

## WOMEN'S FINAL FOUR DREAM TEAM

Forget the movies, the greatest players and coaches in Final Four history have given us four decades of blockbusters.

# Nothing less than marvelous

By PHIL MILLER • phil.miller@startribune.com

**G**oing to the movies these days can seem a lot like watching the women's Final Four — there are a bunch of recurring characters in bright colors battling over colossal yet familiar stakes.

In the NCAA tournament's 40-year history, after all, only 44 teams have advanced to the Final Four, and Connecticut has now reached that level in the last 14 tournaments, and 19 of the last 22.

Just 29 teams have played for the national championship, and Connecticut (11) and Tennessee (eight) own nearly half of the titles, four of them coming against each other.

In the past 39 years, 12 championship games have featured matchups that occurred more than once; by contrast, in that same time frame, the men's tournament has never had a title-game rematch.

And there's one more parallel between the women's Final Four and the grandiosely named Marvel Cinematic Universe: Many of the participants have superpowers.

"I am often astonished at the level of athletic talent that is on display in these games," Tennessee coach Pat Summitt said at the 2007 Final Four, where the Tennessee coach broke a nine-year streak without a championship. "But I try to teach my team, it takes more than talent."

It takes toughness and perseverance, the Hall of Fame coach meant, the mentality to use winning as motivation to work more, not less.

Presumably, that's the common bond between the greatest players in Final Four history, a collection of the sharpest shooters, greediest rebounders and precise passers in the game. Here's an attempt to assemble a dream team of the most superlative Final Four players in history, and the coaches who led them.

Don't be surprised if this year's Final Four in Minneapolis requires another worthy member be added. In this universe, there's always a sequel.

### Players



#### TRACY CLAXTON • F • OLD DOMINION

Few players were as intense on the court as the Connecticut native, and that intensity helped the Monarchs, twice a champion in the AIAW days, to their first NCAA title in 1985. "You better get on the bleeping boards," Claxton reminded center Medina Dixon

during their title-game win over Georgia, "or we're going to lose this bleeping championship." Claxton lived up to her words, grabbing 20 rebounds, 12 of them on the offensive end, and scoring 17 to earn MVP honors.



#### CLARISSA DAVIS • F • TEXAS

It was Cheryl Miller's last game for USC, and the Longhorns' chance to become the first unbeaten women's team in NCAA history. But a San Antonio freshman, who didn't even start on her senior-dominated team, whose minutes were limited by

her asthma, overshadowed it all. "Nobody knew Clarissa Davis until she got here," Texas coach Jody Conradt said after Davis, who would go on to win two Naismith Awards, scored 56 points and collected 32 rebounds in two Final Four games to finish off a 34-0 season and the Longhorns' only championship in 1986.



#### BRIDGETTE GORDON • F • TENNESSEE

She was a little-known Floridian as a freshman and a four-year all-SEC superstar as a senior, and made a trip to the Final Four every season. Two of them ended in championships, Summitt's first, and the athletic forward was instrumental in both. Her

defensive intensity helped force 20 turnovers and hold Louisiana Tech to a championship-game record low of 44 points in 1987, and her 27 points, 11 rebounds and jump-shot marksmanship overwhelmed second-ranked Auburn in 1989.



#### BRITTNEY GRINER • C • BAYLOR

After blocking more shots by herself than any other NCAA team during her junior season, Griner and her 88-inch wingspan capped one of the most fearsome seasons ever by a women's player with 26 points, 13 rebounds and five blocks in a 2012 title-game victory

over Notre Dame. Baylor finished 40-0, and Griner was Most Valuable Player in her second Final Four appearance.



#### CHAMIQUE HOLDSCLAW • F • TENNESSEE

"We like to run," observed Louisiana Tech coach Leon Barmore after the Vols trampled his team in the 1998 championship game, "but Holdsclaw likes to fly." Her graceful speed carried the New York native to three straight NCAA titles at Tennessee from

1996-98, two of them with her as MVP, and allowed her to score 479 points in her four-season NCAA tournament career, more than any other woman.



#### REBECCA LOBO • C • UCONN

Having grown up about 25 miles from Storrs, Lobo turned down dozens of scholarship offers to attend UConn, and it's worth asking whether the Huskies' women's hoop dynasty would have happened if she hadn't. Lobo was the centerpiece of Geno

Auriemma's first champion, leading an unbeaten UConn to the 1995 Final Four at Target Center in Minneapolis. In the title game against Tennessee, Lobo ignored foul trouble, hit tough shots, and rallied the Huskies from a nine-point deficit with 11 second-half points to earn the first of UConn's 11 national championships.

