

# Familiar faces shine in Big 12 men's basketball

BY SAM MCKEWON  
Senior editor

Seems like old times at the top of the power structure in the Big 12 Conference in men's basketball.

So old, in fact, it dates to before the Big 12 was even formed.

Four traditional powers from the old Big Eight - Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Oklahoma State - have positioned themselves atop the league standings along with Texas.

Monday night Missouri played Kansas in a late game, while Oklahoma (12-3) and Oklahoma State (11-3), both 3-0 in the conference, meet tonight to further separate the undefeated ranks from the rest of the pack.

Texas, which was part of the Southwest Conference before the Big 12, stands at 3-0 as well, but is still has a losing record overall at 7-8.

The early league proceedings harken old Big Eight fans back to the battles in the 1980s and early 1990s, when the Waymon Tisdales, the Danny Mannings, Bryant Reeves and Anthony Peplers of the conference competed in games every week that had national

prominence.

While there's no team in the Big 12 figured in the national title race currently, Kansas's demotion from national power to merely mortal because of graduation has left the conference crown up for grabs among the classic war horses.

"You can probably say that four or five teams got a shot at the title," Oklahoma Coach Kelvin Sampson said. "There's Missouri, Oklahoma State, Kansas, us and Texas. We all fit that category."

The conference itself suffered a bit of a knock on its image in the non-conference games. Many of the elite teams in the conference didn't fare well against the upper crust of other conferences. Kentucky pounded KU by 18, Southwest Missouri State beat Missouri, and Oklahoma State lost to UCLA, Creighton and Florida Atlantic.

In the past, the Big 12 has had the look of a one-team conference, with Kansas beating enough top 10 teams to make the rest of the conference look good. It's not happening now.

Still, as Kansas State's Tom Asbury said, it might be better to see more balance within the league and no one major power.

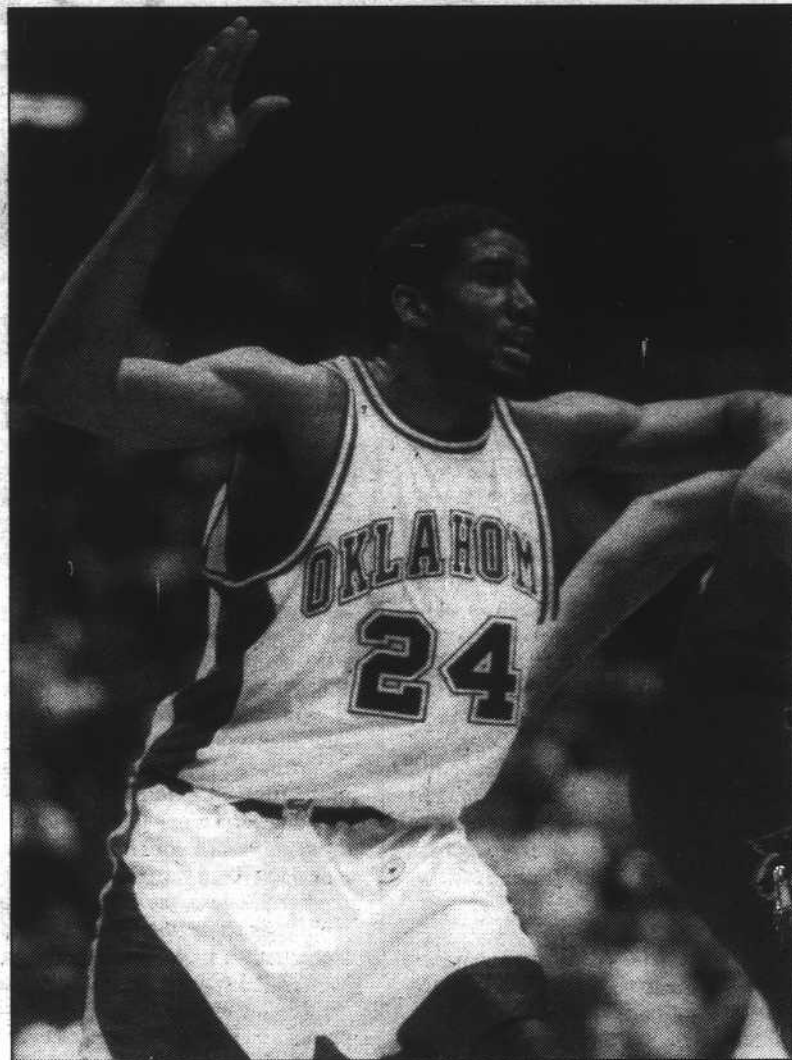
"It's healthy for us, no question," Asbury said. "I don't know if there's parity yet with five teams undefeated and the rest losing, but I can see where it's going."

It's hard to say which team is the most surprising. It might be Texas, which started the conference season 4-8, but has since won its three Big 12 contests under new Coach Rick Barnes, including a 89-76 win over Nebraska Sunday.

Barnes, whose half-court, defense-oriented coaching got Clemson to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament in 1997, said UT is starting to adapt to a pace worlds apart from Tom Penders' free-wheeling, fast-break offense.

"They're starting to see what we want to do with the basketball," Barnes said. "Even when we weren't doing so well, the great thing about these kids is that they come back and want to learn the very next day."

Oklahoma, too, might be considered a surprise. After losing leading scorer Corey Brewer to graduation, OU has brought out possibly the best front court in the conference, with Eduardo Najera (16.4 points per game and 7.4 rebounds per game) and Ryan



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**SOPHOMORE FORWARD Ryan Humphrey leads an Oklahoma team that is undefeated in the Big 12 Conference so far this season. Humphrey joins forward Eduardo Najera as one of the best frontcourt tandems in the Big 12.**

Humphrey (13.6 and 7.9) and guard play that has been stable.

"We're weaker than we've been at the guards," Sampson said. "Our inside

game is there, though, and Eduardo is learning how to be that top player that Corey Brewer and Ryan Minor used to be."

## Low scoring hinders NU

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"You're going to give up some more points," said senior Andy Markowski. "In return, you hope to get more offense."

Florence said the NU press had problems of its own.

"We should have stuck to one thing rather than done several things," Florence said. "We just put in a new press. We're not 100 percent sure on

one press, and then we go to another." Florence also said defense isn't the problem.

"I know our defense is capable of shutting down teams," Florence said. "If we can't score, our defense isn't doing any good. If you can't put up points, you can't win."

"It's a matter of being consistent. If we start one way, we have to keep it going. This team still has a long way to go."

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