



NIT coaches (from left) Anthony Grant, Alabama; Tad Boyle, Colorado; Ken Bone, Washington State; Gregg Marshall, Wichita State.
Photo Courtesy: Steven R. Smith



03/28/2011 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

Brooks: 'Bama's Grant Believes Tide Can Roll In Hoops

NEW YORK - There came a point during the cluster interview here Monday afternoon when Anthony Grant said - with a good natured chuckle and a broad smile - "I'm the coach at Alabama." This was about 10 minutes in, and I'm not so sure he was smiling on the inside or if that good natured chuckle was masking a desire to drop a grenade in the midst of the digital recorders, cameras and notepads.

Yes, Grant *is* the basketball coach at Alabama. Yes, he *was* the coach just two seasons ago at Virginia Commonwealth. VCU - no longer "VC-Who?" - has reached the Final Four of this season's NCAA Tournament, so you know where the media wretches were headed with Grant and what they wanted (and most of it wasn't about Tuesday night's Alabama-Colorado matchup in the semifinals of the NIT).

Here's what the wretches got:

Q: How about those Rams?

A: "How about the Rams? I'm really happy and proud of those guys. It's been a great run and hopefully they can keep going . . . I couldn't be more happy for them."

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Q: How many of those guys did you recruit?

A: "I was fortunate to be a part of that program for three years and I'm proud of what they've been able to do . . . yeah, I recruited some of them."

Q: Was it a difficult decision for you to leave VCU for Alabama?

A: "It's difficult because of the relationships you establish . . . but seeing the success they're having, there's a sense of enjoyment I get from that. I love the opportunity I'm getting to build our program to the point where we can compete for championships as well. I look at it as a win-win for everybody involved."

Q: With Butler and VCU getting to the Final Four, what does that say about the caliber of play now in the so-called "mid-majors?"

A: "I think it's great for the game and college basketball . . . Butler's been to back-to-back Final Fours, now VCU is in there. I think it speaks to great parity in college basketball. For every team out there, I think it makes them say we have an opportunity if we do what we need to do. It speaks to having veterans in your program . . . it's a great story."

Q: What were your feelings when VCU got chosen (for the NCAAs) and Alabama didn't?

A: "I was extremely happy for them . . . I don't think anybody who achieves a level of success gets there by wishing anything bad for somebody else. Our situation is our situation. There was disappointment for our seniors. But we're excited about our season to this point."

It was right about here, with yet another VCU-related question lobbed his way, that Grant - gently and with good humor - might have wanted to pull the pin on that grenade. He let it be known that he was now coaching in Tuscaloosa, where Nick Saban and Crimson Tide football casts a very, very long shadow, and he is no longer in Richmond, where football's shadow is, ah, not so noticeable.

Grant, a youthful 44-year-old who looks as if he could still be playing (he did in his day for Dayton), is not bothered by Saban's sport and the craziness that accompanies it. The dollar-and-cents, heart-and-soul commitment to football at The Bear's school isn't likely to change. Grant knew that when he signed on, but he believes it can also be a basketball school. His track record - 76-25 in three seasons at VCU, 41-26 in two at 'Bama - suggests he can make it happen.

"I spent two years at the University of Florida," he said. "I looked at it as a great opportunity because I know the history and tradition at Alabama; it's got a very rich basketball history in terms of individual players and teams under C.M. Newton, Wimp Sanderson, Mark Gottfried . . . I felt like it was a great opportunity to come in and build a program and compete for championships."

Yeah, basketball coaches can win in Tuscaloosa, too; it just hasn't been done so much in recent years. Flashback to the '80s and early '90s under Sanderson (267-119, 12 seasons), or the '70s under Newton (211-123, 12 seasons), who is now the chairman of the NIT. 'Bama basketball was pretty good then. But it slipped under David Hobbs and Mark Gottfried, who preceded Grant. The Tide's last NCAA Tournament appearance was in 2006, its last postseason appearance in the '07 NIT.

Like CU's current crop of seniors, 'Bama's hasn't played this deep into March. And like the Buffs, the Tide believed it should have been in the Big Dance. But it has gotten over the fact that it didn't happen and has capitalized on its No. 1 NIT seed to join CU on Broadway.

On Selection Sunday, Grant's team was at an on-campus watch party when the no-news-is-bad-news verdict was delivered on CBS. The Tide had won the SEC West (12-4) and after three NIT home wins now is 24-11. 'Bama won by two in the regular season against eventual SEC champion/Final Four participant Kentucky, but lost by 14 to the Wildcats in the SEC tournament.

Still, Tide forward JaMychal Green, a 6-8 junior who recently said he would return for his senior season, called being left out of the 68-team NCAA field "a tough pill to swallow. Everyone was mad initially . . . just really upset. Coach Grant

called us later on and told us about (the NIT) and that it was a blessing for us that we could keep on playing.

"For us to be able to play for a championship, we're grateful. It's good to be in the postseason. This is my first time (and) it's good to still be getting some recognition. But we're two great teams (CU, Alabama) that are supposed to be in the NCAA Tournament."

Although he might not have been at the time, Grant on Monday was more stoic than steamed about the NCAA snub: "It's an invitational tournament, just like this one. My focus is, we're excited to have the opportunity to compete in this tournament."

But he also conceded, "For our seniors and everybody in the program, there's a disappointment when you don't have a chance to compete in the NCAA Tournament, but I think our guys have done a very good job of turning the page and moving on. I think our guys have played really well down the stretch. We're champions of the Western Division of the SEC, one game away from having the chance to win the overall SEC title. We're in the postseason for the first time in a lot of years. This is a great tournament; I feel we've earned the right to be in New York."

That's what the Buffs have been saying for the past two weeks, too. They've also been saying - and this is coming directly from Boyle and his staff - that in the NIT, the hungrier team usually wins. "But that's no different than any game all year," said CU sophomore Alec Burks. "We hear that all the time - and we know it's true."

CU and 'Bama have had three common opponents this season. The Tide defeated Georgia to end the regular season (65-57) and again to open the league's postseason tourney (65-59, OT). UGA beat visiting CU 83-74 in the Buffs' second game. New Mexico, one of the three teams Alabama defeated in the NIT to reach New York (74-67), beat CU 89-76 in the Las Vegas Classic. Oklahoma State, which lost to CU in Boulder (75-71), defeated Alabama 68-60 in a holiday tournament in Oklahoma City.

Grant might have said otherwise in the hours after Selection Sunday, but Monday he declined to say his team was on a mission to prove anything to any group - and you know who that would be.

"We're just trying to win our next game . . . that's been our philosophy all year long," he said. "We control what we can control. That's really where we are."

He also declined to compare CU to any team 'Bama faced this season in the SEC: "That's tough to say. Colorado is Colorado. I wouldn't want to do them a disservice by comparing them to anybody else; I think they're a very good team in their own right . . . I think their team has been outstanding over the last couple of months of the season. For us, we've had success this year on the defensive end. For us to have a chance in this game, we're going to have to be outstanding on the defensive end. It should be a good matchup."

Washington State and Wichita State will disagree, but Tuesday night's second semifinal (7 p.m. MDT, ESPN2) is the best pairing of the tournament: Up-tempo offense (CU) vs. down-and-dirty defense ('Bama). If they had their druthers, Grant, Buffs Coach Tad Boyle and their teams would be preparing for that *other* Final Four.

But they're still playing - and playing for a championship in a pretty bright spotlight. For both schools in late March, that's an upgrade.

NIT TIP-INS: The Buffs visited the New York Stock Exchange on Monday morning and attended an NIT Welcome Dinner Monday night at The Boathouse in Central Park . . . The four teams' first glimpse of Madison Square Garden comes in shootarounds on Tuesday . . . MSG is undergoing an \$850 million renovation that will see the venerable venue shut down for a short period later this spring . . . ESPN's Fran Franchilla believes the NIT's and the NCAA's last four teams are "very evenly matched." The NCAA's Final Four: VCU, Butler, Kentucky and UConn . . . Washington State Coach Ken Bone on leaving Pullman, Wash., for New York: "There's not a lot going on in Pullman right now, so we decided to get out of town. We saw more people in Times Square than we do sometimes in Pullman." . . . Crimson Tide point guard Trevor Releford is a freshman from Kansas City (Bishop Miege). Burks, of Grandview, Mo., knows Releford well, having competed against him in summer AAU ball. Said Burks: "He's my boy." When 'Bama hired Grant two years ago, Releford was among his first recruiting targets. "We thought he could have an impact on our team and he's exceeded our expectations," Grant said . . . Boyle on being by-passed by the NCAA: "You never know what life is going to throw at you. We got thrown a curve ball - we hit it."

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SHOW MENU





Tide's Releford is quite familiar with Colorado star Alec Burks

Published: Monday, March 28, 2011, 6:16 AM



By **Don Kausler Jr./Tuscaloosa Bureau, The Birmingham News, Press-**

Register, and The Huntsville Times

TUSCALOOSA - Perhaps nobody knows Colorado better than Frank Martin. Kansas State's head coach faced the Buffaloes three times this season.

Alabama coach Anthony Grant knows Martin well. They played together at Miami Senior High School, and they later served together as assistant coaches there.

Grant says he talks to Martin sporadically, but that's a phone call that probably won't be made before the Crimson Tide (24-11) meets Colorado (24-13) at 8 p.m. CDT Tuesday in the NIT semifinals at Madison Square Garden in New York.

One reason: Conference confidentiality rules frown on helping coaches from another conference, Grant noted.

Another reason: Martin's Wildcats were 0-3 against the Buffaloes this season.

If Grant is looking for help scouting Colorado, he could turn to his own starting point guard. Freshman Trevor Releford knows one of the Buffaloes well. In fact, he knows Colorado's star.

That's Alec Burks, a 6-foot-6 sophomore guard. He and Releford are both from the Kansas City, Mo., area. Burks played at Grandview (Mo.) High School. Releford lived in Kansas City, Mo., but played at Bishop Miege High School in a Kansas suburb.

Burks and Releford played for five years on the same AAU team, but once they got to high school, they played on rival teams.

Are they friends?

"We're not enemies," Releford said. "I know him pretty well."



Alabama's Trevor Releford (12) drives around Kentucky's Doron Lamb (20) in the first half at Coleman Coliseum in Tuscaloosa, Ala., Tuesday, Jan. 18, 2011. (The Birmingham News/Mark Almond)

He's going to bring it."

Burks was the 2009 Kansas City Star Metro Player of the Year. Releford earned that honor last year.

When they split, Releford played for Kansas City Pump N Run. Burks played for MoKan Elite.

"The competition was always good," Releford said. "It was like a rivalry all the time. We tried to beat each other. They beat us once. We beat them once."

Releford said he has not talked to Burks lately.

"I talk to him when he's back home and works out," Releford said. "I'm looking forward to playing against him."

Releford is a pure point guard who is averaging 11 points and a team-leading 3.4 assists per game. He scored a career-high 22 points Wednesday in a 79-64 quarterfinal victory over Miami.

"For a freshman to walk in and perform the way he has speaks volumes for the work that he's put in," Grant said. "He's been a guy who's been consistent in terms of his approach to the game, his coachability, his work ethic, those things. He's got a chance to have an outstanding future."

Burks is a combo guard who leads Colorado with 20.5 points and 2.9 assists per game.

"He can score in a variety of ways," Releford said. "He's a tough defender, too.

A year ago, Burks averaged 17.1 points per game and led the Buffaloes with 5.0 rebounds per game. He became the first Colorado freshman to surpass 500 points in a single-season (512).

Releford is one of only the four Alabama freshmen to start a season opener at point guard, joining Ennis Whatley (1982), Mo Williams (2002) and Ronald Steele (2005).

"I consider him an experienced guy right now," Grant said. "He's learned and grown with every game.

"This tournament brings a different challenge. This will be a brand-new experience for him as well as our other guys. Now the challenge is to handle the change in environment and what's at stake and perform."

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Playing at MSG nothing new for Relphorde

CU senior won prep tourney at famed New York arena

By **Ryan Thorburn** Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/27/2011 10:43:06 PM MDT



Marcus Relphorde is one of the more well traveled players in college basketball.

So it's not that surprising that Colorado's versatile senior has played at Madison Square Garden before.

Before arriving in Boulder as a transfer before his junior season, Relphorde had played one season for Rick Majerus at Saint Louis and one season at Indian Hills Community College.

The Chicago native was a star at Homewood-Flossmoor (Ill.) High School. But prior to college he spent his senior year at a prep school in Alston, Pa.

It was during that senior season when Relphorde's team, American Christian, competed in and won an elite tournament in New York.

Now Relphorde will finish his CU career trying to help the Buffs win a National Invitation Tournament championship at Madison Square Garden.

"It's definitely going to be exciting to play there," Relphorde said. "I played there in high school, but it's a different story right now."

One of Relphorde's prep school teammates was Tyreke Evans, who played one season at Kentucky before beginning an

NBA career with the Sacramento Kings.

American Christian beat a team led by current Washington Huskies star Isaiah Thomas en route to the title.

"We won there, so it was a good experience," Relphorde said. "Hopefully we can win there now."

The Buffs will face Alabama in the semifinals on Tuesday at Madison Square Garden (7 p.m., ESPN).

Relphorde's play will go a long way in determining whether or not CU can advance and put itself in position to win an NIT championship on Thursday.

The Buffs are 17-6 (.739) this season when Relphorde scores 10 or more points and only 7-7 (.500) when the 6-7 forward scores fewer than 10 points.

More importantly, CU is 9-0 this season when Relphorde shoots better than 50 percent from the field.

"It means a lot from where I started from and where this program has been," Relphorde said of enjoying a deep postseason run with the Buffs. "It means we're moving forward and Colorado is going to be a household name in college basketball."

Tomlinson update

Nate Tomlinson has spent most of CU's spring break in the training room getting treatment on his separated left shoulder. The starting point guard has been able to practice with the Buffs the last two days.

Alabama is one of the best defensive teams in the country and will be pressuring the ball throughout Tuesday's semifinal.

"Hopefully by Tuesday he will be ready," CU head coach Tad Boyle said.

"We're going to need his ball handling. He handles the ball pretty well, and you need a ball handler against a team like Alabama."

Last (Big 12) team

standing

With top-seeded Kansas getting upset by VCU in the Elite Eight on Sunday, the Buffs are suddenly the only Big 12 team still playing.

Missouri and Texas A&M were one-and-done in the NCAA Tournament. Kansas State and Texas were sent home in the round of 32. And Nebraska and Oklahoma State have been eliminated from the NIT. Former CU player Toby Veal will be playing in the Final Four for VCU. He scored six points and grabbed five rebounds off the bench during the Rams' 71-61 victory over the Jayhawks.

New York itinerary

for the Buffs

The Buffs left for New York after Sunday's WNIT game at the Coors Events Center. Today the team will visit the New York Stock Exchange and will conduct a practice at the New York Athletic Club.

Boyle and the other four coaches in the NIT Final Four -- Alabama's Anthony Grant, Washington State's Ken Bone and Wichita State's Greg Marshall -- will participate in a press conference at the Marriott Marquis Hotel.

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Monday, March 28, 2011

NIT: Colorado's antidote to NCAA's snub

By Scoop Jackson
ESPN.com

In a living room in Chicago, Colin Relphorde sits on a couch watching his son, Marcus, and the University of Colorado play their quarterfinal game in the National Invitation Tournament (aka: the NIT).

The people with him say things, make comments within his earshot. All pertaining to their feelings that his son's team has been robbed. As in, the Buffaloes should have been invited to the four-letter formal dance instead of the three-letter sock hop.

They think their comments and condolences make him feel better. Let him know he isn't alone. And to a degree, they do.

But as the evening continues, Colin can't escape the fact that he's watching this game on TV instead of being there in person.

"If they'd gotten in [the NAAs]," Relphorde says, "I'da been there. Wherever they'd played, anywhere he would have gone, I would have been there."

You can hear it in his voice. The loss of that at-large bid.

"At this point, I'm just watching [Marcus] play ball," Colin says. "I've finally gotten through the disappointment -- I should say more so than anger -- of not being accepted, of them not getting into the tournament, because it's a little bit more than being 'snubbed.'"

"My son had a personal goal that I've known about for a long time," he says. "Before he even got into college, he told me he always wanted to get the opportunity to play in the NCAA tournament. [So] that sticks in my mind as I watch them play now. But that's kind of overridden by the fact that I just want them to win and the other part is to show the selection committee that they made the wrong decision."



It isn't the Big Dance, but at least Colorado forward Marcus Relphorde will have the chance to dunk in Madison Square Garden.

We can find a collection of fathers going through this every year, it seems. Mothers, brothers, sisters, aunties, uncles, homies, girlfriends, alums, students, boosters, too, all watching their teams, their schools, their friends, their loved ones, playing in the college basketball postseason tournament that many say is reserved for the 69th bid.

It's called the anatomy of a snub.

March sadness.

There are always more qualified applicants than positions available in the NCAA tournament. Someone always gets left out.

Year after year after year, it's the same routine. Schools get dissed by a roomful of athletic directors and conference commissioners who never seem to get it right.

This year, Colorado made that list by not making the NCAA cut. So did Virginia Tech, Boston College, Alabama and Harvard. More than often, the NIT becomes a proving ground for those teams to show the NCAA selection committee how wrong it was.

Colorado and Alabama, two of the four No. 1 NIT seeds, are still standing and play each other in the semifinals on Tuesday at 9 p.m. ET in Madison Square Garden. (Virginia Tech and Boston College, the other two top seeds, lost in the early rounds.) Washington State plays Wichita State at 7 in Tuesday's first semifinal. The championship game is Thursday at 7 p.m. All three remaining games are on ESPN2.

In some years, an NIT bid forces teams to make decisions. Mental clashes. Stay or go? Schools have refused to go once they've been snubbed by the NCAA. Georgetown, Maryland, Oklahoma State, North Carolina State (David Thompson once called it "a loser's tournament"), Louisville. All in the past have chosen to not accept the NIT invite.

But there are also teams such as the 2007 West Virginia squad. Not good enough in the eyes of the selection committee to make the NCAA tournament, the Mountaineers accepted a No. 1 seed in the NIT and won it & and they haven't been back since. Four straight NCAA tournament appearances. Last year, they made it to the Final Four; and from the looks of the program Bob Huggins has been building, it might be a long time before West Virginia puts itself in the position to have the suits in a room in the second week of March determine their fate again. That 2007 NIT championship? Motivation.

For most teams that feel they've been snubbed, playing in the "National Insignificant Tournament" becomes understood. But in the minds of those who have to live and play through it, who survive and advance in the NIT like the [Colorado Buffaloes](#) have so far, it's never justified.

Throughout the last two weeks, Colorado coach Tad Boyle has been able to get his team mentally past the omission. Even when other coaches couldn't -- or refused to -- see past it.

Mark Turgeon of Texas A&M expressed his feelings in a story on CUBuffs.com.

"I was just stunned that [the Buffs] weren't in," Turgeon said.

Bill Self of Kansas did the same.

"I just can't imagine a team that finishes 8-8, really 10-9 [counting the Big 12 tournament] in the third-best league in the country and with four wins over top five seeds & that to me is unthinkable, that to me is unbelievable & I think they really deserve to be in the field without question," Self said.

After the "oversight," as some in the media have generously called it, Boyle played the "We're all human" card, saying bluntly, "In the game of college basketball, players make mistakes, coaches make mistakes, officials make mistakes & now we're seeing that the committee makes mistakes, too."

That philosophy led to an open discussion with his team during practice the day after Selection Sunday. A commitment was made. So was a conclusion, the latter affirming that they have too much character as a team and too much competitive spirit to let these NIT games slide.

The commitment? To be one of the two teams in Division I men's basketball to be able to say they won the last game of their season.

Basil G. Brooks, contributing editor of the team's website, noticed something else, too.

"The initial shock of not getting in the tournament lingered for a day or more," he said. "But Tad Boyle and his staff did a great job of easing the players out of what Boyle termed 'a little funk' that remained in the first-round NIT win over Texas Southern. I think it [the funk] was pretty much gone by the time Cal got in here for the second round. But if the players' minds have cleared, there's no doubt some residual pain when they tune into NCAA games. That's unavoidable, but the mission is pretty clear right now: Get to the Garden and finish. This is a pretty good basketball team, with a couple of very good players [[Cory Higgins](#), [Alec Burks](#)], a very good sixth man [[Levi Knutson](#)] and enough solid role players to set a school season record for



It took a day or two after Selection Sunday, but the Buffs' Levi Knutson and coach Tad Boyle learned to appreciate the NIT opportunity.

wins [23]. It's been an enjoyable ride -- even with the NCAA snub -- at a school trying hard to make basketball count."

After Tuesday night's quarterfinal victory over Kent State, Boyle put a cap on it.

"I think our team is good enough to have gone to the NCAA tournament and won a few games," he said. "I don't know how many, because that all depends on the matchups, and you see what happens in the tournament. I don't know if it's a blessing in disguise; everyone says it's easier to win games in the NIT. It's been easier for us because we've been at home. We've beaten some good teams. I'm glad we've won. All you can do is play the hand you were dealt, and we were dealt the hand and we're playing it. No matter what tournament you're in, it's huge."

[Javon Coney](#), a 6-foot-3 senior for the Buffs, never got the opportunity to play in the NCAA tournament.

At this stage, two games away from an NIT championship, Coney still can't escape the fact that his one shining moment won't be sung by Luther Vandross or Jennifer Hudson. He might get the Rebecca Black version.

When asked about it, he doesn't sound disappointed. He's too proud of the squad right now, too excited about the being in the NIT Final Four.

But he keeps it very, very true.

"Our society, at least basketball-wise, has always put an emphasis on making the NCAA tournament and being a part of March Madness," Coney says over the phone. "Everything revolves around that this time of year for college basketball. So it was extremely disappointing to us that we didn't have the opportunity to go out and finish the way we wanted.

"But for us to be one of the few teams left, in both the NCAA and NIT tournaments, is extremely great for us and a huge plus just to still be playing. Because not a lot of teams are still playing."

Despite Boyle's belief, this NIT has been Colorado's blessing in disguise.

"One of my concerns when we didn't make the NCAA tournament was that we weren't going to be able to put a stamp on, make our mark on the season we had," Coney continues. "This has been the year where we turned the corner as a program. At the beginning, I thought not making the [NCAA] tournament would diminish that; but thinking about it and having now played in the NIT, it's truly been a blessing. We really have an opportunity to go out, go to New York, actually go to Madison Square Garden and win this tournament, which will be an unbelievable way to end my career and the career of the other four seniors as well."

"Did you see the game?" Colin Relphorde texted me late Tuesday night after the quarterfinal win over Kent State. "Marcus did his thing. Got player of the game!"

I responded that I did, sent congratulations. When I asked if he was going to New York, he replied: "Already made my reservations."

Scoop Jackson is a columnist for ESPN.com.

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Monday, March 28, 2011

The NIT Final Four -- a preview

By Kieran Darcy

While the college basketball world is buzzing about next weekend's NCAA tournament Final Four in Houston, we've got a Final Four of our own right here in our backyard, competing for the National Invitation Tournament championship.

It may lack the prestige of the Big Dance, but four quality teams have descended on the Big Apple this week -- three teams from BCS conferences, and a member of one of the best mid-major conferences in the country. They'll play on Tuesday and Thursday nights at Madison Square Garden, airing on ESPN2. And here's a preview of what you'll see:

THE FAVORITE

Alabama (24-11): The Crimson Tide are led by second-year coach **Anthony Grant**, who in his previous stop piloted Virginia Commonwealth to two NCAA tournaments and an NIT berth in three years, and who recruited several of the key players on this year's VCU team that's in the NCAA Final Four. Alabama finished with the second-best record in the SEC, winning the Western Division at 12-4. It also beat Kentucky, another NCAA Final Four participant, 68-66 in Tuscaloosa on Jan. 18. ESPN's resident bracketologist, Joe Lunardi, listed Alabama as the very first team under the outline in his final bracket projection before the selection show.

Key Players: Alabama's top two scorers are a pair of forwards -- 6-foot-6 sophomore **Tony Mitchell** (15.5 ppg, 7.0 rpg, .526 FG percentage) and 6-foot-8 junior **JaMychal Green** (15.4 ppg, 7.7 rpg, .496 FG percentage). And then there's 6-foot-1 point guard **Trevor Releford** (11.0 ppg, 3.4 apg, 3.3 rpg), who made the All-SEC freshman team.

Key Stats: Alabama's strength is its defense -- and what's the old saying, defense wins championships? The Crimson Tide are third in the country in field-goal percentage defense (38.3 percent), sixth in steals (9.4 per game) and seventh in points allowed per game (59.2) -- that's pretty impressive stuff.

THE CONTENDER

Colorado (24-13): Many people thought the Buffaloes belonged in the NCAA tournament instead of, say, VCU -- after all, they beat Kansas State three times, and also had wins over Texas and Missouri. Colorado finished tied for fifth in the Big 12 with Mizzou at 8-8 under first-year coach **Tad Boyle**, who was hired after spending four seasons at Northern Colorado. The team's 24 total wins this season are the most in school history.

Key Players: Colorado has four players who average in double-figures in scoring, but the star is 6-foot-6 sophomore guard **Alec Burks** (20.5 ppg, 6.5 rpg), the No. 18 scorer in the country. Burks is one of only four players nationally to average more than 20 points, 6 rebounds and 2.5 assists per game this season. Beyond Burks, keep an eye on 6-foot-5 senior guard **Cory Higgins** (16.1 ppg), who has 1,998 career points, and needs 14 more in the NIT to top **Richard Roby** and become the school's all-time leading scorer.

Key Stats: It will be a severe contrast of styles when Colorado and Alabama face off in the second semifinal on Tuesday night, because Colorado is one of the best offensive teams in the country. The Buffaloes are ranked No. 11 in the nation in scoring (80.1 ppg), and No. 16 in field goal percentage (47.5). Even better, they're No. 5 from the charity stripe, knocking down 77.6 percent of their free throws.

THE SLEEPER

Washington State (22-12): The Cougars finished in sixth place in the Pac-10 this season at 9-9 under second-year coach **Ken Bone**, who replaced **Tony Bennett** after he departed for Virginia. Washington State beat their arch-rival and NCAA tournament-bound Washington twice, blew out Gonzaga by 22, and lost by just two to Elite Eight participant Arizona on Jan. 22.

Key Players: Colorado's Burks isn't even the best scorer in the NIT Final Four -- that honor goes to Washington State's **Klay Thompson**. The 6-foot-6 junior guard is averaging 22.0 points per game, leading the Pac-10 and ranking him ninth nationally. Thompson's 727 points this season are the most by a Pac-10 player since **Eddie House** scored 736 in 1999-2000.

(Thompson was also arrested on March 4 and cited for marijuana possession, and suspended for the Cougars' regular-season finale against UCLA). Washington State's second-leading scorer is 6-foot-4 junior guard **Faisal Aden**, who averages 12.9 points per game off the bench.

Key Stats: Washington State, like Alabama, is also very good on the defensive end -- the Cougars are No. 18 in the country in field-goal percentage defense (39.6 percent), and No. 30 in 3-point field goal defense (31.4). But their numbers offensively are also good, scoring 73.7 points per game (No. 54 in country) and shooting 45.9 percent (No. 59).

THE LONGSHOT

Wichita State (27-8): The Shockers are the lone non-BCS team in the NIT Final Four, but they had an excellent season, finishing in second place in the always-tough Missouri Valley Conference at 14-4, one game behind Missouri State. Wichita State played two of this year's NCAA Final Four participants -- losing by just four to UConn in Maui in November, and losing by just one at home to VCU on BracketBusters weekend in February. Head coach **Gregg Marshall**, in his fourth year, led Winthrop to seven NCAA tournaments in nine years, before moving on to Wichita.

Key Players: Wichita State has just one player who averages in double-figures in scoring -- 6-foot-8 senior center **J.T. Durley**. But even he only scores 11.4 points per game. The Shockers have about as balanced an attack as you'll ever see -- 10 players average at least 14 minutes per game, and no one averages more than 26 minutes. Eight players average at least six points per game.

Key Stats: The Shockers are No. 7 in the country in rebounding margin, outboarding opponents by an average of 7.9 per game -- that's outstanding. They're also a very good shooting team, making 46.7 percent from the field (No. 34 in country) and 74.6 percent from the foul line (No. 35).

PREDICTION

Alabama's defense is strong enough for the Crimson Tide to prevail over Colorado, while Klay Thompson has a big game in leading Washington State over Wichita State. And in the championship game on Thursday night, Alabama puts the shackles on Thompson, and Anthony Grant gets to hoist the NIT trophy, before watching his former players take on Butler in a fairy-tale NCAA national semifinal.



Colorado shakes off NCAA disappointment for NIT run

Updated 16h 11m ago |

By [Tom Pedulla](#), USA TODAY

NEW YORK — When the NCAA selection committee dealt members of the Colorado basketball team one of the greatest disappointments of their young lives by failing to choose them as some projected, coach [Tad Boyle](#) saw it as a teachable moment.



By

Jamie Squire, Getty Images Alec Burks, seen here during the Big 12 tournament, leads Colorado in scoring, rebounds and assists. The Buffaloes will play in the NIT semifinals Tuesday against

Alabama. [Enlarge](#)

By Jamie Squire, Getty Images

Alec Burks, seen here during the Big 12 tournament, leads Colorado in scoring, rebounds and assists. The Buffaloes will play in the NIT semifinals Tuesday against Alabama.

"Life isn't fair. That's lesson No. 1," Boyle

remembers telling his downcast players. "And you'd better learn how to deal with it."

The Buffaloes responded with a succession of impressive home victories in the NIT, marching past Texas Southern (88-74), California (89-72) and Kent State (81-74) to advance to Tuesday's semifinal matchup with Alabama. Washington State faces [Wichita State](#) in the first semifinal (7 p.m., ET, ESPN2).

"We're not going to have any regrets about the season," says Colorado senior guard Levi Knutson. "Obviously, we wanted to be in the NCAA tournament, but it was not in our control. For the seniors to end their career in New York, hopefully with an NIT championship, that would be special."

At 24-13, the Buffaloes already have a school record for victories. Their mark includes three wins against [Kansas State](#), which was part of the NCAA field. Boyle still bristles at the perceived snub.

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officials make mistakes and the NCAA selection committee makes mistakes," says Boyle, in his first season at Colorado.

Colorado did much of its damage at home, with a school-record 18 wins there, and went 8-8 in the Big 12. It bowed to eventual champ Kansas 90-83 in the semifinals of the Big 12 tournament.

ESPN analyst [Fran Fraschilla](#) says he is only "mildly surprised" the Buffaloes were denied what would have been their first NCAA berth since 2003. "I thought they had enough quality Big 12 wins to earn a spot," he says, "but I also thought they were penalized for a weak non-conference schedule."

There is no questioning how well Colorado, with Marcus Relphorde and Cory Higgins joining Knutson as senior starters, is performing heading into Tuesday night's game against Alabama (24-11), which also had a case for the NCAA tournament. It has won six of seven and is the highest-scoring team in the NIT, averaging 86 points.

Alec Burks, a 6-6 sophomore, provides star power in leading the Buffaloes in scoring (20.5 a game), rebounding (6.5) and assists (2.9). All of the Buffs' senior starters average double-figure scoring. For the first time in the school's 108-year basketball history, five players have made at least 100 field goals in a season. Andre Roberson, a 6-7 freshman, is on the verge of joining them with 99.

Whether Colorado can win its first NIT title since 1940, Knutson says there is still much to be proud of: "The program took a great step forward this year. They can just build on that from here."

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