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## Duke could face biggest challenge yet

By Eamonn Brennan  
ESPN.com

The [Duke Blue Devils](#) have a distinct scheduling strategy. If at all possible, they avoid true road nonconference games. This isn't new. Since 2007, Mike Krzyzewski's team has played no more than two true road nonconference games in any season, and that includes the team's mandated visits to Big Ten arenas for the ACC-Big Ten Challenge.

That's neither criticism nor praise -- you could argue for or against this sort of scheduling paradigm -- but whether you like it or not, it makes Duke's road trips all the more intriguing. This season, the Blue Devils have a couple of actual away games -- a Nov. 27 date at Oregon (actually, the game is in Portland, but close enough) and a Dec. 29 date at UNC Greensboro -- but their biggest road test might end up not being a real "road" game at all.

If seeds hold at this week's O'Reilly Auto Parts CBE Classic, Duke would face No. 4 Kansas State at Kansas City's Sprint Center in Tuesday's championship round. Duke fans always travel well, but they would no doubt be drowned out by K-State's feisty fan base, plenty of whom live in KC full time. Remember Butler fans in Indianapolis? Picture something similar, albeit with less on the line. (And about 40,000 fewer butts in the seats, given that the Sprint Center doesn't seat the 70,000 or so we saw at Lucas Oil Stadium in April.) Neutral-site games don't get much more hostile than that, and neutral-site opponents are rarely as skilled as the Wildcats.

It's a dream early-season matchup, but it's far from a guaranteed fixture. Duke and Kansas State will have their own challenges -- in the forms of Marquette and Gonzaga, respectively -- in the semifinal rounds Monday. Here's a quick preview to get you ready for the ensuing fun:

**No. 1 Duke vs. Marquette, ESPN2, 7:30 p.m. ET, Sprint Center, Kansas City, Mo.**

### Players to watch

[Kyrie Irving](#), **Duke**: Replacing Jon Scheyer -- one of the nation's best and most efficient point guards last season -- is no light task, but Irving is already making it look simple.

The highly touted freshman has lived up to every expectation in the Blue Devils' three wins this season. He's wasted no time assimilating into Duke's up-tempo, high-powered offense, and he's wasted no time producing gaudy statistics alongside Duke's veteran duo of [Kyle Singler](#) and [Nolan Smith](#). Irving has averaged 14.3 points, 6.7 assists and 4 rebounds (and only one turnover) per game, taking impressive command of the veteran Blue Devils during the team's early-season blitz. Monday night is Irving's formal introduction to a prime-time national audience, and it will be fun to watch him under the bright lights.

**[Jimmy Butler](#), Marquette:** No player epitomizes Marquette's flexible style quite like Butler, an inside-outside threat with the ability to score from the perimeter and slash to the rim. Marquette lost its key scoring threat and interior presence with the graduation of Lazar Hayward to the NBA ranks this past offseason, and Butler's ability to replace Hayward's productivity -- especially given Marquette's personnel, which is heavy on tweener types and light on true forwards and centers -- will be key to the Golden Eagles' chances of surviving (and thriving) in the muddled Big East this season. Butler also likely will draw much of the responsibility for guarding Singler, and he has to provide lockdown defense if Marquette expects to stay within striking distance of Coach K's well-oiled squad Monday night.



A prime-time national audience gets a formal introduction to sensational Duke freshman Kyrie Irving on Monday night.

**Mason and [Miles Plumlee](#), Duke:** You have to feel for the brothers Plumlee. After all, not only do we group them together and call them the brothers Plumlee -- as though they're not two separate, autonomous humans -- but any time anyone raises the "But what are their weaknesses?" question about Duke, the Plumlee boys are the first names checked off the list. That has to be annoying. Annoying or not, though, it isn't an unfair question: Duke senior forwards Brian Zoubek and Lance Thomas were irreplaceable keys to the Devils' title run last season mostly thanks to their ability (especially Zoubek's) to preserve Duke possessions with offensive rebounds. Whether the Plumlees can replace that skill -- a simple task in theory and an incredibly difficult one in practice -- is the biggest remaining question about the best team in college basketball. Monday night would be a good time to start answering it.

**No. 4 Kansas State vs. No. 18 Gonzaga, ESPN2, following first game**

## Players to watch

**[Curtis Kelly](#), Kansas State:** No college hoops fan needs to be reminded that [Jacob Pullen](#) is Kansas State's key player, but it might be worth mentioning Kelly's name again.

After all, he has missed most of the Wildcats' early-season action after being benched in the team's season opener against James Madison thanks to Frank Martin's desire to send Kelly a message about practicing with more energy and a better attitude. Martin backed up his disciplinary overtones by benching Kelly for Kansas State's first major contest, a 73-57 win over Virginia Tech on Tuesday. Thanks to injuries, the Hokies are a little shallow in the frontcourt, and K-State didn't need Kelly to dominate Virginia Tech in the post. Gonzaga, with 7-foot center [Robert Sacre](#) and 6-foot-8 forward [Elias Harris](#), won't be quite so easy to solve. Martin hasn't said whether he's decided to play Kelly on Monday night, but the Wildcats will need Kelly to play -- and be effective on the defensive end of the floor -- if they want to match up with Gonzaga's potent size.



**[Steven Gray](#), Gonzaga:** Gonzaga's first major test of the season came against San Diego State in what was actually the CBE Classic's regional round in Spokane, Wash. Despite the Zags' disappointing loss, there

were positive signs, most of them revolving around the brilliant guard play of Gray. (Not to mention that losing to this San Diego State team, even in the Kennel, is hardly something to be ashamed of. These Aztecs are for real.) Gray scored 35 points in the SDSU loss, as good a sign as any that he can take over the game against good teams when he needs to. But Gonzaga needs more than that from its star guard. Gray has to score, sure, but Mark Few also needs him to defend its opponents' best guard, lead his team in Matt Bouldin-esque fashion and maintain some sense of distribution and balance with Sacre and Harris. It's a huge ask -- especially against a team with guards as good as Pullen and freshman [Will Spradling](#) -- but it's one Gray seems capable of managing, at least thus far.

Curtis Kelly needs to play -- and play well -- for Kansas State against Gonzaga's front line.

## Other assorted thoughts

- It'll be interesting to see how Gonzaga rebounds in its first game after the San Diego State loss. The Bulldogs play the toughest schedule of any team in the nation this season, and the CBE Classic is no different. Does the team adjust its style? Is it skittish? Out of whack? Uncomfortable? Comfortable? Focused? Resolved? With a nonconference schedule this brutal, there's no time to mull over past disappointments, because better and tougher teams are always around the corner. We'll get a good look at how well Gonzaga can handle those challenges going forward after taking one on the chin last week.
- Welcome to college hoops, Vander. Marquette's freshman [Vander Blue](#) hasn't drawn the same plaudits as some of his more highly touted classmates, but he was a big-name recruit in his own right -- the No. 31-ranked player in the 2010 class, to be exact -- and he's already playing big minutes (27.3 per game) for Buzz Williams' team. But Blue hasn't faced anything like the guards he'll see in Duke jerseys Monday night, the combination of playmaking (in fellow freshman Irving), shooting ([Seth Curry](#), [Andre Dawkins](#)) and sheer experience (Nolan Smith). That's an overwhelming wealth of talent, but if Blue rises to the level of his opponents Monday night, he'll start earning the sort of diaper-dandy headlines that have thus far been reserved for Irving, [Harrison Barnes](#), [Jared Sullinger](#) and few else.
- How fast will Duke play? After Coach K's time with up-tempo guru Mike D'Antoni during the duo's work for USA Basketball, Krzyzewski came back to Duke with a newfound enthusiasm for up-tempo basketball. But given the strengths of last year's team -- the way Scheyer operated in the half court, the plodding interior excellence of Brian Zoubek, et al. -- Coach K slowed things down much to the Dukies' benefit. (According to Ken Pomeroy, the Blue Devils averaged 65.5 adjusted possessions per game in 2009-10, ranking them among the 100 or so slowest teams in Division I basketball.) This season, the Blue Devils have showed signs they want to play faster -- they're averaging 69.8 possessions per game thus far, making them the 61st-fastest team in college hoops. But three games is a small sample size, and those up-tempo efforts have come in three blowout wins, the kind of early-season roll-the-ball-out-and-play games that typically devolve into fast-break fiestas. Given this season's personnel, it behooves the Dukies to play up-tempo. Whether Coach K will maintain the team's early pace against quality opponents is another matter entirely.

*Eamonn Brennan covers college basketball for ESPN.com. You can see his work every Monday through Friday in the [College Basketball Nation blog](#).*

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