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Wildcats prepare for elite competition at CBE in KC

By KELLIS ROBINETT
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MANHATTAN, Kan. | During his tenure at Kansas State, basketball coach Frank Martin has taken the Wildcats as far away as Puerto Rico and Orlando, Fla., to take on ranked opponents in early-season tournaments.

He found one much closer to home this season.

Third-ranked K-State will take on No. 11 Gonzaga at 8:30 tonight at the Sprint Center in the CBE Classic, and then face either Marquette or defending national champion and top-ranked Duke on Tuesday.

Both games have been on the radar of K-State fans throughout the offseason, and with the game taking place just a two-hour drive from Manhattan, many of them will be on hand to watch.

The Wildcats regularly play in Kansas City — they will return to the Sprint Center later this year for a game against UNLV and the Big 12 tournament — but Martin is thrilled about this trip all the same.

“I think Kansas City is a great — not good — a great college basketball town,” Martin said. “It’s a great sports town, and to have Gonzaga, Duke and Marquette. ... When you bring people like that together into an event, that’s big-time basketball.”

K-State last played on a neutral court in front of a national television audience in the NCAA Tournament last March. The Wildcats lost a close game to Butler in Salt Lake City, and today’s game will bring back some memories of that setting.

Gonzaga, like Butler, is one of the most respected teams in the country that doesn’t play in a major conference. The Zags have made a name for themselves by consistently winning West Coast Conference championships and playing games deep into March.

Martin knows Gonzaga coach Mark Few fairly well, and holds his team in high regard.

“He gets those guys to play,” Martin said. “There’s a reason why every year when you look at conference championships, 99 percent of the time that conference belongs to them, which is very impressive. And when you look at the NCAA Tournament, Gonzaga is always right in the middle of it with a very high seed ... it’s going to be a big-time challenge for our team.”

K-State is coming off an uninspiring 76-67 victory against Presbyterian last Thursday. After the narrow victory, Martin said the Wildcats lacked leadership and were falling short in several basic areas, such as rebounding and enthusiasm.

When asked about the possible matchups the final game of the CBE Classic could produce, Martin scoffed.

Duke will get its first true test of the season against Marquette in the opening game of the CBE semifinals at 6:30 tonight. The Blue Devils, 3-0, return Kyle Singler and Nolan Smith, who leads the team with 16 points per game, and Marquette, 4-0, is striving for a national ranking.

“I don’t tell our team, ‘Hey, we’ve got a chance to play Duke and they’re No. 1,’” Martin said. “I don’t talk about that stuff. I talk about getting better.”

Listening to his coach made senior guard Jacob Pullen realize something.

“Every game is a big game when you’re the No. 3 team in the country,” Pullen said.

With that in mind, K-State plans on approaching this game with renewed energy — getting to play so close to home is simply a bonus.

“It will be good basketball against three other good teams out there that are highly ranked,” guard Martavious Irving said. “But we’ve got to prepare for them just like we do every other team on our schedule.”

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