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UTEP Miners hope to even College Basketball Invitational title series

By Bill Knight / El Paso Times
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EL PASO -- As always, in the crazy, beautiful world of college basketball, there is no place quite like home.

UTEP got home just after 5 p.m. Tuesday, ready to play another home game and hoping to play two more home games. Miner fans have bought just more than 9,800 of those general admission tickets for Wednesday night's dance.

UTEP and Oregon State, finalists in this second annual College Basketball Invitational best-of-three championship series, will go at it in Game 2 on Wednesday night in the Don Haskins Center. Oregon State took Game 1, 75-69, in the great atmosphere at Gill Coliseum in Corvallis, Ore.

"Seemed like Cameron Indoor (at Duke) or something," UTEP sophomore Gabe McCulley said of the 8,029 fans in Gill. "It was a great atmosphere. Everybody was jumping up and down and you couldn't hear anything."

UTEP coach Tony Barbee said, "Their crowd was great. I know our fans will be out in full-force. The atmosphere was electric last week with 8,000 in there. Can you imagine it with a full house?"

The Miners came out pancake flat to start both halves Monday night. Oregon State raced out to big leads, forcing the Miners to play chase the rest of the evening.

"We've traveled almost 9,000 miles in the CBI," Barbee said, smiling and shaking his head. "We could have flown to Australia. I think it showed up in our play last night."

UTEP has gone to Reno, Nev., and back to El Paso for a home game, then to Richmond, Va., and back and then to Oregon and

back.

Oregon State shot a sizzling 60.5 percent against the Miner defense Monday night. UTEP's all-time leading scorer, Stefon Jackson, made was just 6-for-21 shooting.

"As I watched the tape on the flight back, we played better than I initially thought," Barbee said. "We were a little sloppy defensively. But give them (the Beavers) credit. They stepped up and made shots. We attacked their 1-3-1 zone well, but Stefon went 6-for-21, and that isn't going to happen often. He missed 10 or 12 of what I consider his best shots. If he makes another five, we win the game."

Oregon State certainly did step up and make shots. Roeland Schaftenaar made 5-of-8 and finished with 19 points. Seth Tarver went 8-for-8 from the field and

had 17 points. Lathen Wallace made 6-of-9 from the field, 5-of-7 from beyond the 3-point arc and finished with 18 points.

Randy Culpepper led UTEP with 20 -- including another of those soaring, head-to-the-rim dunks that made ESPN Sports Center's Top 10 Plays of the Day. He was No. 1 with his Richmond dunk and No. 6 with his Oregon State slam. Jackson had 17 points and sophomore guard Julyan Stone had 10 assists.

"We played hard and we battled back, but we still didn't get the win," Stone said. "Oregon State is a good team and we've got to attack their zone better and get open shots. At first, we were real down

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after the loss. Any competitor wants to win every game. But coach talked to us about it being a three game series and we're looking forward to playing again."

Stone is on the verge of breaking UTEP's all-time single season assist record of 229 set by Filiberto Rivera in the 2004-05 season. Stone now has 219.

"That record means so much to me because it means I'm helping my teammates," Stone said. "But, more than anything, I want to win this championship."

UTEP, now 22-13 on this long season, is home again. The Haskins Center will be rocking.

"We feed off our crowd," Stone said.

There is, after all -- especially in the crazy, beautiful world of college basketball -- no place like home.

Notes: Memphis coach John Calipari has now accepted the Kentucky job. Reports from Memphis have said Calipari is recommending Barbee as his replacement.

Barbee, who played for Calipari at Massachusetts and was an assistant under him at Memphis, said, "I'm happy for coach if this is what he wants to do, if this is what makes him happy."

An ESPN report said Calipari recommended Barbee as his replacement at Memphis. Asked Tuesday about that report, Barbee said, "I'm happy being at UTEP. I love El Paso. My family loves El Paso. I'm not going to deal with speculation."

Bill Knight may be reached at bknight@elpasotimes.com; 546-6171.

Game time

- What: UTEP vs. Oregon State.
- When, where: 8 p.m. MDT Wednesday, Don Haskins Center.
- Radio: KOFX-FM (92.3).
- TV: HDNet -- Dish Network Channel 9422; DirecTV Channel 79 and 306; Time Warner Digital Cable Channel 899. HD package required.
- Tickets: \$10 general admission; 747-5234.

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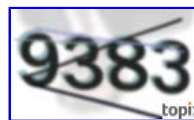
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