76-68: Bulldogs' 3-peat one for the ages

Randy Jones

The odds must be astronomical, right?

We've all said it or heard it when something abnormal happens during a sporting event. An event, a shot or a feat no one has ever seen before.

But really, what are the odds?

I started thinking about this Saturday night when I saw the score of the Barton-Erskine men's basketball game.

76-68.

Sure, nothing about the score is exceptional.

"We're just glad we won the game," Barton coach Ron Lievense said. "The scores are irrelevant."

However, under closer scrutiny, the score fits the definition of exceptional to a tee.

Why?

Because the Bulldogs have won by that exact score each of the past three games — Saturday night, Jan. 24 at Queens University of Charlotte and Jan. 21 against Pfeiffer.

"Huh?" I thought to myself as I sat on my couch. "Wonder what the odds of that are?"

So, I started asking.

Friends said things like "Probably a better chance to win the Powerball" or "A zillion to one."

Not exactly scientific.

At work, I reached out to some mathematicians. A wonderful thing about the Internet. These folks are at your fingertips.

The first reply came from right here in Wilson, as Barton professor Zhixiong Cai emailed me.

I asked him "What are the odds of this happening?"

His answer came in an email:

"Hi, Randy. From statistics point of view (I've taught stats for 27 years), the scores of each game is determined by many factors. No one can predict, or control on exact scores of a fair game. For three consecutive 76-68 scores you mentioned, I'd say it's an interesting coincidence, and by chance only."

I sank a bit. It took many stats classes back in college, but I had hoped for a large-digit number as an answer. No an "it's all chance" one.

He continued saying you can look at the odds of one team winning over the other based on track records.

This gave me hope.

A quick look at the averages for the Bulldogs this year and it's amazing. Barton scores 79.6 a game, while their opponents average 71.7. Pretty close to 76-68. And heck, Barton topped Shaw 77-67 back in December. Really close.

Soon after I finished those calculations, my email pinged.

This one came from Joseph A. Gallian, a professor at the University of Minnesota in Duluth.

Gillian helped edit a book called "Mathematics and Sports", so if anyone could help me out, he'd be the guy, right?

His second sentence was "there is no exact answer."

I sank a bit again.

But, he continued saying that his friend Rick Cleary, "can give you an exact answer by making some reasonable assumptions."

Yes!

Cleary teaches a math and sports course at Bentley University in Massachusetts. Bentley, coincidentally, was in the Division II Final Four in 2007 when the Bulldogs won the NCAA title.

He took a quick stab at my question "What are the odds?"

"We can see this season, (Barton) has consistently scored 70-95 points a game with only a few outliers just outside those boundaries," he said in an email. "It's a reasonable guess to assume that the probability that Barton scores 76 points in a game is about 1/25. Likewise for an opponent scoring 68, also 1/25."

He used Barton's probability of winning each game at 90 percent. Something Lievense certainly would beg to differ.

"That was a huge week for us," the coach said. "After two long road trips, we have three very good teams on Monday, Thursday and Saturday. It's a very hard turnaround and one I wish the league would not do."

But back to the odds.

Using Cleary's numbers, the odds are .000002 that Barton wins those three in a row by the same score. Or about two in a million.

If you use an 80 percent chance of winning it falls to .0000013 and 70 percent falls to .0000008.

Needless to say, the chances were pretty slim.

I called Cleary to make sure I was reading the numbers right. My statistics grades in college ranged from a C-minus on up, so it was a prudent thing to do.

"Changing the probability of winning would change it, yes, but not the magnitude," he said.

Sweet, my math chops are still good, I thought.

He said that there are approximately 1,000 NCAA men's basketball teams in Divisions I, II and III, and the numbers say it will happen to some team once every FIFTEEN years, but the odds it would happen to your team (aka, Barton) specifically are once every 15,000 years.

"That's definitely mind-boggling," Barton junior Jarrett Jernigan said on Tuesday. "With all the good teams you play, it's unfathomable really."

None of the players interviewed on Tuesday had ever played two straight games with the same score, let alone three. Not at Barton. Not in high school. Not even in pee wee leagues.

It was the talk of practice on Monday.

"It's pretty crazy," freshman Chris Flemmings said. "We were all laughing about it. I've never seen anything like it. Not even close."

And those in attendance Saturday for No. 3 almost didn't see it.

Senior forward Jon Hart scored a layup with 2 seconds left for the exact match, but he wasn't supposed to.

"I had put up the hold sign," Lievense said, remarking the game was already decided.

Hart smiled when asked about it.

"I wanted to dunk it, but I didn't want to get undercut. So I just laid it in," he said. "Coach might have signaled for us to not shoot, but I didn't see it."

Cleary said that's not surprising none of the players have experienced it. But someone out there has seen it happen.

"My guess is yes, it has happened to another team out there in my lifetime," he said. "I'm in my 50s and while I don't know, the numbers say it probably has."

My last question for the PhD is probably the one you're wondering, if you made it this far.

"What are the chances Barton beats Mount Olive by that score on Thursday?"

The answer by Cleary, who on Monday gave his class at Bentley a homework assignment to try and answer my question — "About 1 in 1,000. So, if I could bet $1 to win $1,000, it would be a good bet."

For Jernigan, one more 76-68 game would be nice. He'd rather it come in April though.

"Wouldn't it be funny if we get to the NCAA championship and win by that score?" he said.

"Now that would be crazy."

Flemmings named Conference Carolinas Player of the Week

From staff reports

Barton College freshman guard Chris Flemmings has exhibited a torrid shooting touch behind the 3-point line as of late, and his latest exploits have garnered the attention of the Conference Carolinas league office.

Flemmings

Flemmings was tabbed as the league's Player of the Week after a 3-0 showing that now has Barton (14-2, 9-1 CC), winners of seven straight, ranked No. 12 in the NABC Div. II Coaches Poll.

In three wins by the identical score of 76-68, the Cary Green Hope product was 10 of 19 from beyond the arc in conquests of Pfeiffer, Queens and Erskine.

Against Pfeiffer, the 6-foot-5 Flemmings poured in 11 points and seven rebounds before bucketing 16 points against Queens on 3-of-4 shooting behind the 3-point line.

Flemmings saved his best for last, producing a career-high 22 points in the victory over the Flying Fleet. In a 61-61 standoff, Flemmings canned his fourth trey of the game to send the Bulldogs ahead to stay with 3 minutes, 17 seconds to play.

Barton, ranked second in the Southeast Region behind No. 10 Lincoln (Tenn.) Memorial University, now embarks on a crucial three-game road swing beginning tonight at archrival Mount Olive College.

CONFERENCE CAROLINAS GLANCE

Women

	Conf.		All	
	W-L	Pct.	W-L	Pct.
Limestone	11-1	.917	14-2	.875
BARTON	11-1	.917	12-4	.750
Pfeiffer	8-3	.727	13-3	.813
Mount Olive	8-4	.667	12-4	.750
Coker	7-5	.583	11-7	.611
Queens	7-5	.583	9-7	.563
Belmont Abb.	7-5	.583	8-8	.500
Lees-McRae	5-7	.417	7-8	.467
King	5-8	.385	9-8	.529
N. Greenville	3-9	.250	5-11	.313
Erskine	0-12	.000	1-17	.056
Converse	0-12	.000	0-16	.000

Saturday's Games
BARTON 62, Erskine 53
Pfeiffer 89, Converse 32
Coker 73, King 63
Queens 63, North Greenville 56

Limestone 76, Mount Olive 62
Belmont Abbey 64, Lees-McRae 60
Tuesday's Game
Erskine 62, Allen 32
Wednesday's Game
North Greenville 84, King 67
Thursday's Games
BARTON at Mount Olive
Coker at Belmont Abbey
Lees-McRae at Limestone
Pfeiffer at Queens
Erskine at Converse

Men

	Conf.		All	
	W-L	Pct.	W-L	Pct.
BARTON	9-1	.900	14-2	.875
King	8-4	.667	13-5	.722
Limestone	7-4	.636	11-6	.647
Erskine	7-5	.583	11-5	.688
Belmont Abb.	6-5	.545	13-6	.684
Coker	6-5	.545	9-8	.529
Queens	6-5	.545	9-8	.529
Mount Olive	5-5	.500	8-8	.500
N. Greenville	4-7	.364	7-8	.467
Pfeiffer	1-9	.100	3-14	.176
Lees-McRae	1-10	.091	1-16	.059

Saturday's Games
BARTON 76, Erskine 68
Coker 79, King 70
Queens 79, North Greenville 63
Mount Olive 99, Limestone 78
Belmont Abbey 98, Lees-McRae 74
Tuesday's Game
Erskine 80, Allen 57
Wednesday's Game
North Greenville 63, King 55
Thursday's Games
BARTON at Mount Olive
Lees-McRae at Limestone
Coker at Belmont Abbey
Pfeiffer at Queens

It's Barton vs. Mount Olive tonight

By Paul Durham
Sports Editor

The last time Conference Carolinas men's basketball archrivals Barton College and Mount Olive College faced one another the Bulldogs set up the Trojans to serve up a little revenge the next time they met.

After all, Barton ended Mount Olive's season last March when the Bulldogs, as the No. 3 East seed, upset East No. 2 MOC 67-60 in the championship game of the conference tournament in Kornegay Arena. That gave Barton the league's automatic bid to the NCAA Division II tournament and the Trojans failed to receive an at-large bid.

Fast-forward 11 months or so and the situations are a bit reversed as the teams square off again in Kornegay tonight. Barton (14-2, 9-1 CC), ranked No. 12 in the most recent NABC Div. II poll, leads Conference Carolinas while the Trojans (8-8, 5-5 CC) are in eighth place, slowly digging themselves out of a 1-7 start.

"First of all, Mount Olive has a very good team," Barton head coach Ron Lievense said. "They've won seven out of their last eight games. They're playing with a lot of confidence right now."

"It's a big game for both schools. Both teams will be playing really hard and both teams want to win this game desperately, so it's going to have that kind of an atmosphere to it."

Barton's Elaine Morgan had a career-high 19 points against Erskine on Saturday. *Gray Whitley | Times*

Tip-off is set for 7:30 p.m. with the Barton-Mount Olive women's game, in another critical conference test, beginning the action at 5:30 p.m.

The Bulldogs enter tonight with a seven-game winning streak but that will be seriously tested by not only the Trojans but also a trip to second-place King (Tenn.) College on Saturday. The Tornado slammed Barton 97-72 in Wilson on Jan. 3, handing the Bulldogs their worst home loss in the school's NCAA era.

But Lievense cautions the season is at a point where no one game counts more than the others.

"This stage of the game, every game is so huge," he said. "It doesn't matter who you're playing, they're all so huge this late in the season. Mount Olive is a tremendously athletic team and we're going to have our hands full playing against their athleticism and their speed.

"This is a huge game and of course, we're 0-2 against King so that's also a huge game."

The Bulldogs are dealing with injuries to starters Brian McNair and Aaron Brown, neither of whom have practiced this week. Lievense was unsure how much each would be able to play tonight.

Mount Olive boasts the second-highest scoring average in Conference Carolinas at 80.6 points per game, just ahead of Barton's 80.5 average. The Trojans are led by senior Darrell Patterson (15.9 ppg) and junior point guard Dory Hines, a Kinston High product who ranks third nationally in assist-to-turnover ratio (3.3).

Lievense noted the key for his Bulldogs was handling Mount Olive's pressure defense. The Bulldogs average a Conference Carolinas-low 13 turnovers a game.

The Lady Bulldogs (12-4, 11-1 CC) also sit in first place but share that spot with Limestone, which handed fourth-place Mount Olive a 76-62 loss Saturday.

Barton, which won at MOC but lost to the Trojans in Wilson Gym last year, has reeled off seven straight victories.

"I feel good about the way we're playing but Mount Olive will present a challenge," Lady Bulldogs head coach Wendee Saintsing said, emphasizing the Trojans' rebounding strength, especially on the offensive end.

Barton brings the fourth-best turnover margin in the country (7.5) and is fifth nationally in steals per game (15.1). Junior guard Nyeshea Willie's 20.6 points per game ranks her seventh among Div. II players.

Tamara Nesmith leads Mount Olive with 17.1 points and 9.8 rebounds per game.

Saintsing praised the recent play of junior Ashley Thornton, who was recently elevated to the starting lineup, and senior point guard Elaine Morgan, coming off a career-high 19 points in Saturday's win against Erskine.

"I think she's getting more confident in what she does and how she needs to do it," Saintsing said.

Chapter 2 of this season's Barton-Mount Olive rivalry will play out Friday, March 1, in The Dog House.