

Alford sets sights on NCAA finals as career at Indiana nears end

BLOOMINGTON, Ind. (AP) — Steve Alford, Indiana's two-time All-America and career scoring leader, is trying not to think about the possibility that Saturday's NCAA semifinal game against top-ranked Nevada-Las Vegas might be his last as a Hoosier.

Every game for a college senior, in some way, is a farewell performance, he said.

"I've tried to take that approach in every game I've played this year, whether it's been on the road or at home, saying this will be the last time I'll play against so-and-so, the last time I'll play at Iowa, or at Illinois or at Michigan or wherever," Alford said.

Now that he is a member of a Big Ten champion for the first time — the No. 3 Hoosiers share the title with Purdue — Alford's only unattained goal is an NCAA championship.

He set his school scoring record

during the season. And his 38 points in last weekend's two Midwest Regional victories over Duke and Louisiana State pushed his career total to 2,382 points.

The realization that in the tournament, any game could be the final chance for Alford, starting forward Daryl Thomas and reserve forward Todd Meier to play for Indiana has made them play harder, Alford said.

"I think we've really tried . . . the three seniors have really tried to instill that kind of attitude into everybody, that it's not only the last game of our careers, but for everybody else. It's the last game of their particular season. And you never know when another opportunity is going to come around.

"I remember our freshman year, we were two points away from going to (the Final Four in) Seattle, and that opportunity didn't come for three more years," Alford said.

"The younger guys feel that and know that and really have worked hard to do all they can to make the most of the opportunities we've had," he said.

The two victories at Cincinnati gave Indiana a 28-4 record and its first appearance in the Final Four since 1981, when the Hoosiers — led by sophomore Isiah Thomas — won their fourth NCAA title and the second for Coach Bob Knight. The victory over North Carolina for the championship was the final game as a Hoosier for Thomas, who left school two years early to play in the NBA.

Indiana was beaten in the second round of the NCAA tournament the next year and in the regional semifinal in 1983. The Hoosiers lost to Virginia in the regional final during Alford's freshman season, then failed to make the tourney in 1985 and were upset by Cleveland State in the first round last year.

Syracuse-Providence game pits teams that know each other well

SYRACUSE, N.Y. (AP) — Anyone who says Providence is not a physical team has not played them, Syracuse forward Howard Triche said.

Triche said that past experience tells him to get ready for another battle of bodies Saturday when the two Big East teams play in the Final Four semifinals at New Orleans.

"The first Big East game we played was in Providence and I was extremely exhausted," the Syracuse co-captain said. "They're so disturbing. They're never going to give up."

Providence, 25-8, is a team that likes to trap on defense and use its 10-deep bench to pound and tire an opponent.

Syracuse, 30-6, can expect more of the same Saturday from the upstart Friars, who knocked

off the Southeast Region's top two seeds, Georgetown and Alabama, en route to the national championship foursome.

"Even at the end they still play like they want another couple of minutes on the clock," Triche said.

"To tell you the truth, everytime I've played Providence I've felt exhausted at the end of the game," Orangemen center Rony Seikaly said. "They don't give you anything easy. They press the whole game. If you have a layup, they'll foul you and make you earn it on the foul line. Their big men are always working inside trying to get position. They never stop working."

"They're tough. They're overachievers. Nothing ever comes easy against them," Seikaly said.

The recognizable names for

Providence are those of their sharp-shooting trio of guards, Billy Donovan, Delray Brooks and Ernie Lewis, who combined to lead the nation in 3-pointers made per game this season.

The Friars frontliners — Dave Kipfer, Daryl Wright, Steve Wright, Jacek Duda, Marty Conlon and Abdul Shamsid-Deen — have toiled in anonymity for most of the season.

"Their big men are not very talented, but they make up for it by playing so hard and so many," Seikaly said.

But the Friars showed against Georgetown they can resort to an inside game when necessary. After burying their first three opponents under an avalanche of 3-pointers, Providence changed its strategy against Georgetown and its swarming defense.

Cruz looks to play full-time as he gets set for 16th year

KISSIMMEE, Fla. (AP) — Jose Cruz was voted by fans last year as the most popular player in Houston Astros history.

Cruz annually gets the loudest applause when he is introduced in the batting order with a distinctive "Jose Crrruuuuzzzz" in the Astrodome.

He likes the cheers, but now he's hearing trade rumors — and they sting.

"It bothered me a little bit, yes, especially since I've been a leader on this ball club for 12 years," Cruz said. "So it hurts a little, but you never know in this game."

Cruz, an Astros cornerstone since he was traded from St. Louis in 1974, often has been considered underrated.

Now he may just be considered old.

Cruz will be 40 years old in August and, if he holds onto his starting job, he'll be the oldest regular outfielder in the major leagues.

"Last year I had a pretty good season even though I was hurt a

little," Cruz said. "Now, I just have to go out and show those people (management) that I can still play."

Cruz hobbled through the first half of last season with a knee injury.

After the first month of the season, Cruz was hitting .121 with four hits in 33 at-bats.

He was hitting .249 at the All-Star break but batted .309 and drove in 40 runs over the final 73 games.

Cruz, back for his 16th major league year, doesn't like to hear the word platoon.

"I'm an everyday player; everybody knows that," Cruz said. "Last year, even with the bad leg, I hit .278. I know I started slow, but the knee didn't keep me from having a good year."

He has played in more games, 2,188, than any active major leaguer who hasn't played in a World Series.

Cruz and the Astros narrowly missed World Series trips in 1980 and last season and Cruz is ready to remedy that.

Tarkanian would have preferred LSU to Indiana in semifinal game

LAS VEGAS, Nev. (AP) — Nevada-Las Vegas will not be facing the team Coach Jerry Tarkanian would have preferred in Saturday's Final Four matchup with Indiana, but count on him to show up in New Orleans anyway.

"I'd rather have played LSU than Indiana because I thought we had a better chance of beating them," Tarkanian said Tuesday. "I just wanted to play someone I thought we could beat."

"For that matter, I'd rather have played Pacific," Tarkanian said as an afterthought, referring to a Pacific Coast Athletic Association opponent.

UNLV beat Iowa 84-81 and Indiana edged LSU 77-76 Sunday to advance to the semifinals of college basketball's championship tournament.

Tarkanian said just being in the Final Four is more than he allowed himself to dream last fall. He has contended since preseason practices began that the four teams making it to New Orleans would have to be not only very talented, but also very lucky. He stuck with that assessment Tuesday.

"I thought we were very good and very lucky," Tarkanian said of the NCAA playoffs. "I thought all the teams that made it were very good and very lucky. In fact, if you played the tournament over again, I think you would have four different teams in the Final Four."

The Runnin' Rebels ended the regular season ranked No. 1 in the nation, a spot they held for 12 weeks

"I'd rather have played LSU than Indiana because I thought we had a better chance of beating them. I just wanted to play someone I thought we could beat."

Jerry Tarkanian

in the Associated Press poll. The heady success of this year's team is still tough for Tarkanian to comprehend.

"It's been like a fairytale season," Tarkanian said. "At the start of the

season I thought we were going to have a good team, but I don't believe anybody could have foreseen a 37-1 record and the Final Four."

The Rebel coach credits the leadership of his six seniors with much of this year's success. He cited an example in Sunday's game when senior guard Gary Graham approached him in the closing minutes of UNLV's dramatic come-from-behind victory.

"We took Gary out because he had four fouls," Tarkanian recalled. "Mark Wade (guard) had four, too, and we didn't want to be playing at the end of the game with just one ball handler."

"Gary came to me and said 'If you need a free-throw shooter, you know I'm ready,'" Tarkanian recalled.

In the closing seconds, with UNLV leading 82-81, Graham told his teammates "Get it to me and I'll hit the free throws," Tarkanian recalled.

Graham, who is hitting 86 percent from the free throw line, took the ball inbounds with 10 seconds remaining, was fouled, and coolly sank two shots to give the Rebels their winning 3-point margin.

Astros' Thon doesn't want to call it quits

HOUSTON (AP) — Houston Astros shortstop Dickie Thon said Tuesday he does not want to retire from baseball, but would like some time off to undergo eye exercises.

Thon left the club's training camp in Kissimmee, Fla., March 14 after being frustrated with his performance and having trouble seeing the ball during exhibition games.

On April 8, 1984, Thon was hit above the left eye on pitch by New York Mets pitcher Mike Torrez in the fifth game of the season. The injury nearly ended his career.

The 28-year-old Thon underwent a 2½-hour eye examination in Houston by a team specialist last Friday with test results showing no change in his vision from last year.

Thon told KPRC-TV in Houston Tuesday that retirement does not appeal to him, but he would like to pursue some new exercises that could strengthen his eyes.

Thon said he will ask the Astros management about getting time off to do the exercises.

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