After two rounds of the NCAA's, the Buckeyes have two victories by an average margin of 13 points, and a date in St. Louis for the Sweet Sixteen round....all without having played a complete all-around game at the level we saw in the Big Ten tournament the week before. It makes you wonder what they're capable of if and when they put it all together, especially now that Kansas and Georgetown have exited the once daunting Midwest Region.

Ohio State advanced to the regionals with relative ease, overcoming an off-day shooting the ball by Evan Turner in the opener, as well as ongoing problems with ball-handling and turnovers. While sloppy and uneven at times, the Buckeyes still prospered in Milwaukee with stifling defense, a lethal transition game, and solid performances by Turner's less-celebrated teammates.

Turner's outside shot deserted him in the first round game against UC Santa Barbara, and despite a brilliant overall performance (24 Pts, 9 RB, 9 A)) against Georgia Tech, he still struggled on most anything outside 8-10 feet. Turner had one 3-pointer against Tech, but most of his field goals came at or around the rim...in a couple of cases, rebounding his own misses for second-chance layups (not that there's anything wrong with that).

With their top scorer struggling to hit from the field, a couple of things were made clear about these Buckeyes: a) Evan Turner can help win games for his team without shooting the ball well, and b) those other guys in OSU uniforms are pretty good too.

Supporting Cast - Looking for Consistency

Two of the Buckeye starters that helped bail out Turner's sub-par shooting performance (2 of 13) against UCSB, Dallas Lauderdale and William Buford, were more inconspicuous on the offensive end in the second game of the weekend, although Buford did hit a crucial late 3-pointer in Sunday's win. Buford was a force on both ends in the UCSB win, with 16 points in an assertive offensive showing to go with seven rebounds.

And Lauderdale dominated the paint for OSU with 12 boards and a career high eight blocks against the Gauchos, before delivering a more pedestrian performance (4 pts, 4 bounds, 3 blocks) against the Yellow Jackets. To his credit though, Lauderdale battled the two young Georgia Tech big men to a stalemate down low, and it was the Yellow Jackets who got in foul trouble, not the Buckeye big man.

OSU got a little more consistency from David Lighty, who had 9 pts, 4 bounds and 6 assists on Friday night, and then a relatively quiet 18 points on Sunday, with three rebounds and three assists. His ball-handling is desperately needed on this team when they face a competent press, and he can get to the rim when the outside shots aren't falling.

Perhaps Friday's biggest hero was Jon Diebler, who shot 7 of 12 from 3-point range against the Gauchos, including an early burst of 3-pointers to get OSU off to a fast start. Diebler briefly went cold in the first half Sunday before finding the touch when it counted, to finish 4 for 10 for the game against Georgia Tech. Despite his 0-5 streak on Sunday, Diebler is shooting 50% from long range (11 of 22) for the two games combined, and just under 54% overall. Shooting like that will make up for some of Dallas Lauderdale's masonry at the free throw line.

Just as an aside....every TV commentator I've seen do an OSU game during the postseason tournaments has noted the Buckeyes' unselfishness, both in the half-court offense and in the transition game. That kind of attitude is obviously key to success at any level of basketball, but I think it's especially notable on a team littered with "Mr. Basketball" types, state career scoring champs, and "Player of the Year" winners...guys who have always been "The Man" on every team they've ever played for. Credit Matta for engendering that kind of feeling on a team comprised of star individual talents.

Answering Questions

Some of my concerns about the Buckeyes going into the tournament have been tempered somewhat by the team's showing over the last two weekends. The issue of fatigue on a team playing six guys, for example, was pretty much set aside when they played games on three consecutive days in the Big Ten tournament and finished on Sunday looking stronger than they started on Friday. There are no more back-to-backs. As Matta says, they can rest in April.

Turner did look gassed against UCSB Friday night, almost from the outset. It was puzzling why the refs allowed the Gauchos to bump, hack, hip check, and generally beat up on Turner from the start. It made some of the touch fouls called elsewhere look laughable by comparison.

Turner's tendency to force the dribble in tight spots results in way too many turnovers, although it's not readily apparent who better is available to take the ball-handling load off of ET. So they live with it...and celebrate the often spectacular results of his one-on-one game.

The size of Georgia Tech was supposed to be troublesome for OSU's smaller but more athletic starters, but the Jackets front court youngsters Derrick Favors and Gani Lawal were largely neutralized by a combination of foul trouble and inexperience, and totaled just eight field goals and eight rebounds combined. Matta was quick to double the big men when they got the ball down low, and one assumes he'll continue with that strategy against Tennessee. The Bucks army of swingmen continues to play 'bigger' than they are on defense in the front court, compensating for their lack of height with quickness, trapping, great hands, and leaping ability.

The ball-handling and free throw shooting problems still worry me, as does the prospect of a Tennessee team that can match the OSU transition game to an extent the Bucks' first two opponents could not. But all of a sudden, Ohio State finds itself in the catbird's seat in a region that was thought to be the tournament's toughest a few short days ago.

With that seat comes the pressure of being the favorite in each of their next two games, should they get that far. But the intimidating prospect of having to beat Georgetown and Kansas to get to the Final Four has been eliminated. OSU could not have asked for their path to Indianapolis to be paved with fewer major obstacles. Now it's time to put a complete game or two together.

Madness Returns

From where I sit, this year's tournament has been the best in years. Recall last year when the first round was almost completely devoid of major upsets? If you picked every single higher seed in the first round a year ago, your sheet looked pretty good on Friday night. Forget that.

This year, parity is back with a vengeance. The consensus going in this year was that the at-large field was perhaps the weakest ever. I heard numerous pundits boldly pronounce that all four No. 1 seeds would advance to the Final Four. Hah!

It's not like I had more than a couple of Abe Lincolns riding on my small-time office pools in this tournament....still I can't recall ever sitting in front of my TV fervently hoping both of my projected finalists will lose. Both did...and I couldn't be happier about it...because stories like the Northern Iowa Panthers and the St. Mary's Gaels are what make this the greatest sporting event on the planet.

Basketball played at it's most fundamental, team-oriented level is indeed a beautiful thing to watch. This format proves yet again that an assembly of Australians transplanted to California are a worthy match for the big conference kids from Philadelphia. It shows that an unlikely bunch of mid-major no-names from the Corn Belt is capable of knocking off a team many thought was unbeatable in this event. A game in which coaching and teamwork can overcome superior athleticism levels the playing field between the

Ivy League and the Big Ten
. A purer and more exciting form of sport is hard to find anywhere.

Now, my memory isn't what it once was, but I can't recall more buzzer-beater finishes in the first two rounds for a long time...Purdue, Michigan State, Murray State, UNI, Butler, Washington, ODU...I know I'm forgetting some. And I know there were more overtime games than ever, because CBS told me so. With my better half out of town, I parked it in front of the big screen and watched intently for four days, interrupted only by brief expeditions into yard work. *(Not sure why it's notable that my wife is gone...because I do this most every year regardless of where she is)*

Making it all the sweeter of course, is the fact that the Buckeyes are still alive, and even more drama is in the offing...starting with a rematch of 2007 against Tennessee .

OSU-UCSB Box - Recap

OSU-Georgia Tech Box - Recap

I would be remiss if I didn't give a tip of the cap to the Ohio University Bobcats for their stunning beatdown
of the Georgetown Hoyas on the tournament's opening day. Making it even more satisfying was the fact that no buzzer-beater or miraculous comeback was required to send the Hoyas home. John Groce's troops led wire-to-wire, opening up a 17-point lead in the first half. The lead rarely dipped below double-digits in the second half, and Ohio U. cruised home to a 14-point win.

Some observers were calling it the greatest moment in the history of Ohio University athletics. For my part, I wracked my brain to figure out what event might possibly be in second place...(producing Mike Schmidt maybe?...though that's not an *event*)

The Big East still has two strong teams (WVU, Syracuse) left in the field, but the conference's reputation as the elite league in college basketball took a major hit as Pitt, Notre Dame, Villanova, Louisville, Georgetown and Marquette were all eliminated on the first weekend with a total of two wins combined. Heh.

The Big Ten has three Sweet Sixteen teams (OSU, MSU, Purdue), more than any other conference. The SEC (Kentucky, Tennessee) and the Big 12 (Kansas State, Baylor) have two each, and the ACC (Duke) has the same number of teams remaining as the Ivy (Cornell) the Horizon (Butler) and the MVC (Northern Iowa). Heh.

I must also say that it's downright weird not to see North Carolina...or U. Conn....or Memphis in the tournament. Not bad, mind you...just weird.

College Basketball's Hotbed

One of the striking things about this year's NCAA's is the geographic concentration of NCAA tournament teams from the Appalachian region, making this part of the country look good...at least in terms of its college basketball success. This is not exactly breaking news...the region stretching from western New York down through the Ohio Valley to the Smoky Mountains has long been associated with roundball excellence and tradition.

But consider the teams from the greater Appalachian region that have won NCAA tournament games this year...Kentucky, Ohio University, Syracuse, West Virginia, Pitt, Ohio State, Tennessee. Add a couple more winning schools on the region's fringes (Murray State, Xavier), and then count additional teams from the region that made the tournament but didn't win any games (Vanderbilt, Louisville, Robert Morris, Lehigh?), and good representation starts to look more like dominance.

And you don't have to stretch the region too far westward into into Big Ten country to encompass six more tournament wins from Butler, Purdue and Michigan State, (and zero from Notre Dame).

That's an awful lot of quality basketball packed into a relatively small strip of the country...certainly one unmatched by any other region of the nation. Not sure exactly what that says...except that this is a rich vein of college basketball interest and excellence on the court. Again, not a fresh insight...just an enduring reality brought into focus once again by this year's tournament.

A Recruiting Flurry

Just a bit of football news in a relatively quiet time for the program:

The 2011 football recruiting class went from two to seven in just over 24 hours last week, as Jim Tressel went 'big'...securing commitments from four linemen and a cornerback, with three of the group hailing from northeast Ohio.

The biggest name of the new commits is Chase Farris , a two-way lineman from Elyria who will probably play defensive end as a Buckeye. Farris is 6' 5", 265 lbs., and still growing as a 17-year old. He already had offers from all the Midwestern football powers...UM, MSU, ND, Illinois, WVU among others, but his heart has always been in Columbus.

Farris now joins two other standout defensive ends in the Buckeyes' 2011 class. Steve Miller of Canton McKinley, and
Ken Hayes
from Toledo Whitmer are ranked as the #3 and #7 defensive ends respectively, by the Scout.com service. It's hard to imagine a better group of DE recruits anywhere in the nation now that the versatile and athletic Farris has joined OSU's 2011 unit.

Last year Tressel signed offensive tackle Andrew Norwell early in the process, and then held off on some local kids, saving spots until signing day for national offensive line recruits Seantrel Henderson and Matt James. When both players went elsewhere, Tressel was left with a class containing just the one offensive lineman, and he wasn't about to let that happen again.

This time around, Tressel identified a couple of Ohio linemen he liked, and wrapped them up early. Chris Carter , a 6' 4", 325, offensive lineman from Cleveland JFK, and Antonio Underwood , a 6' 3", 300 lb. lineman from Shaker Hts., both join the 2011 class projecting as offensive guards as Buckeyes. Both young men are somewhat under the radar in terms of their national recruiting profiles, but as we know, sometimes it is an offer by a major program that makes, rather than follows a player's rating. Besides...as we have also learned...when in doubt, trust the Vest.

The only out-of stater in the class so far is Brian Bobek , a lineman from Palatine, IL, who projects as a center at Ohio State. The 6' 3", 280 lb. Bobek held offers from Purdue and MSU, and said OSU coaches told him he was the only center they were offering this year.

DerJuan Gambrell , a 6' 2", 180 lb. defensive back from Toledo Rogers, is another slightly under the radar recruit for Tressel and the Buckeyes. He played mostly safety on defense for Rogers last year, but OSU coaches are projecting him as a cornerback in Columbus.

That's it for now, Bucknuts. Till next time...O-H