

SEC EAST PREVIEW

KENTUCKY BY KYLE ALMOND
THE GAMECOCK

When Keith Bogans and Tayshaun Prince decided at the last minute to pass on the NBA, Kentucky's national title hopes went through the roof.

The returning superstars should give the Wildcats one of the best 1-2 punches in college basketball and a great shot at winning back-to-back SEC titles.

"It was a tremendous boost to our program," said Kentucky head coach Tubby Smith, who signed a four-year contract extension during the offseason. "They bring so much to the ball club, not only talent-wise, but they also help teach the younger players as well."

The NCAA has recently started allowing players to test the NBA waters by working out and getting a feel for where they might get drafted while leaving them the option of coming back to college. Bogans and Prince took advantage of the opportunity, then brought big smiles to the Wildcat faithful by staying in Lexington.

With those two returning, the expectations are as high as ever for the

Wildcats. They were chosen to repeat as conference champs at the SEC Media Days, and they're ranked No. 4 in the nation by the Associated Press.

Kentucky is still the team to beat in the conference, and Florida head coach Billy Donovan can't argue with that.

"My personal feeling is that Kentucky is the best team in the country," Donovan said. "I think that they have great depth, they've got great size and they've got two great players in Bogans and Prince."

Backcourt

Bogans can pile on the points from the shooting guard position (17 points per game). He's one of the most versatile scorers in the nation.

With the graduation of Smith's son Saul, point guard could be an issue for the Wildcats. Smith is expecting senior J.P. Blevins to step up and sophomore Cliff Hawkins to provide depth.

Frontcourt

Prince was SEC Player of the Year this past season and is now a Preseason All-American and a legitimate candidate for the Naismith Award. At 6-foot-10, he can post up and shoot the three.

Sophomore phenomenon Jason Parker tore his ACL and is out for the season, but there's plenty of talent to fill in the middle. Jules Camara is back after missing last season because of a suspension, and the near 7-footer has been turning heads in the preseason with his athleticism.

Marvin Stone and Marquis Estill are big bodies who can bang with anyone inside.

Outlook

The Wildcats have been SEC champs eight out of the last 10 seasons. They always seem to be in the national title hunt, too. This year should be no different.

Opposing teams thought they were getting a break when Bogans and Prince declared early for the NBA. Now, they'll have to work harder than ever if they want to beat this team.

TENNESSEE BY PRESTON BAINES
THE GAMECOCK

better than most in the conference.

Frontcourt

Tennessee has one of the best starting frontcourts in the conference. Along with Yarbrough, UT has two other players that are hard to stop.

Juniors Marcus Haislip and Ron Slay are both strong players in the post who can shoot the long-range shot as well. Slay had a long streak of games in double figures snapped last year when the Vols faced the Gamecocks on Jan. 13.

Depth could be a problem behind the big three for UT.

Backcourt

UT was hit hard in the offseason with losses to the backcourt.

In addition to the graduation of Tony Harris, guards Harris Walker and Terence Woods got kicked off the team.

Jon Higgins, one of the SEC's most prolific three-point shooters, will try to make up for the Vols' shortcomings at guard. Senior Del Baker will also have to use his experience to be a team leader.

Senior Jenis Grindstaff and junior transfer Thaydeus Holden will also provide an extra punch in the backcourt.

Outlook

Tennessee has one of the most talented starting fives in the SEC. But after that, there are some question marks.

UT will be relying on many freshmen to lead the team, and that usually only works well with Duke. Tennessee might not make the NCAA tournament for the fifth straight year.

VITAL STATISTICS

KEY PLAYER

PRINCE
Senior Forward

HEAD COACH

Tubby Smith

LAST YEAR'S RECORD

24-10, 12-4 SEC

AGAINST USC LAST YEAR

at Kentucky: W 69-63; at USC: W 94-61

TOP PLAYERS

F Tayshaun Prince, G Keith Bogans, G JP Blevins

PROJECTED FINISH BY SPORTS STAFF

First place, SEC East

VITAL STATISTICS

KEY PLAYER

YARBROUGH
Junior Forward

HEAD COACH

Buzz Peterson

LAST YEAR'S RECORD

22-11, 8-8 SEC

AGAINST USC LAST YEAR

at UT, W 79-71, at USC W OT 68-67

TOP PLAYERS

F Vincent Yarbrough, G Marcus Haislip, F Ron Slay

PROJECTED FINISH BY SPORTS STAFF

Fourth, SEC East