# SEC on the home stretch

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While the SEC basketball tournament is just around the corner as of Monday, there were four games remaining in the regular season.

That is one-fourth of the 16-game SEC schedule, enough time for some fence-straddling teams to fatten their resumes.

With four teams in a knot for fourth place with 6-6 SEC records, there are plenty of candidates to join the Top Three – Kentucky, Florida and Vanderbilt in the NCAA Tournament field.

ESPN bracketologist Joe Lunardi currently has the SEC getting five teams in the NCAA field. He adds Alabama (a 10-seed) and Mississippi State (9-seed).

Kentucky is the crème de la crème with an impressive 12-0 SEC record as of Monday. The Cats are a 1-seed by Lunardi.

Florida (20-6, 9-3) and a Lunardi 4-seed is next, followed by Lunardi 7-seed Vanderbilt (19-8, 8-4). These are two programs that came in with high expectations, but have been plagued at times by inconsistency. They are fighting to upgrade projected NCAA Tournament seeding.

If the SEC only gets three teams to the Big Dance, it will mark the second year in the past four that the league has had only three teams get to March Madness.

Mississippi State could enhance its stature by becoming the first SEC team to beat Kentucky tonight in Starkville. It would be a signature win for Coach Rick Stansbury. State then has road trips to Alabama and South Carolina before closing shop at home against Arkansas.

State is 19-8 overall and on a three-game losing streak. Their RPI ranking is 50 and they have a poor strength of schedule ranking of 68. They need to win at least two of their remaining four games and it won't be easy. A win over Kentucky would almost ensure it would happen.

Alabama was thought at one point to be a shoo-in for an NCAA Tournament berth. That was before Coach Anthony Grant started handing out pink slips to some of his top players.

Two of them are still in Grant's doghouse. Forwards JaMychal Green and Tony Mitchell have incurred the longest suspensions, as at one point in the season, Bama had players suspended that accounted for 69% of their scoring, 57.5% of their rebounding and 54% of their assists.

Bama maintains a 35 RPI ranking, best of the four 6-6 teams. Starting this week, Bama goes to Arkansas, has home games against Mississippi State and rival Auburn before going to Ole Miss.

If they get the suspended players back, they have the best chance of becoming the fourth SEC team to get in the NCAA Tournament.

LSU is a longshot at 16-10, but the Tigers have by far the easiest road in the final four games. They face Georgia at home, go to Ole Miss, back home for Tennessee and finish at Auburn.

Tennessee is also a longshot and the Saturday loss to Alabama was huge. The Vols have an abysmal 106 RPI, are 13-13 overall.

Coach Cuonzo Martin's team was suffocated by Bama's pressure defense and turned the ball over an inexcusable 17 times.

"Too many,'' Martin lamented afterward. "It shouldn't happen, not with the experience we have and the time we put into taking care of the basketball.''

Early season losses to Oakland, Austin Peay and College of Charleston will be difficult for the Vols to overcome.

I'm saying the SEC deserves three teams, will get a fourth in the coming weeks.

Except for Kentucky, it hasn't been a vintage year for SEC basketball.

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