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Boise State's season ends in CBI semifinals

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EUGENE — If there was one consistent thing about the first year of the Leon Rice era at Boise State, it was the Broncos never really were out of a game because they never believed they were.

Wednesday's College Basketball Invitational semifinal at Oregon definitely showed that.

The Broncos, who couldn't buy a basket in falling behind by 20 points with 16 minutes left, fought back within six before finally succumbing 79-71 in front of a Spring Break crowd of 6,157 at the dazzling Matthew Knight Arena.

"That's kind of who this team became — just a group that would never give up," Rice said. "They never stopped playing and just kept battling. They had us down 20 and it looked like it could get nasty, and God bless these guys because they never gave up."

The loss to the Ducks ended the season for Boise State, which finished 22-13. Oregon (19-17) advances to the CBI championship series next week against Creighton, which beat Central Florida 82-64 in the other semifinal.

It wasn't the finish the Broncos wanted, but most looked at the big picture after the disappointing loss.

"This year has been unbelievable," said senior forward Reggie Arnold, who posted team-high totals of 24 points and six rebounds.

The Broncos shot only 36 percent in the first half and found themselves down 38-27 at halftime. An 11-2 run to start the second half by the Ducks made it a 20-point margin.

"It felt like every time I scored, they would come back and hit three 3s," Arnold said. "They just came out blazing. We got off to a bad start in both halves."

Oregon shot 50 percent from the field in both halves, making eight 3s in the first and 12-of-25 for the game.

Rice saw the Broncos were getting little production from the frontcourt — starters Daequon Montreal, Ryan Watkins and substitute Daequon Montreal combined for one point — so he made a change.

"We just went really small on them and tried to heat them up a little bit defensively," Rice said, "and spread them out a little more and tried to attack them with more guards."

The strategy worked, thanks to junior guard Tre' Nichols, who didn't play in the first half. Nichols scored all 16 of his points in the second half, making 4-of-7 shots from 3-point range.

"I noticed the score and knew I had to be aggressive with whatever I did," Nichols said. "I got in a rhythm. The first shot I knocked down felt good and I hit it again. I knew I had a good rhythm going."

Rice said it was good to see Nichols play perhaps his best game of the season.

"Everyone on this roster has contributed," Rice said. "That's the thing Tre' has to take into the offseason. He can live in that spot — he doesn't have to visit it once in a while."

Nichols' outburst keyed the comeback that saw BSU close within 74-68 with 1:19 to play on a three-point play by La'Shard Anderson, who finished with 10 points, one assist and six of the Broncos' 16 turnovers.

"This team is never been about giving up — all year we've shown the world that we're never giving up," Nichols said.

Boise State couldn't get any closer as the Ducks beat the full-court press and got a pair of easy buckets from Joevan Catron, who scored 24 points, pulled down 11 rebounds and had four assists and three steals.

"That Catron is a handful and what those guys are doing now is making perimeter jumpers and you can't guard him with one guy," Rice said. "It's pick your poison. And his twos become threes because he's so strong."

Catron made 12-of-14 from the free-throw line.

The Broncos didn't help themselves at the line, making only 13-of-22. BSU did force 17 turnovers.

"When we went small, we were all over the place," Arnold said.

"We were never the biggest dog in the fight but we were usually one of the scrappiest, and that's what we wanted," Rice said.

It was the final game for seven seniors, who left a positive impression.

"I just enjoyed it," Rice said of his first season. "It started with these seniors and the way they allowed us to really come in and get after them. ... They started this thing and established how hard we're going to play and how tough we're going to be and it's going to help propel this program."