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Women's Final Four assembles in Philly

(AP)— Nothing like going back home to try to win a national championship. Connecticut, Penn State, Tennessee and Rutgers will assemble in Philadelphia for the women's NCAA tournament Final Four, and there is a strong Philly flavor running throughout the group.

Connecticut coach Geno Auriemma and Penn State's Rene Portland both grew up in Philadelphia. Vivian Stringer of Rutgers once coached at Cheyney State, which is just outside the city. It will be homecoming from some players as well. Penn State's Andrea Garner and Rashana Barnes, Rutgers' Shawnetta Stewart and Tennessee's Kristen Clement are Philly products.

Look for those personal cheering sections to be a little larger and louder than usual. "We've been talking about it since the beginning of the year, since last year," Garner said. "We knew it was in Philly and we said we were going back there. We had a lot of people behind us thinking we could, too. We appreciate that support, Philly, here we come."

Penn State (30-4) will arrive full of confidence after a dominating 86-65 victory over Louisiana Tech in the Midwest Regional final.

The Lady Lions will need that confidence and more because they face No. 1-ranked Connecticut (34-1) in the national semifinals on Friday night.

Connecticut has overwhelmed one opponent after another with its depth and talent, which includes first-team All-Americans Shea Ralph and Svetlana Abrosimova. And though LSU stayed

with the Huskies for much of the game before Connecticut prevailed 86-71 in the East Regional, Tigers coach Sue Gunter saw enough to declare, "I would say they would have to be the prohibitive favorite."

Connecticut and Penn State have met once before this season, the Huskies winning 87-74 on Dec. 5.

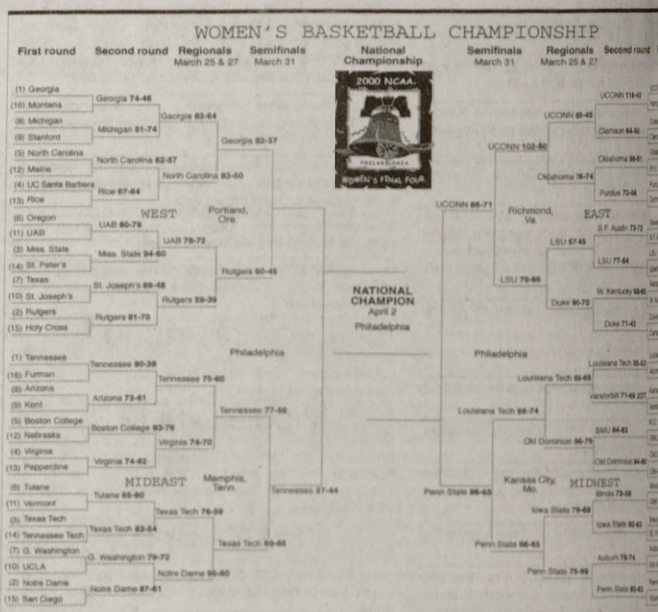
The Tennessee-Rutgers game sends the coach who has more Final Four appearances and national championships against the first coach to take three schools to the Final Four.

Tennessee coach Pat Summitt is in the Final Four for the 12th time and is seeking her seventh title. Stringer had Final Four teams at Cheyney and Iowa before working her magic again at Rutgers, a school she promised to make the "Jewel of the East" when she was hired in July 1995.

"She's a phenomenal woman," Rutgers' Linda Miles said. "She's a coach who gets you to buy into a philosophy of defense."

Rutgers (26-7), the West Regional champion, will show up in Philadelphia with a pesky matchup zone, which has put the clamps on its last three opponents. The Scarlet Knights gave up 39 points and then 45 before beating Georgia 59-51 to earn the school's first Final Four trip.

Tennessee (32-3) hopes it will have All-American Tamika Catchings at full strength to crack that zone. Catchings sprained her right ankle in the Lady Vols' 57-44 Midwest Regional victory over Texas Tech, and though she returned to



finish with 16 rebounds and six assists, sprains have a way of lingering. It won't just fall to Catchings, Summitt said.

"They'll have to play together," she said. "We'll have to have excellent ball movement and player movement. That's what we've been able to do a better job of since probably late January, early February. We've learned to play the game better together on the offensive end."

After winning three straight national titles, Tennessee lost in the regional finals last year. That loss motivated this team.

"We're definitely not going to take

for granted the opportunity of being in Philly," Semeka Randall said.

Neither is Connecticut, which returned to the Final Four in 1996. "We're now getting back again. Despite a 10 record over the last four years, we're a Connecticut player has a teaching job. Upon listening to various demonstrations in this country, as there are in other countries, who make sacrifices and who don't get an opportunity to play, it is difficult," Auriemma said. "So when you're really, really happy for them, you're really, really happy for them."

Scheduling hot topic at NFL meeting

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP)— NFL owners have dropped plans for games between natural rivals like the 49ers and Raiders, Giants and Jets, and the Redskins and Dolphins.

The league also is making progress this week on realigning teams when the new Houston franchise joins the NFL for the 2002 season.

Realignment has been one of the league's thorniest problems. Those were around for the last major restructuring—the AFL-NFL merger in 1970—call the difficulties.

"The hardest thing I've done in years in the league," Baltimore's Art Modell says.

This realignment, which is supposed to be finished by June 1, 2001, might be as difficult.

Houston, which lost the Oilers' franchise after the 1996 season, will be back in the AFC. That will give the AFC teams, requiring one team to move to the NFC. The strongest candidate is Seattle.

But the only thing being discussed this week is the scheduling format for the new lineup, which will include four-team divisions.

The most likely plan is one proposed by Pittsburgh owner Dan Rooney.

It would include home-and-home games within each division, a total of plus four games against teams in a division within the conference and four games against teams in a division in other conference.

Some owners wanted the extra games to be natural geographic rivalries which could be played annually. But there aren't enough of them to make it practical. What AFC team, for example, would be a natural rival for Green Bay?

Rooney said Tuesday the other games probably would be based on schedule strength, similar to the current format. That means the first-place team in a division would play first-place teams from other divisions, second-place teams would play second-place teams and so on.

By now, the most popular plan is to keep several divisions as they are now.

The NFC East, for example, mostly will keep Dallas, Philadelphia, Washington and the New York Giants. The Cardinals are dropping Arizona. The Cardinals are happy with that, but that's to be expected.

"There are going to be hurt feelings however you do it," said Tampa Bay coach Tony Dungy, whose team will find itself in an NFC Southeast division with Carolina, New Orleans and Atlanta.

"But you develop new rivalries a couple of years when you play each other and are competing for a title the next year. Time changes everything. My wife wouldn't remember that Cleveland was once in the NFC."

Dungy's main problem with the plan is tiebreakers.

"Under this proposal, you may be competing for a wild-card berth with someone you haven't played and who hasn't even played any teams in your division. What do you do then?" he asked.

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