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Victorious UTEP now focused on Oregon St.

By Bill Knight / El Paso Times
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EL PASO -- The fun has swooped in, surrounded the UTEP Miners.

Late Wednesday night, when Randy Culpepper's soaring dunk made No. 1 on ESPN SportsCenter's Top 10 Plays of the Day, the Miners rushed into the hotel hallway, laughing and cheering. They grabbed Culpepper, who was about to step into the shower, and tossed him into the hall, too.

The fun moved in all around them.

And why not?

It might not be the Big Dance, the main spotlight, the NCAA tournament. It might not even be the forever-standby, the NIT. But basketball players love to play basketball, love to play games. And the Miners are still playing games.

UTEP returned to El Paso early Thursday afternoon, returning from Richmond, Va., and an impressive 81-69 win over Richmond in the semifinals of the College Basketball Invitational. The Miners will get a few days to rest, practice, catch their collective breath before heading for Corvallis, Ore., to meet Oregon State on Monday in the opening game of the best-of-three CBI championship series.

"It really is fun," Culpepper said, breaking into a grin. "Coach (Tony) Barbee told us the best teams are still alive, and these are the teams that give it their all. We just wanted to go out there and give our all and do what we do. I think we've really gotten better at the end of the season. I feel like we have a good chance to win this. Definitely ... to still be playing games is fun."

Breaking into a bigger grin, Culpepper said, "And it was definitely fun getting on

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SportsCenter. As soon as it was on, I got about 15 text messages and then my mother called. The whole team ran out into the hall and got me out there. We were definitely having fun."

Laughing, freshman teammate Jason Jones said, "We all ran out into the hall and then we grabbed Randy and got him out there. It was fun."

Culpepper, of course, made the top of Sports Center's list by doing what Miner fans have seen him do all season -- soaring his 6-foot frame up so high that his head seems headed for the rim and throwing down a serious dunk.

But it is all fun when you win -- and when players get to play more games.



UTEP guard Randy Culpepper posed Thursday with fans that were on hand when the Miners returned from Richmond, Va., where they beat Richmond to advance to the finals of the CBI Tournament against Oregon State. (Ruben R. Ramirez / El Paso Times)

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"Without question, we are playing our best basketball," Barbee said. "I think it is two-fold. The teams who are still

playing this time of year are excited about playing. And our guys are excited. Secondly, because of deflection and injury, we have shortened our rotation. The guys still here are getting more minutes and they are stepping up and it has almost made us a better team."

While the Miners are indeed playing their best basketball, having won all three CBI starts and nine of their last 12 games. But Barbee points out that this team, now 22-12, has played pretty well all season.

"We played well at the start of the year and we've played pretty well all year," he said. "We have had some games where we haven't played our best basketball. But overall, we've played well. The good thing is our sophomore class really grew up. The freshmen class -- in Arnett (Moultrie) and Jason (Jones) have found a comfort zone, where they know what is expected every day in practice and every night in games. And that has led to more consistency."

Stefon Jackson, a senior, is the only upper classman on the team. Every other player is a freshman or a sophomore.

Jackson, who has been the target of other teams all season, continues to play outstanding basketball. He scored 34 points in the win over Richmond. He scored 26 at Nevada in the first CBI win and 26 in the win over Northeastern. He now has 2,385 points in his UTEP career -- the record for both UTEP and for Conference USA. He was almost unstoppable at Richmond.

"All that and Stefon is doing what he is doing," Barbee said. "He's like a snowball rolling downhill. Hard to stop."

The Miners will play at Oregon State Monday night, then host the Beavers Wednesday night in the Don Haskins Center. If a game three is needed, it will be in the Haskins Center the following Friday night. Miner officials are encouraged by the enthusiasm of the general admission crowd last Wednesday when UTEP defeated Northeastern 75-66 in the CBI quarterfinals.

"I think we'll have a great turnout," UTEP athletic director Bob Stull said. "By 2 o'clock today (Thursday) we had already sold 3,200 tickets and that's just the first day. The team is excited. Tony is excited. The most exciting thing is Stefon is the only one off this team who won't be back next year. This is an exciting team and they are fun to watch and I think this (CBI) experience will get us ready for an even higher level next year. Our crowds have been good. So let's just fill it up Wednesday."

And the fun continues.

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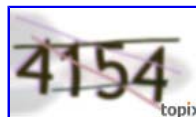
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