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How Should We Feel About UConn?

As the Huskies Dominate the NCAA Tournament, Some Wonder—Is the Women's Game Broken?

By **DARREN EVERSON**

The Connecticut Huskies women's basketball team is in the midst of one of the most outrageous and improbable runs in the history of college sports. Never mind that the team has won 76 straight games. What's even more impressive is the way they've done it.

In all its games leading up to the NCAA tournament, Connecticut won by an average margin of 34.8 points. That's the equivalent of a Major League Baseball team winning by an average of seven runs per game or an NFL team stomping everyone by three touchdowns.

According to Ben Alamar, a sports-management professor at Menlo (Calif.) College, the probability that an NFL team would go undefeated, as UConn has done, while winning its games by an average of 21 points, is about six per one million—or about once in every 167,000 seasons.

The team's games get out of hand so quickly that sportscasters say they spend far more time than usual preparing filler material. "In pre-game production meetings, we say to each other, 'Let's hope for 20 good minutes,'" says Doris Burke, an ESPN college basketball analyst.

Ask most supporters of women's college basketball about the amazing Huskies and you'll hear that their dominance is good for the game.

"Not good, great," says LSU coach Van Chancellor.

"It's history in the making," says Tennessee's coach, Pat Summitt.

Setting aside the awesomeness of the feat and whether UConn's blowouts make for good TV, the laughingly lopsided nature of its wins does raise a fair, if slightly awkward, question: Is this the greatest college team of all time, or is there something desperately wrong with women's basketball?

"Obviously there's people thinking that for whatever reason, we're pushing people away and not growing the game," says UConn coach Geno Auriemma. "But that's not my job. My job is to make my team the best it possibly can be."

Nearly four decades since the 1972 enactment of Title IX, the federal law that prohibits sex-based discrimination at schools receiving federal aid, there are signs that women's basketball is narrowing the historical gap with the men's game. The talent level is soaring, coaches say, largely because more players are taking up the game in hopes of playing professionally.

"Women can do things now at a size that they used to not be able to do," says Mr. Chancellor, the LSU coach. He uses Maya Moore, UConn's 6-foot do-it-all star, as an example. "The Moore kid

would've been solely a post player in the '80s."

Instead she shoots 41% from three-point range and gets four assists per game.

Coaches and analysts say the rising talent level is actually making women's basketball more competitive. They point to this season's NCAA tournament when No. 4-seeded Kentucky upset Nebraska (a team that was 32-1), Xavier's near-upset of second-ranked Stanford in a regional final, and fourth-seeded Baylor's run to the Final Four. Led by shot-blocking star Brittney Griner, one of the sport's most exciting talents in years, Baylor dismissed top-seeded Tennessee earlier in the tournament by 15 points. (Baylor takes on UConn Sunday in the Final Four in San Antonio.)

The statistics don't indicate that the women's game is getting more competitive. Two teams, the Huskies and Lady Vols, have won 11 of the last 15 national titles. Through four rounds, the average game in this year's NCAA tournament has been decided by 16.7 points. That's well above the men's average margin of 10.7 and 8% higher than the average margin for the women in 1994, when the tournament expanded to its present 64-team format.

Even if you remove UConn from the equation, the average margin (14.6) is close to what it was 16 years ago.

There is a vast difference between the best teams and the rest of the pack. The top programs, Tennessee and UConn, have both topped 10,000 fans per game this season, which is higher than every Pac-10 men's team save Arizona.

Meanwhile, 43 of the 73 schools in the six major conferences averaged fewer than 3,000 fans, a level that's lower than all their major-conference men's counterparts.

Carolyn Peck, a former coach at Purdue and Florida who is now an ESPN analyst, says the sport is growing, "but it's not where it can be. It's not just a matter of being on TV. You want to play in front of a crowd."

Teams that don't have the same level of talent or support often look like junior varsity squads against UConn. The Huskies haven't trailed anyone in the NCAA tournament so far since the first 30 seconds of their first-round game (congratulations, Southern University.)

Southern and another opponent, Iowa State, both were down 20 points before 15 minutes had passed. Temple, the Huskies' second-round sacrifice, did so in roughly seven minutes. Florida State, the last so-called barrier between UConn and the Final Four, managed to hang within 14 points at halftime before UConn went on a 24-6 run and won by 40, the biggest margin ever in a regional final.

Still, many members of the sport's establishment insist the carnage is good for the game, since it drives interest. "Right now, everybody is watching and following Connecticut," says Ms. Summitt of Tennessee. "It means we're going to have people fixed to their TVs to see what happens. That's good."

Supporters of the women's game mention that no one ever questioned the dominance of UCLA's men's basketball team, which won 88 straight games in the early 1970s under coach John Wooden.

The legendary coach himself agrees. "I think it's good for the game," says Mr. Wooden, now 99. "There's more incentive for others to come up to Connecticut's level."

As for anyone who might venture to criticize his team, Mr. Auriemma, the UConn coach, has this to say: "I don't think anybody can say that being this good is bad," he says. "I guess only in America could people make comments like that."

—David Biderman contributed to this article

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