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[OSU-UTEP kick off CBI championship series](http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/sports/10652875-41/story.csp)

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CORVALLIS — One win from .500 and two wins from a title.

The Oregon State men's basketball team finds itself in that unlikely position today as it plays host to UTEP in the first round of the best-of-three championship series in the College Basketball Invitational.

Tipoff is set for 7 p.m. at Gill Coliseum.

No, it's not the national spotlight of the NCAA Tournament, and it's not even the NIT.

But only one Pac-10 team is still standing this week, and OSU coach Craig Robinson makes no apologies for leading the Beavers (16-17) to home wins over Houston, Vermont and Stanford to reach this stage.

"If we had lost to Stanford, I would have been disappointed," he said. "But we would have still been able to walk out of here with our heads held high and proud of being part of a good season, and now we're playing in the finals (of the CBI). It's starting to slowly sink in, and it sure is a happy feeling."

UTEP feels the same way.

The Miners (22-12), who will be on the road for the third time in the CBI, before returning home to El Paso for games on Wednesday and Friday, if necessary, have traveled a far more difficult path than OSU.

They opened the 16-team tourney with a 79-77 win at Nevada. Back home at the Don Haskins Center, they beat Northeastern 75-66 before gaining a berth in the championship series with an 81-69 victory at Richmond.

"Without question, we are playing our best basketball," UTEP coach Tony Barbee told the El Paso Times. "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 defection 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."

UTEP, which finished in a tie with Houston for fourth place in Conference USA, has won nine of its past 12 games.

The young Miners rally around 6-foot-5, 185-pound guard Stefon Jackson, their top offensive threat and the lone senior on the UTEP roster. The other 13 players are either freshmen or sophomores.

Jackson, a native of Philadelphia, is the all-time leading scorer in Conference USA with 2,385 points in his four-year career.

He is averaging 24.6 points per game this year, making 43 percent of his shots from the field (257-of-601). He also gets to the foul line on a regular basis, shooting 84 percent on 292-of-349 attempts.

Jackson has been on a tear during the CBI, scoring 26 points against Nevada and Northeastern, and going off for 34 against Richmond.

“He’s like a snowball rolling downhill,” Barbee said. “Hard to stop.”

UTEP split with conference rival Houston during the regular season before losing to the Cougars in overtime in the first round of the Conference USA Tournament. OSU gutted out a tough 49-45 win over Houston in its CBI opener.

The only other common opponents between the two teams are Arizona State and Nevada.

The Sun Devils had little trouble handling the Beavers this year — winning 69-38 at home and 49-38 in Corvallis — and they also rolled over UTEP, 88-58, in a Thanksgiving tournament in Anaheim, Calif.

OSU lost 79-71 at Nevada in its second game of the season, and the Miners knocked off Nevada in the first round of the CBI.

While Robinson has been to El Paso as an assistant coach with Northwestern, he has never played or coached in a tournament with a best-of-three format. It’s one of the things that originally attracted him to the tournament last year when his team at Brown was invited to compete in the inaugural CBI.

“That’s one of the cool things that I liked about this tournament last year,” Robinson said. “It will be interesting to see how you play a team in a series like this because I’ve never experienced it. I experienced it as a player in Europe, but that was the last time, and that was over 20 years ago.”

OREGON STATE VS. UTEP

College Basketball Invitational championship series. Game 1: Today at 7 p.m. in Corvallis.
TV: None. Radio: KKNX-AM (840).

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