

Gonzaga is No. 1 in AP Top 25 for 1st time

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By NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS

The Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — The to-do list for the Gonzaga basketball team got shorter Monday: For the first time, the Zags were ranked No. 1 in The Associated Press Top 25 poll.

Sweet but it may get bumpier from there.

Next: Avoiding the potholes that have stopped every other No. 1 this season, then finding a way to the Final Four.

“We don’t believe there is any jinx,” assistant coach Tommy Lloyd said, subbing for coach Mark Few, who was said to be fly-fishing and unavailable for comment. “Obviously, it’s a dream for us, the ultimate accomplishment.”

The fact that Few would skip perhaps the biggest day in program history to go fishing says much about the priorities of the coach who helped build and has sustained Gonzaga’s success.

Few has repeatedly said he enjoys the balance between work and family time that Gonzaga provides, a major reason he has not left for a bigger program.

Students celebrated the No. 1 ranking on the downtown campus Monday and the food services department wheeled out a 20-foot cake that read “Congratulations Zags.”

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Staying No. 1 has been tough this season, with Gonzaga the fifth school to hold the spot after replacing Indiana this week. The others were Duke, Louisville and Michigan.

Gonzaga, a small Jesuit school in Spokane, is where crooner Bing Crosby went and where John Stockton threaded pinpoint passes. It has the best record in Division I at 29-2 following weekend wins against BYU and Portland. The Hoosiers, beaten by Minnesota last week, dropped to No. 2.

“We’re not necessarily in pursuit of a ranking,” Lloyd said. “We’re trying to get to the NCAA tournament. When that’s over, as coaches we can look back and realize what an accomplishment it is and how difficult it is.”

The Zags are the 57th school to be ranked No. 1 since the AP poll began in January 1949. The school is considered a mid-major and reached No. 2 for the first time last week. Now it will play for the first time at No. 1 on Saturday night in the West Coast Conference semifinals.

The school received 51 first-place votes from the 65-member national media panel, 44 more than Indiana. Duke, winners over Miami after a loss to Virginia, remained third with five first-place votes.

Kansas and Georgetown both jumped two spots to fourth and fifth. The Hoyas received the other two first-place votes. Miami, Michigan, Louisville, Kansas State and Michigan State rounded out the top 10. Virginia Commonwealth and UCLA, both ranked earlier in the season, returned to the poll at 21st and 23rd, respectively.

Gonzaga’s rise to the top comes 14 years after the school burst onto the national scene with a surprise run to the final eight of the NCAA tournament. Since then, Few has guided the Zags to 12 conference titles, 13 trips to the tournament and four trips to the round of 16.

Along the way, Gonzaga has produced a slew of NBA players, including Dan Dickau, Adam Morrison, Ronny Turiaf, Austin Daye, Robert Sacre and Jeremy Pargo. The team features players from Canada, France, Germany and Poland along with Stockton’s son, David.

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Kelly Olynyk, the 7-foot Canadian center, leads the team in scoring at nearly 18 points a game and averages seven rebounds. He calls the No. 1 ranking a “great milestone.”

Olynyk never dreamed that he would be playing for the No. 1 team in the nation when he chose Gonzaga over other offers.

“It never even crossed my mind,” he added.

Spokane is a city of 200,000 near the Idaho and Canadian borders. The Lilac City is a blue-collar town, far from the high-tech wealth of the Seattle area. But basketball is one place where the state’s second-largest city outshines Seattle. Gonzaga, in fact, is the first team from the state of Washington to be ranked No. 1.

At the time of Gonzaga’s run to the final eight, the school had fewer than 5,000 students and was struggling with enrollment and budget issues.

Today, enrollment is at 7,800 and new buildings are popping up on campus all the time. The 6,000-seat McCarthy Athletic Center, which opened in 2004, has been sold out for all but one game. The Zags have rewarded their fans with a 120-8 home record there.

That success hasn’t come easy. Every year, the Zags seem to take on a tougher non-conference schedule to make up for their WCC schedule. This year they own wins over No. 9 Kansas State, No. 13 Oklahoma State, plus Clemson, Oklahoma, Baylor, Washington State and West Virginia. Their only losses are to Illinois and Butler.

For now, the Zags, newly-anointed No. 1, head to the league tournament in Las Vegas. Lloyd knows such honors go only so far.

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“I don’t think those teams are going to care where we are ranked,” he added.

Baylor still No. 1 in AP women’s basketball poll: Baylor remained No. 1 in The Associated Press women’s basketball poll for a ninth straight week while Toledo entered the Top 25 for the first time since 2001.

The Lady Bears cruised to wins over Oklahoma and West Virginia. Baylor, which received all 40 first place votes for the second straight week, will play in the Big 12 tournament this weekend before hosting the first two rounds of the NCAA tournament.

Next are No. 2 Notre Dame and No. 3 Connecticut. Stanford and California are fourth and fifth. Duke fell one spot to sixth. Kentucky, Penn State, Tennessee and Maryland round out the first 10.

Toledo has won 14 straight and is No. 25. The Rockets were last ranked Nov. 19, 2001 for a week before falling out. LSU also jumped in at No. 22 after beating Kentucky, Alabama and Texas A&M over the past eight days. Iowa State and Purdue dropped out.

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