

THURSDAY ... holy cow, it's March 26, and the team I cover is still playing basketball.

Needless to say, when the **CBI's best-of-three championship series** switches to El Paso for Wednesday night's Game 2 at UTEP, and Friday night's possible Game 3 at the Don Haskins Center, the blogger won't be there because of budget constraints and the fact he has several outstanding bar tabs left over from the Sun Bowl.

If you are a retired (and shameless) AIG executive and money is no object, today's best airfare deals for flights from Portland to El Paso are \$674 on United, \$689 on US Air, and \$618 on Southwest.

As always, hotel/motel rates are much cheaper in **Juarez**, but I have to warn you, cross the border at your own risk.

I'm guessing the Gazelle Group won't exactly have coach Rob's guys in a four-star hotel in El Paso, but let's be real here, these players' feet have yet to touch the ground after last night's OT win over Stanford that put them into the CBI championship series, within a game of .500.

A Comfort Inn in Albuquerque would be just fine for this group.

They just want to keep playing.

Snicker if you will at the 16-team CBI's bracketology and its willingness to invite a 13-17 OSU team riding a four-game losing streak (all in the past now, brother) but consider this:

There must be a decent buzz at UTEP about this CBI stuff, because this was written on the UTEP website last night after the Miners punched their ticket to the Finals series with an 81-69 win at Richmond:

"The Miners will be arriving in El Paso at 1:25 p.m. Mountain Time on Thursday for fans who want to **GREET THE TEAM AT THE AIRPORT.**"

UTEP (22-12) is no joke, having won five of its last six games behind the nation's fifth-leading scorer, 6-5 senior guard **Stefon Jackson**, the all-time leading scorer in UTEP and Conference USA history with 2,385 points and counting. ... Jackson, a Philly kid (nicknamed D.J. for "Draining Jumpers") has led UTEP in scoring in the last 11 games and he's been over 30 five times in that stretch.

I'm thinking coach Rob goes 1-3-1 zone here, because the Miners' guards - Jackson and 6-foot Randy Culpepper - are absolutely killing people, either scoring on drives and jumpers or getting to the foul line, where UTEP was No. 2 nationally in FTs made going into the Richmond game.

Jackson and Culpepper had a combined 53 points against Richmond, and they had a combined 47 points in UTEP's CBI quarterfinal win over Northeastern.

If UTEP coach **Tony Barbee** goes big with his lineup, he throws out 6-11 frosh forward Arnett Moultrie (8.2 ppg, 8.2 rpg), 6-6 freshman F Jason Jones (2.9, 1.8), 6-10, 240-pound soph center Wayne Portalatin (0.8, 1.7), Jackson, and 6-6 guard Julyan Stone (5.7, 5.3, 6.1 assists per game). ... Culpepper either starts or comes off the bench.

Given that the Miners are very, very quick with penetrating guards - and the fact they can also out-height the Beavers' "bigs" this is a difficult matchup for coach Rob and his staff to figure out. ... but Game 1 is at home, and OSU has been finding ways to win. ... the team that looked absolutely out of gas after that Pac-10 tournament loss to Stanford has gritted out consecutive wins over Houston, Vermont, and Stanford, all three opponents with 20 or more wins.

Finally, a little nostalgia here ... Oregon State hasn't played UTEP since a Nov. 29, 1986 game in El Paso that featured two great guards - a freshman named **Gary Payton** and a sophomore named **Tim Hardaway** - and two Hall of Fame coaches, OSU's **Ralph Miller** and UTEP's **Don "The Bear" Haskins**.

I was there, covering the thing.

If I'm not mistaken UTEP has only lost two home openers in the history of its building, and one of them was on that day, when the Beavers won 83-72 in front of 12,222 fans who were very, very upset that this cocky little freshman guard from Oakland and his buddies - Jose Ortiz, Eric Knox, undersized C Bill Sherwood - had the cheek to march into the Bear's lair and steal a victory.

You talk about resumes ... Miller, who passed away on May 15, 2001, had 657 wins in 38 seasons.

Haskins, who coached then-Texas Western to the NCAA championship in 1966 (you know the history there), retired with 719 wins in 38 seasons. ... the Bear passed away last Sept. 7.



UTEP's Stefon Jackson is called D.J. (for "draining jumpers") and he is one of the nation's leading scorers. ... he is OSU's biggest problem in the CBI championship series that begins Monday night at Gill.

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