

## Big 12 Basketball ... Among The Best

By MIKE JONES  
Fort Worth Star-Telegram

The usual gang of more than 16,000 were there cheek-to-cheek.

Many among the 4,000 or so students had camped out at some time during the previous week on the cold, hard cement floor of the Allen Fieldhouse lobby while holding a place in line for their allowed block of 30 students.

Their more-senior counterparts had for years braved both stormy afternoon and hard Midwest-winter night to keep the appointed round with Kansas basketball.

On this particular January night of 2003, all those assembled were more than rewarded for their fanatic if at times irascible support of their beloved Jayhawks.

Before ESPN cameras on this Big Monday, KU had broken a rare 2-game losing streak. And done against the third-ranked Texas Longhorns, one of those teams they love to hate. True, the usurpers from down under had not gone quietly into the brisk night. Soon-to-be national player of the year T.J. Ford had point-for-point matched the Hawks' Kirk Hinrich, both playing one of the games of their lives. Each scored a game-high 25 points in KU's 90-87 victory that survived two late 3-point attempts - by UT longshot ace Sydmill Harris and Ford himself.

But as good as Ford and Hinrich were that night, neither stood as tall as Kansas forward Nick Collison, both by measure or in fact. Collison's 24-point, 23-rebound performance earned him a standing-O from the crowd, enthusiastically joined by ESPN color analyst Dick Vitale.

It was a Big 12 affair to remember.

"I was just flipping around the other day and found it on ESPN Classic," Collison recently recalled. "That game is a favorite memory for me."

Well it should be. Though Collison drew top post-game billing over both Ford and Hinrich, several other players had remarkable moments during only one of the games between the two rivals that have become annual dates on the conference schedule worth putting a circle around.

"Obviously I played very well," remembered Collison, now with the Seattle Sonics. "But it was huge for our team because we had lost two straight games (at Colorado, to Arizona after blowing a 17-point lead). Kansas hadn't lost three straight games since the early 1990s, and if we had lost three straight it would have been big.

"But we ended up winning the game and going on to win the conference title and go on to the Final Four, so in light of all that, it was probably the best game I ever had at Kansas."

That instant-classic battle is one of the intense new rivalries spawned by the creation of the Big 12 Conference stands as only one example of the kinds of games that as conference basketball has matured, could break out any night at any site. And the kind of game that, as the 10th-anniversary season approaches, has made the league a stellar attraction not only on ESPN's Big Monday but also on other network television broadcasts.

Conference basketball news and features are also on display daily not only in the hometown newspapers, but also in major publications like the Kansas City Star, Fort Worth Star-Telegram,

Dallas Morning News, Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News, who regularly staff several games a week at different sites.

"Obviously, I'm a little prejudiced and a little excited that ESPN has the Big 12 contract and will continue to have it," ESPN play-by-play announcer Ron Franklin said. "But I truthfully believe that part of the evolution of the Big 12 and a reason it has just jumped to the front is not just the fact that there are good teams.

"I think the Big Monday thing has been the absolute shot in the arm, because to me Monday night during that time of the year is a time when most families are at home, they don't go anywhere. And the Big 12 has the wonderful (8 p.m. CST) time slot. ESPN doesn't do everything right, but the one thing we know how to do is market a product. And with SportsCenter, and all the different shows

and ESPNNews now which is 24 hours - you constantly see and hear about the athletes and the prowess of the teams in the Big 12.

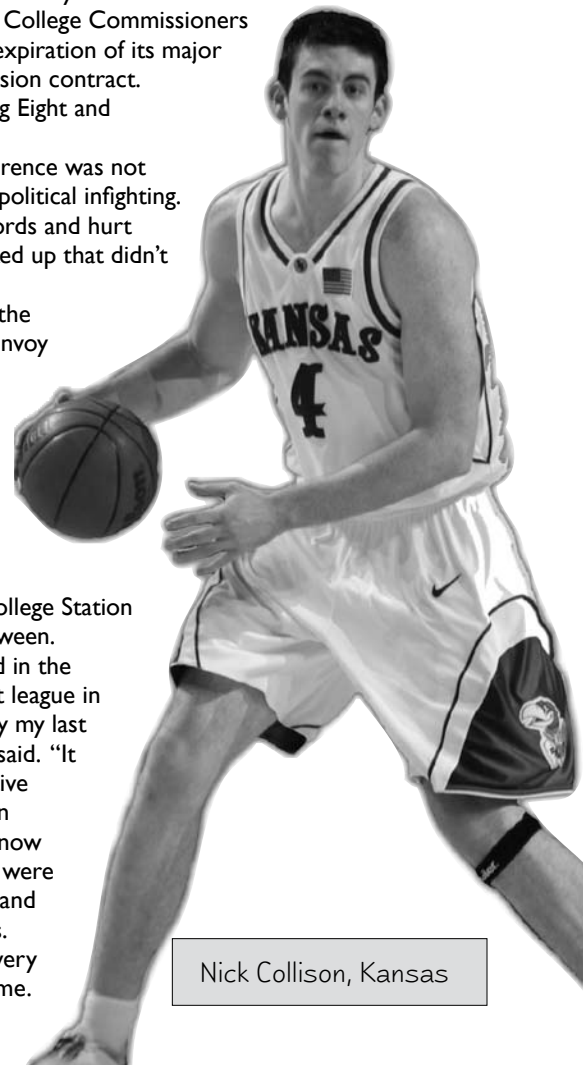
"And, the teams have been backing it up on the court."

The Big 12 was originally formed out of the free-for-all sparked by the demise of the football-oriented College Commissioners Association and the expiration of its major college football television contract. The merger of the Big Eight and four members from the Southwest Conference was not without intrigue and political infighting. There were harsh words and hurt feelings and dust kicked up that didn't settle for years.

Money fuelled the expansion-merger convoy and football still provides most of the gas. Big 12 basketball, however, has in recent years produced unparalleled competitiveness and excitement - from College Station to Lincoln and in between.

"When I played in the league it was the best league in the country, especially my last two years," Collison said. "It was a really competitive league and a lot of fun because you got to know everybody and there were a lot of great players and a lot of good rivalries. And it seemed like every game was a tough game.

"I remember our sophomore



Nick Collison, Kansas

year when we got smashed at Baylor. If you're not ready to play every night, you're going to get beat. Especially on the road."

That has been especially true in recent seasons as more and more conference programs have upgraded in almost every category, spawning an unparalleled growth. Big 12 basketball yet may be an entity that is just coming into its own.

"The biggest growth in the Big 12 has been basketball," said Texas coach Rick Barnes, who joined the league before the second season after stops at Providence and Clemson.

"Coming out of the Big East and the ACC, when I first got here, it felt like a new league. There were a lot of things that weren't in place. The league was going through a getting-to-know-you, feel-it-out phase. But I will say this. Over the last few years, I do think it's become a major player nationally.

"I do think from a basketball standpoint there is no doubt that it has improved every year - from competition to officiating to the way things are done at games, to facilities and preparation.

"It's become a first-class league."

Count a nationally-leading five teams (Kansas twice, Oklahoma, Texas, Oklahoma State) in the NCAA Final Four since 2002 -- one more than the ACC, two more than the Big Ten and three more than the Big East and Conference USA.

The Big 12 has a 30-16 record in the NCAA Tournament since 2003, trailing only the Big East (31-14).

Kansas (16), Oklahoma State (8) and Texas (7)

rank among the nation's Top 10 programs in terms of consecutive Tournament appearances.

A nationally-leading six Big 12 teams were invited to the 2005 Tournament, the fifth time that has happened in six seasons of the 21st Century.

Three student-athletes have won national player of the year awards - including Ford in 2003 (Naismith, Wooden, Sporting News, Sports Illustrated), Collison also in '03 (National Association of Basketball Coaches) and Kansas' Drew Gooden (NABC) in 2002.

Sixteen players have been named to All-America

lists and seven coaches have won national coach of the year awards.

"I think the national perception is very good," conference commissioner Kevin Weiberg said. "And it certainly was enhanced by having five teams in the Final Four in a 3-year period. That was obviously a huge breakthrough for us. Even though we didn't win

a national championship in those years, having that presence meant a lot and elevated the national regard in which our programs are held.

"You have to have a little luck to get to a national championship, but there is a stamp of approval that comes with making it to the Final Four and it's important to break through and have some consistent appearances there.

"My sense is that over the last six-to-eight years, we've taken good strides in how the conference is perceived nationally."

The one peg the conference has had since its inception is the quality of its coaches. Subsequent recent additions of Hall of Famer Bob Knight at Texas Tech, Billy Gillispie at Texas A&M, Scott Drew at Baylor, Wayne Morgan at Iowa State and Bill Self at KU have only added strength.

"The league really has come a long way," said Colorado's Ricardo Patton, one of the coaches who was there at inception. "I think that for the league to be as highly-regarded as it is across the country says a lot about the different programs that make up the Big 12 and the coaches that make up the league.

"You look at a Hall of Famer like Bob Knight and Eddie Sutton, who is going to be there, and even a guy like Rick Barnes who I think is going to be one who is there in the Hall of Fame - it's a high-powered league when it comes to coaching."

Oklahoma coach Kelvin Sampson is another of the conference coaches who is rapidly establishing hall of fame-type credentials.

"I thought the potential was there when the conference was formed," Sampson said, "but the thing that I don't think anybody anticipated was how great the coaching is at every school. I think that's the thing that separates our league from a lot of others. I'm not saying our coaches are better, but this is an unbelievable coaches league."

Franklin is a respected veteran announcer who does his homework and has called games from coast to coast. He's on board with Sampson's observation.

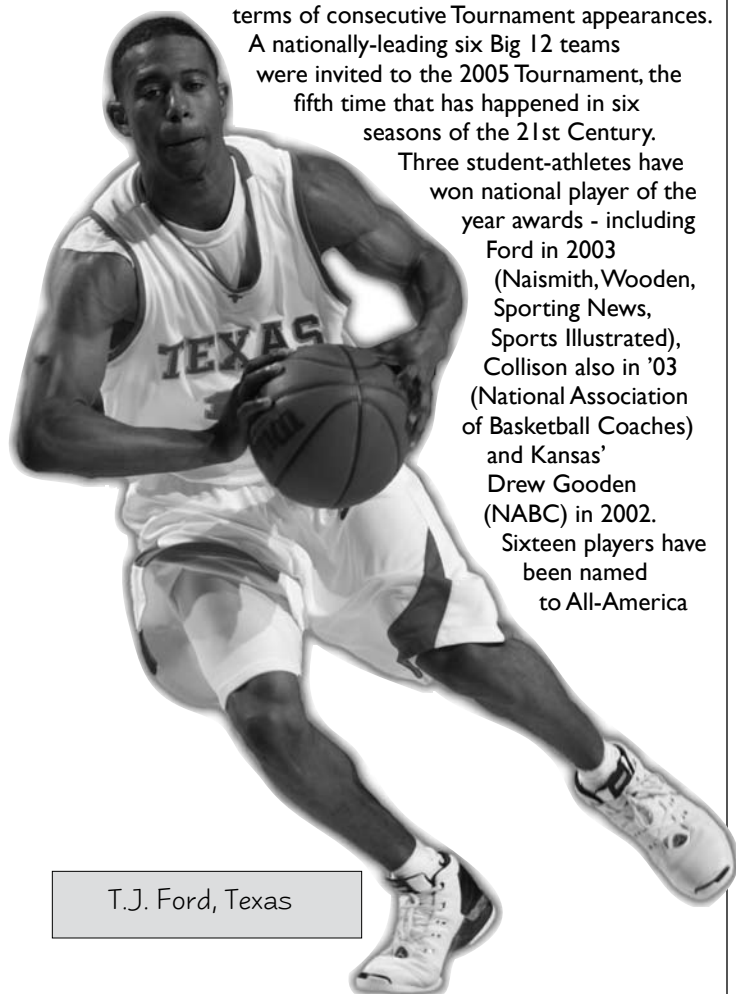
"You cannot argue with any case," Franklin said. "Go down the list and I don't care who you put at the top of the heap—it's just solid, solid, solid. Coach Sutton, Rick Barnes, Kelvin Sampson have all done such a great job recruiting. Bob Knight has gotten blood out of a turnip. And I'm a huge Bill Self fan.

"This league has as many consistently solid coaches as any league in the country. And it's just going to get better."

Sutton more than deserves a place in any college basketball coaching hall of fame. He has resurrected the program at his beloved alma mater where he played for the legendary Henry Iba, taking the Cowboys to two Final Four appearances in 15 seasons and bringing some of the conference's most exciting players to Stillwater.

**"This league has as many consistently solid coaches as any league in the country. And it's just going to get better."**

- Ron Franklin



T.J. Ford, Texas

Closing in on 800 victories, Sutton was the first college basketball coach to take four different programs (including Creighton, Arkansas and Kentucky) to the NCAA Tournament. During his 11 seasons at Arkansas, Sutton won more games percentage wise (.799) than any other coach in Southwest Conference history.

**"And no one can criticize the Big 12 for not being an outstanding conference."**

- Eddie Sutton

"Having coached in two other conferences - especially the SEC - I could foresee the Big 12 had a chance to be as good a conference as any in the country when you took in all sports in both women's and men's athletics and that certainly has proven to be

true," Sutton said.

"Football was basically why the league was formed. But I think that as far as basketball, the Texas schools were really helped. (The University of) Texas didn't need any help. I'm probably looking more at A&M and Baylor. There were so many of the players from the high schools in Texas who were coming to our place or Oklahoma or other places, and those kids were not wanting to play in the Southwest Conference. I think (the Big 12) gave them instant credibility, which has enabled them to recruit better.

"There are so many athletes in Texas and that was and still is one of the places other than Oklahoma that we really concentrate on. Kids want to go somewhere and play on television and be in the NCAA Tournament and play in a great league.

"And no one can criticize the Big 12 for not being an outstanding conference."

Sutton's words stand up to current figures. Oklahoma State's incoming recruiting class - though like Texas minus an immediate NBA lottery pick out of high school - is ranked No.1 nationally by more than one recruiting service. Hoop Scoop ranked the Cowboys the best in the country and also included Iowa State, A&M, Kansas, Baylor, Kansas State and Texas Tech among its top 30.

Mike Kunststadt of texashoops.com is recognized as the Authority on Texas high school basketball. An ex-Texas high school coach, he annually conducts four summer camps that draw close to 3,000 participants and represent fertile summer recruiting ground for Big 12 coaches from all schools. The conference also has a partnership with Kunststadt's camps that help provide a training ground for up and coming game officials.

"The Big 12 has had a tremendous impact on high school basketball in Texas," Kunststadt said. "I think most of the 10 to 15 top players every year have at least a few Big 12 teams among the schools they are considering.

"During the days of the old Southwest Conference, you might get one or two who might have an interest. Now, not all of them may stay in Texas, but they go to Kansas or Oklahoma or Oklahoma State or somewhere else in the Big 12."

Last spring, the roster of almost half of the 65 NCAA

Tournament teams carried at least one player from the state of Texas. National recruiting expert Bob Gibbons sees the Big 12's recruiting muscle from that perspective.

"What has happened is the Big 12 has been able to bring in quality players (on a national scale) because some schools better known for football have proven to be competitive in the league in football," Gibbons said. "I just know that during the past five years when I look at the distribution of the top talent of high school seniors in the nation and determine which conference has had the best results, the Big 12 has been right there with the ACC and the SEC among the three best recruiting conferences in the nation. And in a given year, the Big 12 has been the best.

"The conference has to be given a lot of credit for establishing itself to recruit nationwide."

Sampson, whose 2002 team joined Kansas in the Final Four, has watched the conference grow from one perceived nationally as top-heavy to one that in terms of top-to-bottom balance matches any in Division I.

"One through twelve," Sampson said, "this upcoming season is the best the conference has ever been. You don't have to measure yourself nationally any more. You just measure yourself against the schools in this league and you can determine whether or not you're one of the better teams in the nation.

"Now, instead of trying to make the NCAA Tournament, we have teams who every year are trying to make the Final Four."

Until 2002, the Big 12 credibility yardstick was getting to the Final Four. The last frontier remains winning that elusive national championship. Two programs - Oklahoma and Texas - are being prominently mentioned among those who have a legitimate shot in 2006 though its months away from Selection Sunday.

"That's the only thing we haven't done as a conference is have a team win the national championship though we've had five teams get to the Final Four," Sutton conceded. "But believe me, it's tough enough just to get there. People don't realize how difficult it is.



Andre Emmett,  
Texas Tech





## BIG 12 10TH ANNIVERSARY

"There are a lot of great Hall of Fame coaches who never made it to the Final Four and it's harder now than it used to be because of the parity in basketball nationally."

"That's our next step, winning the national championship," Sampson said. "For us to continually say ours is as good as anyone in the country, someone needs to win a national championship and it's going to happen - just like getting to the Final Four was once the next step for us."

"Well, we haven't been around as long as the Big Ten, or the ACC or the Big East or the SEC. We've only been here for nine years. But it's time. It's getting close. We have teams this season who are capable of winning the national championship and if not this year, then next year. We have great programs and we are going to have a program that eventually is going to win a national championship."

Former Kansas athletics director Bob Frederick was one of those who wasn't sure exactly what to expect when the conference was formed.

"When we were putting this all together," said Frederick, who was mentioned as a possible commissioner, "our initial thoughts were obviously about football. I didn't really know what to think about where we would be in basketball."

"Although we knew coming in that overall, sports programs on both the men's and women's sides were going to be enhanced as a result of adding the schools from Texas, the reputation of Southwest Conference basketball at the time wasn't particularly great nationally. But the one thing I did have a strong feeling about was that this would really help those schools get much more competitive in basketball, and that has happened."

"Two things - the commitment (to basketball by all institutions) plus the opportunity to recruit at a higher level really made the Big 12 a stronger conference than the Big Eight plus the SWC combined."

"The whole proved to be better than the sum of its parts."

As the conference completes its first decade of existence, former Kansas coach Roy Williams finds himself with a unique perspective of the league he was a part of from

Hollis Price, Oklahoma

Jayhawks' second consecutive Final Four appearance in 2003 when he was unable to resist a second calling from North Carolina.

"I'm not too big to say that the Big 12 proved me wrong," said Williams, who at UNC finally won that elusive national title. "I was one of the skeptics. But I think it was a marvelous idea and it's a marvelous league - and a league that people who know look at it, admire it and are a little jealous of it."

"I knew it was going to be good for our schools because it was good for football, which meant more money and all that stuff. But I just wanted to wait and see because I was worried what it might do for basketball."

"I will tell you right now that the (basketball) people in the ACC as we expand to 12 teams hope that 10 years down the road we're going to look at this ACC expansion and feel just as good about it as people in the old Big Eight do about the Big 12."

### BIG 12 TEAMS IN THE FINAL FOUR

2004	Oklahoma State
2003	Kansas
	Texas
2002	Kansas
	Oklahoma

### BIG 12 HISTORY - BY THE NUMBERS

- 2 - Big 12 coaches (Bob Knight, Eddie Sutton) who rank in the top two nationally among active coaches in victories.
- 39 - NBA draft picks since the league began play in 1996-'97.
- 43 - NCAA victories by Big 12 teams over the past four seasons.
- 57 - Final rankings in the Associated Press and USA Today/ESPN polls since 1996-97.
- 59 - Wins over nationally-ranked non-conference opponents since '96-97.
- 87 - All-America selections for Big 12 student-athletes in the last nine years.
- 1033 - Non-Conference victories by Big 12 schools in nine seasons of competition.

