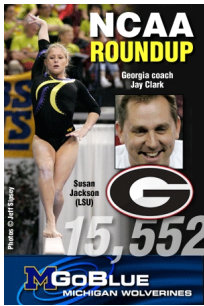


Written by Dwight Normile
Wednesday, 03 February 2010 10:15



The NCAA gymnastics season produced some surprises in January, so here are some interesting story lines to follow as the year moves forward.

- **Georgia**, the five-time defending women's NCAA champion, has a record of 1-3. Do the Gym Dogs miss the influence of retired coach **Suzanne Yoculan** or the 9.95s and 10.0s of retired NCAA record breaker **Courtney Kupets**? Maybe a little of both.

But really, January is a time when all teams are finding their identity, even Georgia. And although first-year head coach **Jay Clark** took over a winning program—the toughest job in sports—he's hardly a rookie. He was an assistant to Yoculan for 17 years.

"It has happened in the past," he told IG about starting off with a losing record. "And [it] has actually happened when we have won championships. Surely, no one envisions [starting this way], but it is not that atypical this early. We have a great training team that is underachieving in meets to this point. We will be fine. It is more magnified now because there is a new coach and all, but we are confident in our kids, our system and this program as a whole. Growing pains can be painful, but they do pass."

After starting the season with a 0.10 win over visiting **Stanford**, Georgia has lost three consecutive road meets (

ma
ah
and

Auburn

). If the ninth-ranked Gym Dogs lose at home to 11th-ranked

Kentucky

on Friday, those growing pains might get a little more intense.

- **LSU** senior **Susan Jackson** tops the women's all-around rankings, over **Morgan Dennis** (**Alabama**) and **Ash** **anee Dickerson** (**Florida**)

, respectively. Jackson is an incredibly athletic gymnast who has the experience to stay at or

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near the top of the rankings all year. But after making the Super Six the last two seasons, LSU is ranked only 12th.

"Right now we are going very slow and having to compete with a bit of caution due to a lack of depth caused by untimely and unfortunate injuries to key individuals," LSU coach **D-D Breaux** said. "Susan has been a rock this season. If anyone can lead and pace this team to a strong finish, it will be Susan and the other seniors."

• **Utah** drew **15,552**, the largest crowd in NCAA gymnastics history, to its Jan. 22 dual meet against **Georgia**, which it won, 196.550-196.500. The following week the Utes defeated **Washington** on the road in front of 1,851. I asked Utah coach **Greg Marsden** if his team ever experiences a motivational letdown on the road when there is a sparse crowd.

"To be honest, that can be a problem at times," he said. "We have to work hard to create our own energy. At home, the crowd does that for us."

For the record, Utah's 15,552 eclipsed its own single-meet record of 15,447 against **BYU**, March 28, 2008. Perhaps even more impressive is that of all women's NCAA sports, Utah ranked second in home attendance in 2008-09 to

Tennessee

basketball, 13,999-13,861.

Alabama

gymnastics was fourth (10,484), behind

Connecticut

basketball (10,529). Since 1992, Utah has topped the Average Home Attendance rankings for gymnastics every year but three (

Alabama

, 1997, 2004;

Georgia

, 2001).

• **Michigan** has claimed the top men's team ranking over early leader **Illinois**, the latter excelling under first-year head coach

Justin Spring

, who is assisted by two-time world all-around champion

Ivan Ivankov

.

One of the Illini team members reportedly quipped: "We're the only team whose coaches are better than we are."

• Not surprisingly, **Alabama**, which placed second in 2009, sits atop the women's team rankings, ahead of **Oklahoma**. Of course, early rankings aren't as important as what you can do at the end of the season, but it sure must be motivating to see

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your team near the top. As noted above, senior

Morgan Dennis

is the No. 2-ranked all-arounder, and sophomore

Ashley Priess

, who placed 10th all-around at the 2006 World Championships, is tied for seventh.

- Speaking of **Oklahoma**, the Sooners just moved into their newly-renovated gym (and also expanded by 7,000 square feet) over the semester break. The new digs must have sent a welcome message, especially to the men's team, that gymnastics will be around in Norman for a while.

For the OU women, redshirt freshman **Natasha Kelley**, who missed last season because a torn Achilles' tendon, is competing on bars and beam despite a complete tear of her right ACL last fall. And 2003 co-world uneven bars champion

Hollie Vise

is making the most of her senior year by competing on floor, having been a bars and beam specialist her first three Sooner seasons.

- **California-Berkeley**, which qualified **Kyle Bunthuwong** and **Glen Ishino** to the U.S. national team last summer, is off to a slow start this season. How slow? Cal is ranked 18th, below club program

State

Arizona

Actually, injuries have kept the Golden Bears in hibernation a little longer than usual.

Bunthuwong needed time to recover from a jammed knee, and Ishino peeled off high bar when his grip broke at the bottom of tap swing for a Kolman. He sustained only minor injuries, according to Weiner.

"I'm very excited about this year's team," he told IG. "With **Brian Del Castillo's** return to good health, we have four excellent all-arounders...."

- So there you have it after the first month. Any predictions as to which teams will win the 2010 NCAAs in April?