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Forget the seeds, Utah State simply a better team



March 15, 2001
By [Dan Wetzel](#)
SportsLine.com Senior Writer
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GREENSBORO, N.C. -- When the brackets came out Sunday night and [Ohio State](#) and [Utah State](#) were paired together, Aggies big man Shawn Daniels looked it over and came to a simple conclusion.

"They are a state school, we are a state school," he said.
"That's it."

The seed numbers -- the 5 next to the Buckeyes, the 12 by the Aggies -- meant nothing to Daniels and nothing to his gutsy teammates. Good thing, too. It was one of the reasons Utah

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Tony Brown (left) and Curtis Bobb celebrate after sending Utah State to overtime. (AP)

State stunned Ohio State 77-68 in overtime on Thursday to advance to the second round of the NCAA Tournament.

This was an upset in the minds of the Tournament Selection Committee only. Utah State, the big-timers from the Big West Conference, was not a legitimate 12 seed. Now with a 28-5 record, a suffocating defense and a close-knit group of tough, hungry seniors, the Aggies are one of the nation's top 32 teams, which they proved by making the second round.

Utah State won this game for three simple reasons, it has a better team, it had a better game plan and it played better than the Buckeyes. Pretty simple.

"Before the game I told (Ohio State coach Jim O'Brien), 'Boy, you are awfully good, we are going to try hard here but I really like your team,'" said Aggies coach Stew Morrill. "He said, 'Don't give me any of that, you've got a good team.'"

O'Brien was being serious because he watched a lot of nightmarish film the past few days and had to be shaking his head in wonder. Utah State plays defense like its next meal depends on it. In winning the Big West Tournament last week, it held opponents to just 43 points per game and 33.5 percent shooting.

"They reminded me of Wisconsin," said O'Brien, whose team was baffled and battered by the Aggies match-up zone.

Forget Wisconsin, the Aggies play it like Russia, impossible to invade. At the half, Morrill decided his team needed to stop the

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Buckeyes' 7-foot center Ken Johnson, not just from scoring but from shooting. Johnson was double- and triple-teamed and managed just one shot the entire second half and overtime.

The Aggies defense, which was a constant scramble of man, zone, match-up zone, three quarter trap and just old fashion junk, baffled the Bucks and forced 21 turnovers. Utah State committed just five.

"In my mind they were the better team today," said O'Brien. "They played very, very well."

In fact, they were not just better today -- they are just plain better. Make this a best-of-7 series and the Aggies win five. Maybe six.

And that's the point here. Too much emphasis on college basketball this season was placed on statistical formulas -- including the flawed Ratings Percentage Index -- instead of what is obvious to the naked eye. Not that Utah State got a lot of national television time.

"We just wanted to show the country that we didn't win 28 games for nothing," said Daniels.

"The thing is," said senior guard Bernard "Handle The" Rock, who had 18 points against Ohio State, "if we don't win our conference tournament, we don't even get in. That's the way it is, though."

Morrill isn't a fan of the RPI because 75 percent of the value of a team is the schedule it plays. Wins and losses are just 25 percent and there is no factoring in for margin of victory or whether the game took place at home or away.

"We get in our league and we win and lose ground," said Morrill. "Other teams get in their league and lose and gain

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ground. That really doesn't make sense. The RPI and all those things favor the power conferences. It becomes difficult for leagues like ours.

"I understand the ACC and the Big Ten and all these leagues are good and they get seven or six teams in. But once in a while can a league like ours get two? Just once in a while? A team from our league, Irvine, is a capable NCAA Tournament team."

Couple this mid-major victory over a Big Ten team with Georgia State's victory over Wisconsin and the argument starts holding weight. These mid-majors aren't just deserving of their bids, they've earned better seeds -- the highest non-power conference seed is Butler at No. 10.

"All I hear about is RPI, RPI, but last year we had a RPI of 28 and we got a 12 seed," said Morrill, whose club lost to then defending national champion UConn. "So then they say there are all these other factors. Hey, I don't know."

What Morrill, a brilliant defensive mind, does know is how to coach. His performance with this team, not just Thursday but throughout the year, has been phenomenal. At 48, he now has an impressive record of 289-163 over 14 seasons at Montana, Colorado State and Utah State. He is now 56-11 the past two years in Logan.

"The key for us this year is, number one, the kids were coachable. Number two, they bought into our defensive philosophy. We go out and recruit pretty good players who are really good kids. I think we can coach them if they have those two qualities."

The group he found to do that is one of craziest collections you've ever met, a starting five that hails from California, Colorado, Belgium, New York and Utah. It's a team that

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includes married Mormons and tough New York City kids. All living in harmony in the peaceful Rocky Mountain town of Logan, Utah.

"I think we are kind of weird," said Daniels, a 6-6, 260-pound Bakersfield, Calif., kid who muscled the talented Johnson all day on the block. "We've got all different guys who do all different things. But as soon as we get to school we are together the whole time, basically every day. We just get close."

Close enough to be a dangerous team in March. The Aggies aren't a household name, they don't play in a major conference and Logan is not exactly a famed hoops town. Doesn't matter, this is a very good team, with very good players and an exceptional head coach.

Forget the seed, the Aggies did.

"I don't care that we were a 12 seed," said Morrill. "We flew across the country and won a basketball game. I'm happy for our school. The seed doesn't matter."

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