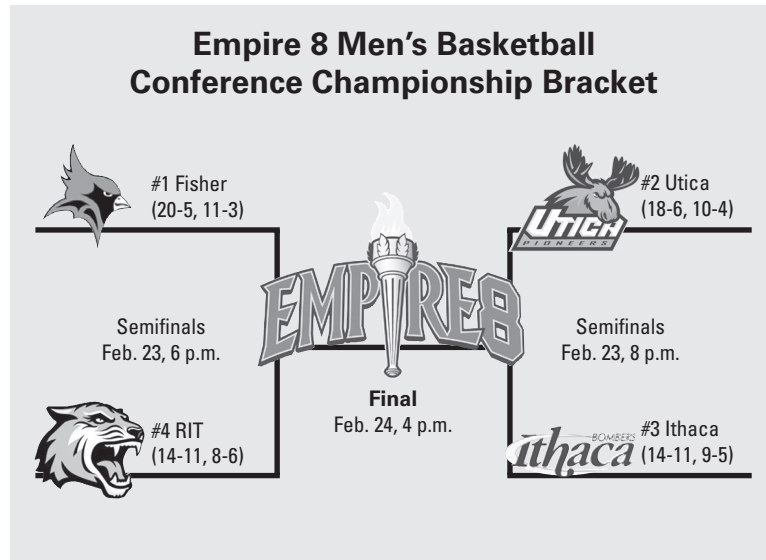
#3 Ithaca Bombers

14-11 overall, 9-5 E8

Top Guns: Jeff Bostic (so., 15 ppg, 6.8 rpg), Sean Burton (so., 15 ppg, 5 apg), Sean Leahy (so., 12.3 ppg, 4 apg), Tom Brown (fr., 6.7 ppg, 5.1 rpg).

X-Factor: Athleticism. Ithaca is a small, physically-weak team and they know it. So they play to their strengths and run, run, run. The Bombers' run-and-gun offense has taken teams by surprise (see: 70-68 OT win over Utica) and it has failed miserably (see: 29-point loss to Fisher). How effective shoot-first point guard Burton steers Ithaca's up-tempo style will dictate their playoff fate.

Outlook: Led by sophomores Bostic, Burton, and Leahy, IC is set for E8 glory in the future. With only one senior on the roster (forward Sean Stahn), many underclassmen have gained priceless playing time in Ithaca's up-and-down season. Conventional wisdom says to write off the Bombers this season because of their inexperience. But wait. The 2003 Carmelo-GMac led Orangemen (yes Orangemen, not Orange) and last season's Florida Gators



proved that postseason experience is overrated, winning championships with mostly underclassmen. If Utica eliminates the Bombers it won't be because of Ithaca's young roster. It will be because of their lack of size. When your tallest player is a 6-7 string bean nicknamed "Birdman" (Leahy), you won't be scoring many points in the paint.



#4 RIT Tigers

14-11 overall, 8-6 E8

Top Guns: Tim Bacon (sr., 14.1 ppg, 7.1 rpg), Kenny Gethers (jr., 14 ppg, 6.6 rpg), Barrett Zeinfeld (jr., 13 ppg, 1.6 rpg), Rick Whitwood (so., 7.6 ppg, 4.9 rpg).

X-Factor: Behemoths. Without taking anything away from Zeinfeld and Whitwood, two of the league's top marksmen, RIT is first and foremost a team built on big men. The Tigers have six players that are at least 6-6, led by the 6-7, 245 lbs. Bacon. In conference play, RIT leads all E8 teams in offensive rebounds. Limiting second chance points is definitely a point Fisher's Kornaker will be drilling before the semifinal round.

Outlook: St. John Fisher and RIT are certainly familiar with each other. They've met three times this season with the Tigers

taking their last bout 70-68, behind a late 16-2 run in which Zeinfeld nailed three trifectas. The Tigers tend to play to the level of their competition, rarely losing in double-figures. This is a double-edged sword, however, as RIT dropped two games to lowly Hartwick (10-15, 3-11). Expect Friday's game to be a back-and-forth battle between two similar teams. The Bacon-McSweeney match-up on the block should be an interesting game within the game.

So lace up your boots, Crazies: The road to the NCAA's goes through St. John Fisher. After losing top scorers Sean O'Brien and Mike McGee to graduation many predicted a rebuilding season in Pittsford, N.Y. But through a collective team effort, Fisher is still the league favorite. With the deepest roster of the four teams, the Cardinals have the manpower to win close games. A strong rotation of ten players gives Kornaker plenty of options. Unlike the other three teams, the Cardinals storm into the postseason on a winning streak.

But then again, anything can happen in the "February Frenzy."

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RIDING THE PINE

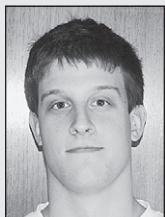
State of the Sabres Address

ASSISTANT IN FOCUS EDITOR
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We've seen this before. Right, Sabres fans?

At the rate Buffalo's players are going down with injuries, they're going to have to lace some skates on Sabretooth and have him play defense. (And this reminds me, the NHL has by far the best set of mascots, even if some of them make no sense. For example, the Islanders' Sparky the Dragon, Carolina's Stormy the Ice Hog and Toronto's Carlton the Bear are all not only funny, but also child friendly).

Once again, the rash of injuries has struck some high-profile Sabres. Most noticeably, is the recent injury to one of the league's most electrifying players: Maxim Afinogenov. His bro-



ken wrist will sideline him for at least six weeks and he might not see the ice again before the playoffs. Losing one of their top playmakers will definitely hurt Buffalo's chance at a President's Cup (awarded to the club with the best regular season record), but shouldn't affect the team's ultimate goal of winning a Stanley Cup. After all, Afinogenov managed to score the equalizer goal against the Oilers after his injury occurred.

Other injured Sabres such as Jaroslav Spacek and Jiri Novotny should also be back for what is hopefully a long playoff run. But the major blow is Paul Gaustad's sliced tendon that will shelve him for the season. There's no doubt that the Sabres will miss Gaustad's punishing style of play and his rapport with linemate and co-captain Chris Drury. If the Sabres are going to make a trade before the Feb. 27 deadline, they would most likely need to acquire a physical forward to replace Gaustad or a

veteran defender to supply leadership and stability to Buffalo's blueliners.

Of course, they don't have to necessarily make a trade (especially considering their tight salary cap situation). They dealt with key injuries all of last year and still finished near the top of the standings. The plague of injuries that rifled through Buffalo's defensive corps did eventually catch up with them and it opened the door for Carolina to bring the Cup to NASCAR land. I have an idea to stop these injuries: for the next season of 24, owner Tom Golisano should hire Jack Bauer to protect the Sabres from both injuries and a terrorist cell made up of Zdeno Chara look-a-likes (tell me you wouldn't tune in for that). While he's at it, Jack could convince NHL commissioner Gary Bettman to introduce hockey cheerleaders into the mix.

Even if Jack Bauer can't keep Buffalo's roster healthy, there's still isn't any reason to panic. If

Tim Connolly (who's currently sporting the Britney Spears shaved head look) can successfully return from the nasty injuries he suffered against Ottawa last postseason, then Buffalo will have added firepower to shoot down the rest of the league's major contenders. Plus, call-ups like Drew Stafford can help to get the job done.

So what if the Predators traded for Peter Forsberg? That's not the kind of move the Sabres need to make anyway. If Nashville does happen to topple the Sharks, Wings and Ducks while making it out of Western Conference, they will still be having nightmares of their 7-2 home thrashing at the hands of the Sabres back on Dec. 21.

As for the Eastern Conference competition, I still think the Sabres have the upper edge. They have more depth than the Thrashers, more experience than the Penguins and they have a history of playoff mastery against Ottawa. As for the Devils

and their trap style of defense, the way I see it is that their seemingly superhuman goalie Martin Brodeur will be worn out by playoff time.

One more Sabres note, is there a play-by-play man who is more worthy of calling a Cup-clinching game than Rick Jeanneret? Jeanneret, alongside the always-reliable Jim Lorentz, adds an element of excitement to the game that few others can. In fact, if I could have one person to narrate my life it would definitely be Jeanneret. I would run around getting into fights just to hear his brilliant play-by-play ("Pukos just threw down his books and...wait... now he's headed after the girl with the scooter, holy mackerel!")

Still, the question remains: can these Sabres slug the competition and win it all? We won't know until June, but, either way, these guys are, as Jeanneret would say, "good, scary good."

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