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PUTBACKS

BY ANDY KATZ

So, what's up with Michigan's three-game losing streak? First, senior G Lester Abram is out with an ankle injury. Second, the defense has gotten lax, giving up 90.7 ppg during the slide, up from 62.8 ppg when they started 16-3 ... ADs around the country already are tracking their next hires. Expect George Washington's Karl Hobbs, Northern Iowa's Greg McDermott and UAB's Mike Anderson to be this year's flavors of the spring ... One team's trash is another's treasure. BC beat UCLA last season with two SoCal players the Bruins thought they could do without (F's Craig Smith and Jared Dudley). This year, the Eagles took down a fellow ACC team with someone their opponent hadn't wanted badly enough. Frosh combo G Tyrese Rice, from Chesterfield, Va., dropped 23 on Wake Forest in a road win ... Pitt C Aaron Gray is on the NBA radar after barely playing his first two seasons. The seven-footer is averaging a double-double and went for 23 and 12 against UConn ... Zona F Ivan Radenovic is finally backing Lute Olson's raves. After struggling with his J most of the season, he's connected on 65% of his shots over his past four games ... Talent was clearly not the issue at Tennessee during Buzz Peterson's reign. Turns out, UT just needed a jump-start and an up-tempo style, exactly what Bruce Pearl brought to town. Now, the Vols sit atop the SEC East.

ALMOST FAMOUS

THE MAAC'S BIG STAR HAS AN UGLY CRED-TO-PPG RATIO. IT'S A STAT HE'S OKAY WITH BY MATT BEARDMORE



KEYDREN CLARK IS too small. He competes at a mid-major, and that's if you give little St. Peter's College of the MAAC the benefit of the doubt. And if you don't, it certainly explains those inflated stats.

Believe any or all of it if you want. But while you're questioning his game, Clark is spotting up 10 feet beyond the arc and drilling another three-pointer. "If I'm given a fair shot, when it's time to go to Portsmouth or Chicago, I think I have a legitimate shot at making an NBA team," Clark says.

He'll get invited to the two pre-draft camps. And to hear St. Peter's head coach Bob Leckie tell it, his star will be ready to dominate once he gets there. "If he was in another program such as Duke or North Carolina, he'd be getting his due

respect," Leckie says. "Here, he has to earn it."

More than any part of his star's game, what Leckie admires most is his humility. But the coach also knows the Peacocks' 5'9" senior is supremely confident. Clark will put his skills up against anyone's. On any level.

Why wouldn't he? His lightning-quick release and unlimited range have made him D1's two-time reigning scoring champ. (Two seasons ago, he averaged 26.7 ppg; last season 25.8.) Currently at 25.6, he has an outside shot at joining Oscar Robertson and "Pistol" Pete Maravich as the only players in D1 history to accomplish the scoring three-peat. "For me to be mentioned in the same breath as two legends, that's enough," Clark says.

He may not have those guys' Hall of Fame credentials, but he does deserve more attention than he gets. Shouldn't more people know that the unheralded recruit from Rice High School in Harlem is now the 12th-ranked scorer (and counting) in NCAA history?

One who did know is no longer around to see the way the story turns out. Last June, Clark found his best friend and teammate George Jefferson dead in their dorm room. Jefferson was 20 when he died of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, the same heart condition that contributed to the deaths of Reggie Lewis and Hank Gathers. "At the beginning of the season, that was always on my mind," Clark says of his friend's death. "Having to play basketball with him not here was heartbreaking."

The effects of the loss were obvious. Clark struggled early, scoring just 27 points in St. Peter's first two games, both losses. But he found his stroke soon enough, averaging 24.4 ppg in December, 28.6 in January.

And those are numbers that deserve recognition, no matter what conference they're put up in.

CLARK COMES UP A LITTLE LESS BIG AGAINST BIG COMP, AVERAGING 21.5 PPG AGAINST FLORIDA, PITT, SETON HALL AND UMASS.

W2W4

2122 UTEP AT MEMPHIS: FEDEX FORUM: MEMPHIS

John Calipari keeps yapping about how Rodney Carney is as good as J.J. Redick and Adam Morrison. You want POY love, Rodney? Drop 30 on TV. You haven't done that in two months. They do it every night.

THE NUMBER

91%

LAST SEASON, MICHIGAN STATE BIG MAN PAUL DAVIS SHOT JUST 67% FROM THE FOUL LINE. OBVIOUSLY, THAT HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH WHY HE AVERAGED JUST 30 MPG IN CONTESTS DECIDED BY LESS THAN 10 POINTS. BUT MSU DIDN'T BENEFIT FROM HIS ABSENCE. THE SPARTANS WERE 4-4 IN THOSE GAMES. IN ANY CASE, THAT WAS LAST SEASON. DAVIS IS HITTING 89.3% FROM THE STRIPE THESE DAYS, WHILE PLAYING 36.8 MINUTES AND HITTING 91% IN CLOSE MATCHES. OH, AND MSU IS 7-2 IN CLOSE GAMES.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

The last time Kansas started off 1-1, Richard Nixon was president. So forgive the Phog Allen faithful for holding their collective breath as their team headed into the second week of December. One of the best classes in school history was gone, including Wayne Simien, one of the best Jayhawks ever. And for the first time, Bill Self, the guy who was hired to replace one of KU's best coaches, was fielding a squad dominated by his recruits. Good people of Lawrence

FRANERASCHILLA KNOWS WHY THE JAYHAWKS CAUGHT AN UPDRAFT

you can breathe. The team that Self built has gone 13-2 since, including six wins in a row. His teams have always played tough defense, so it's no surprise that during the win streak they're allowing 61.7 ppg, down from the 66.3 ppg they averaged over the past two seasons combined. But the real reason they're back on track is they're better on offense. Freshman swingman Brandon Rush not only believes the "me-first" image he earned as an AAU phenom, he's almost

unsettled to a fault: his 14.4 ppg comes on roughly 10 shots a night. After a shaky start, Mario Chalmers has been freed of playmaking responsibilities while Russell Robinson, whose sloppy play as a frosh kept him off the court last season, has emerged as Self's after-egg. This young team—10 players are sophomores or freshmen—may not be ready to make a Final Four run, but the talent is here. So relax, KU: That slow start was just a hiccup.

