

SPORTS

THE BATTALION

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A&M sends five to NCAA championships

Men's team lands record number in singles tournament

By Michael Crow
THE BATTALION

The Texas A&M men's and women's tennis teams will send five players to the 2003 NCAA Individual Tennis Championships held in late May.

Three A&M men were selected to compete in the field of 64 players from around the country, marking a school record. Senior All-American Ryan Newport and sophomores Lester Cook and Ante Matijevic will represent their squad.

A seeding at the NCAAs meets the Intercollegiate Tennis Association's criteria for being named All-American. Newport received the honor a year ago, but it is the first All-America recognition for his two sophomore teammates.

"This is truly a great honor for all three guys," said men's Head Coach Tim Cass. "Ryan has had a tremendous senior season and continues to be among the nation's elite. Lester and Ante have played

very well all season and beaten some very good teams."

Last year, Newport reached the round of 16 in singles competition. The senior from Houston defeated five top-25 opponents in 2003 to close the season with a No. 13 national ranking.

Cook was an All-Big 12 selection in singles and doubles, as was Matijevic.

The No. 10 men's team has not sent more than one player to the championships since 1985 when Grant Connell and Greg Hill made the trip.

From the women's team, juniors Jessica Roland and Roberta Spencer will compete in the individual tournament.

"I'm very excited for both Jessica and Roberta," said women's Head Coach Bobby Kleinecke. "They have worked very hard this year, and I'm glad they are being rewarded for that."

This year marks Roland's second appearance in the tournament. Roland led the Aggies this season, posting a 23-13 record while playing No. 1 singles and

No. 1 doubles. Last season, Roland competed in doubles play with Ashley Hedberg, but the pair was eliminated in a first-round match up with Fresno State.

"Jessica's experience last year will give her more confidence going into this year's tournament," Kleinecke said. "She knows what to expect, and her experience will also benefit Roberta."

Roland and Spencer finished the year ranked 71st in doubles play by the ITA.

The women's championship is slated for May 19-24 at Linder Stadium in Gainesville, Fla. First serve for the men is scheduled for May 21 at the Dan Magill Tennis Complex in Athens, Ga.

"Every match is going to be tough," Kleinecke said. "But (our athletes) are competitors, and I know they will go out and make the most of their opportunity."

Meanwhile, both A&M teams will host the NCAA team championships beginning Friday, May 9 at the A&M Tennis Center. The men will take on Maryland-Baltimore County at 4 p.m., while Kleinecke and the women will match up with Louisiana State at 7 p.m.



JOHN C. LIVAS • THE BATTALION

Junior Roberta Spencer is one of five Aggies selected to the 2003 NCAA Individual Tennis Championships held in late May.

Texas' All-American point guard declares draft eligibility

By Jim Vertuno
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

AUSTIN — T.J. Ford, the All-American point guard who led a resurgent Texas team to the Final Four for the first time in 57 years, announced Thursday he will leave for the NBA.

"It's been a real tough decision," Ford told a news conference as he sat next to coach Rick Barnes. "I will be in the NBA draft and forego my final two years."

Ford said he didn't make his final decision until Wednesday night although published reports as early as Tuesday had speculated that he would leave.

"I feel like I'm making the right decision. I'm not shaky about it at all,"

Ford said.

He said it was difficult to give up a college career he enjoyed but ultimately decided to chase a life-long dream to play in the NBA. Ford raised eyebrows in the room by wearing the football jersey of his friend Longhorns junior wide receiver Roy Williams, who spurned his chance to turn pro early and will return for his senior season.

Ford said the gimmick was merely to try to promote his friend.

Ford, who said he has not hired an agent, is projected as a lottery pick in the June 26 draft and is likely to be among the first guards selected.

During the season, Ford said he was "110 percent" sure he would return. After Texas lost to eventual national champion Syracuse in the semifinals,

center James Thomas said, "We're going to have the same team all over again."

But Ford soon made it clear he would consider leaving for the NBA.



FORD

He had an injury scare two weeks ago when he spent four hours in an emergency room after taking a fall during a pickup game on campus. Ford downplayed the injury as a "spill" and the medical treatment as precautionary but did not disclose details.

Before Ford's freshman season at Texas began in the fall of 2001, he was diagnosed with spinal stenosis, a narrowing of the openings of the vertebrae the

spinal cord runs through. After consulting with doctors, Ford decided against surgery to fix the problem, and tests later showed that the condition had improved.

Ford said that did not play a role in his decision.

Ford was considered the key player to elevating Texas from a solid but unspectacular program into one that could compete for a national title.

"He has done more in two years for Texas basketball than anyone who's come before him," Barnes said.

The most highly-touted recruit Texas had ever signed, the crafty 5-foot-10 point guard was the catalyst for Texas the past two years. He earned the Naismith and John R. Wooden awards as national player of the year.

"I accomplished a lot of things in college. The only thing I didn't do was win the national championship," he said.

Barnes said he expected this decision before the season even started.

"I knew all along that if he had the type of year he was capable of having, he would have to make this decision," Barnes said. "It's the right thing to do. This is his dream."

With Ford, Texas figured to be a favorite to win the 2004 NCAA national championship.

Barnes said Texas will still strive to return to the Final Four, even without Ford.

"This junior class that is getting ready to become the senior class, they're the foundation for this program. They raised the bar," Barnes said.

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