

Big 12 race tight at the top

By Jaime Aron
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DALLAS — The Big 12 men's basketball season has reached the midpoint, and the only thing settled is that it's going to be a heck of a race to sort out the top seeds in the conference tournament.

Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and Kansas all came out of the first eight games with one loss. Texas lost twice, yet is No. 6 in the country, second-best among Big 12 teams.

"A lot of times in years past, there's been one team that has sort of separated themselves," Kansas coach Roy Williams said Monday in a weekly conference call with reporters. "Right now, no one has."

The second half tipped off in style Monday night with the two highest-ranked teams — No. 5 Oklahoma and No. 6 Texas — meeting in Austin.

The Sooners, Longhorns, Cowboys and Jayhawks are still good bets to finish in the top four when the season ends March 9. Doing so means a first-round bye in the conference tournament.

What remains to be determined is what order they'll be in. Looking at the head-to-head schedule for those four teams, Oklahoma has the toughest road and Kansas the easiest.

Counting Monday night's game, the Sooners play four of their last eight against its top challengers — Texas twice and the others once. The Longhorns have the two against the Sooners and Oklahoma State once.

The No. 13 Cowboys play OU, UT and Kansas once, plus have a game in Boulder, where Colorado has knocked off Texas and Kansas.

The No. 9 Jayhawks play at Oklahoma and are at home against Oklahoma State.

Williams compares these headline games to the final nine of the Masters. "That's where the tourna-

ment is won and lost," he said. For the league's second tier, the closing stretch is a chance to impress the NCAA tournament's selection committee. The Big 12 has had six teams make it the last three years.

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The Big 12 is third in RPI ratings, which could help the chances of a seventh team getting invited. The league's ranking was boosted by going 112-31 in non-conference play. The 78.3 winning percentage is tops in the Big 12's seven-year history, and the 112 wins tied the mark set last season.

"In this league, you can be improved and not show any gain up the ladder. As a matter of fact, you can improve and slide back one," Sooners coach Kelvin Sampson said.

The middle section of the standings are stacked with No. 21 Missouri (5-3 in Big 12), Colorado (4-4), Texas Tech (3-5) and Texas A&M (3-5).

"There's always room for improvement. I've never seen a perfect player or a perfect team," Red Raiders coach Bob Knight said. "I'd like us to average 150 points a game, and we're not quite doing that right now."

Missouri has had to juggle to replace some key players. Coach Quin Snyder said 6-foot-10 reserve Jeffrey Ferguson is expected to return Wednesday night against the Aggies. He's missed three games because of a disciplinary suspension.

The Buffs have won every home game and lost every road game. A loss to Nebraska, which hasn't beaten anyone else in the Big 12, looks even worse considering Colorado is talented enough to have beaten Texas and Kansas.

A&M is buoyed by senior Bernard King, who on Saturday became the leading scorer in conference history, and freshman Antoine Wright.

"In past years, it seemed like our season was over at this point," Aggies coach Melvin Watkins said. "Now it feels like we're in the hunt. There's light at the end of the tunnel, and the kids see that."

Teams looking to make a better-late-than-never run includes Iowa State and Kansas State (both 2-6) and Baylor and Nebraska (both 1-7).

Baylor recently played five straight games against ranked teams and is nearing the end of a run against eight ranked teams in 10 games. The Bears are coming off a drubbing by Oklahoma and next face Kansas and Oklahoma State.

"There's a lot of teams in our league that might be 1-7 playing that same schedule," Baylor coach Dave Bliss said.

Kansas State coach Jim Woodriddle told his team before the season that they'd evaluate their league play in two halves. They discussed Sunday making a fresh start in the second half.

"I think it helped to let them know the world hasn't ended," said Woodriddle, whose Wildcats have lost four straight. "If we can turn this around in the next eight games, we can finish in the mid-part of our league, which would be a big accomplishment for us."

Yao a hit among Chinese fans

By Joe McDonald
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIJING — Although he scored just two points in Sunday's NBA All-Star game, Yao Ming was a smash hit with Chinese fans who relished the attention heaped on the country's first basketball star.

Fans watched in restaurants and stores as the game, shown at mid-morning Monday in China, was carried live by state television in a broadcast available to some 300 million homes.

"The NBA game was more wonderful because of Yao Ming," said Fei Fusheng, a member of the fan club for Yao's former team, the Shanghai Sharks. Fei watched in a Shanghai bar as the West team defeated the East 155-145 in double overtime.

Yao, a 7-foot-6 rookie center, made his only basket 65 seconds into the game. Yao didn't attempt another shot in the game and played 17 minutes.

Yao's All-Star game appearance also raised hopes for promoting Chinese basketball. The NBA publishes a Chinese-language version of its maga-

zine and is considering staging exhibition games in the country.

"Yao Ming has taken Chinese basketball onto the world stage," said Li Yaoming, deputy executive manager of the Sharks. "Yao Ming is also serving as a bridge for the NBA to open up the big Asian markets they have dreamed for years."


Yao played for the Sharks until last year, when he went to the Houston Rockets as the overall No. 1 pick in the NBA draft. He adjusted quickly to the NBA game, and the fans — voting on ballots available in Mandarin for the first time — selected Yao to start for the West team ahead of Shaquille O'Neal.

Fei said that despite scoring only one basket in Sunday night's game, Yao performed well.

"No matter how many points he scored, you could obviously tell that the team's defense would have been weakened if Yao Ming weren't there," Fei said. "He should play longer next time."



YAO MING



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