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Men's basketball: UWGB is big fish in CBI pond

BY PETE DOUGHERTY • PDOUGHER@GREENBAYPRESSGAZETTE.COM • MARCH 17, 2009

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There were no tournament seedings, point spreads or odds online for the College Basketball Invitational on Monday.

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But looking over the field of the 16-team tournament, which was set after the NCAA Tournament and National Invitation Tournament had taken 97 teams off the board, the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay had to feel it has as good a chance as anyone to win the tourney.

The Phoenix has the highest RPI computer rating of the field at No. 71, ahead of Nevada (No. 80), UTEP (No. 85) and Northeastern (No. 89). The RPI is by no means the ultimate measure of the teams, but, if nothing else, it shows the Phoenix should be aiming high in its first postseason tournament in more than a decade.

"We have a good opportunity," Phoenix point guard Rahmon Fletcher said. "They said we're one of the best teams in there, so we're going in with the mind-set to win, not just play only a game but to win a tournament."

The Phoenix (22-10) opens tournament play against Vermont at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Resch Center. Quarterfinal games, which already are set by the tournament bracket, will be March 23.

The semifinals are March 25 and will be followed by a best-of-three finals beginning Monday, March 30.

UWGB, which finished second in the Horizon League, faces a first-round opponent whose resume is much like its own. The Catamounts are 23-8 overall and finished 13-3 and tied for first place in their league, the America East Conference. However, they lost their first-round game in the conference tournament, and with their low-conference profile and No. 90 RPI rating, landed in the BCI instead of the NIT.

They feature Marqus Blakely, a 6-foot-5, 225-pound junior forward who averaged 15.9 points and 9.0 rebounds a game, and was both the conference's player of the year and its defensive player of the year.

The majority of the tournament's field, in fact, is teams like UWGB and Vermont from low- to mid-level conferences, though there are three clubs from the six power conferences. Stanford (18-13, 6-12 conference) and Oregon State (7-11, 11-17) had bad seasons in the Pac-10 Conference and

finished in eighth and ninth place, respectively. St. John's (16-17, 6-12) took a beating and finished 13th in the powerful Big East, which had probably the strongest and deepest league in the country.

There also are two teams from a league that rates just below the power conferences, Conference USA, and, on paper, they appear to be among the strongest teams in the field: Houston (21-11, 10-6) and UTEP (19-12, 10-6) finished tied for fourth place in the league.

Nevada (21-12, 11-5), which finished second in the Western Athletic Conference and was left out of the NIT,

UWGB IN CBI

Who: UWGB (22-10) vs. Vermont (23-8) in the first round of the College Basketball Invitational.

When, where: 7 p.m. Wednesday, Resch Center.

Tickets (available at the Resch Center box office): \$17, \$14, \$10.

Youth \$7. Season-ticket holders can get their usual seats by calling the Resch Center and picking up their tickets by noon Wednesday.

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is another of the better-known teams in the BCI and faces UTEP in its first-round game.

The CBI is run by the Gazelle Group, which conducts several preseason college tournaments every year and added the CBI as a postseason tourney last year. UWGB didn't guarantee the CBI a game but secured the first-round home game by agreeing to cover its costs in one of the Gazelle Group's preseason tournaments in the fall of 2010.

"We're making sure we're not putting any of the university dollars at risk," said Ken Bothof, UWGB's athletic director.

The winner of the UWGB-Vermont game plays the winner of the Oregon State vs. Houston game, which will be played Wednesday night at Oregon State. That quarterfinal game will be March 23, most likely at either Oregon State or Houston, Bothof said. After the quarterfinals, the teams will be re-seeded.

The Phoenix undoubtedly would have rather had a bid to the more prestigious NIT, but more than anything, wanted to keep its season alive.

"We had open minds," forward Ryan Tillema said. "We get to play at home. That's a great feeling, as a senior I get to play at home again. It's exciting. Obviously, you don't want the career to end, you just want to keep playing and keep winning games."

The Phoenix has been practicing regularly since losing to Cleveland State in the semifinals of the Horizon League Tournament March 7, and its most important development since then is the return of forward Terry Evans. He practiced this past Saturday after missing the final week of the regular season and the conference tourney because of a dislocated left elbow.

Evans will have to wear a brace on the elbow for the rest of the season but said he's relatively close to full strength and has been able to practice without any major inhibitions.

"I can pretty much do everything," he said after practice Monday. "It's just a slight range of motion thing. I can't extend my elbow out all the way. But as far as playing and doing things, I can still play basketball at a high level."

The Phoenix badly missed Evans' defense and athletic ability in its extremely physical loss to Cleveland State. His return will improve UWGB's defense and rebounding, and it also helps its playing rotation. Key seniors Tillema and Mike Schachtner should be back to their optimal playing time, which is a little less than 30 minutes a game, after having to go above that with Evans out.

Evans will have had three full practices before playing Wednesday after missing two weeks because of the injury.

"I thought he was very good in practice on Saturday and (Monday)," coach Tod Kowalczyk said. "I don't think there's a whole lot of rust. He's got his legs. He certainly looked good today. So, I'd like to think he'll be ready to go."

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