



Thursday, March 21, 2024

MCNEESE STATE COWBOYS VS. GONZAGA BULLDOGS

Game Time: 07:35 pm ET

Selection: McNeese + 6.5

When the brackets were revealed and Gonzaga's name was selected as a 5th seed, right away I thought they were seeded higher than I expected. I felt based on their body of work this season, I had projected them as a 7 or 8 seed. It's true that the second half of Gonzaga's season was far better than their first and it's difficult to discount their chances early in the tournament. Their success is one of the great college basketball stories ever written, headed by their Hall of Fame bound coach Mark Few. But this is not a vintage Gonzaga team that we've seen in the past. They are vulnerable to a red-hot team like McNeese State in the opening round. This was a team that I had circled as a potential Cinderella, especially after it boasted dominant wins against the likes of VCU, UAB and Michigan in non-conference play and their super conference tournament victory.

Led by former LSU head coach Will Wade, the Cowboys destroyed the Southland Conference. It was a turnaround of monumental proportions under their first-year head coach. Last season McNeese was a dismal 11-23. This year they are 30-3. With an upset win against Gonzaga, it will be the biggest one-year turnaround in the history of college basketball. This is an elite offense (51st in Adjusted Efficiency) that can shoot the lights out from the perimeter. Four starters shoot over 40% from 3.

Former TCU transfer Shahada Wells leads the team on both ends of the floor, as he is tops in both scoring (17.8) and assists (4.8). His biggest strength is his defensive intensity (third in the country in steal rate).

McNeese is at a disadvantage to the Gonzaga interior. It ranks outside the top 330 in average height, with no player taller than 6-foot-9. The Zags' main lineup often has three players 6-foot-8 or taller on the floor most times.

But what McNeese is more than capable of is matching the Zags offensively. With just one loss since December, McNeese has the perfect veteran leader in Wells and a strong surrounding cast on the offensive end around him. Gonzaga struggles defending the perimeter (185th in the country), which

opens the door for McNeese to both space the floor and let it fire from 3. They look to attack downhill, and Gonzaga's defense is not one to force turnovers. The possessions will be there for the Cowboys, so it all comes down to execution and keeping the Zags from second chance opportunities. It'll be intriguing to see how McNeese defends the glass against the Zags' physicality. The Cowboys have struggled when it comes to limiting second-chance opportunities (244th), which is an issue against the likes of Anton Watson and Graham Ike.

Mark Few and the Bulldogs have lived in the NCAA Tournament for over 20 years. They have a winning DNA. It will be quite an accomplishment if McNeese State can compete with the Zags for 40 minutes. Getting 6.5 points is great value for a team I feel has a chance to upset the Zags and march on or at least compete with them on the scoreboard. Buckle your seatbelts because this game should be a dandy.

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Any questions or comments can be sent to: wiz@wizardraceandsports.com

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