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Oregon State capitalizes on opportunity

By Andy Katz

111911 OSU's Jared Cunningham

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. -- November matters. It is relevant for teams and for players that have one or maybe two shots to make a difference before conference play.

Oregon State is in the Pac-12, but limited itself to two games against major-conference teams outside of league play. Lose to Texas on Saturday night and the Beavers would have to spend the rest of the nonconference plodding along in obscurity.

Take out Texas and do it behind another 30-plus point performance from wing [Jared Cunningham](#) and it provides enough fodder to pay attention to Oregon State for the time being.

And that's exactly what happened. OSU was down five points with 2:39 left in regulation in the semifinals of the Legends Classic at the IZOD Center on Saturday night.

"Last year, we wouldn't have come together," Oregon State's [Roberto Nelson](#) said.

Added teammate [Joe Burton](#): "We didn't have the mental toughness to win. That's the difference. I love this team. I love the fight that we have for each other."

Oregon State found a way to win, creating plays in the final few minutes. The defense made stops, Cunningham got to the free-throw line and the Beavers were in position to tie the game down 81-79 with 17 seconds left. That's when Cunningham drew a foul and made two free throws. Oregon State's [Eric Moreland](#) then blocked [Myck Kabongo](#)'s layup attempt at the buzzer.

The Beavers dominated the overtime and escaped with a [100-95 victory](#) over the Longhorns to move into Monday night's title game against Vanderbilt, which knocked off NC State earlier in the evening.

Cunningham finished with a career-high 37 points, a game after he scored 35 in a home win over Hofstra.

"We all have confidence now," Cunningham said. "We believe in each other."

Cunningham's teammates were quick to praise him in the postgame locker room. He has quietly emerged as one of the top scorers in the country. Cunningham was a highlight reel a year ago with his ability to flush a jam with authority. Now he's scoring in a variety of ways and he's leading the Beavers, too.

"He can definitely keep it up," point guard [Ahmad Starks](#) said. "He can keep up his defense and he can slash to the basket. He can score like that."

"Jared is amazing," Nelson said. "He can do everything for us. He's the leader on this team. He is showing us. He's carrying us on his back and it's great to have a player like that on our team. That's the difference."

This is the same program that piled up some truly horrible nonconference losses the last few years. Oregon State was able to remain somewhat competitive in the Pac-10, but too often put itself in a nonconference hole under head coach Craig Robinson.

But the 4-0 Beavers seem to have shed their bad karma and genuinely look like a team that can be competitive in every game they play. Oregon State is actually beating the teams it should at home and now has taken down a team that it wasn't expected to knock off on a neutral court.

"They are absolutely right," Robinson said. "A year ago, we couldn't win a game like that. These guys believe in each other as a group. They think they can win these games. This was a character win. Our guys stuck together."

Now if Oregon State could actually beat Vandy, the Beavers would have not just one but two quality wins for its book shelf heading into a wide-open conference.

"This is why you play in tournaments like this," Robinson said. "You get your team prepared to play and you never know. You could play a ranked team that could change your season. I'm so happy these guys are getting a taste of the big time. Vandy is going to be tougher than this. They have three pros [[John Jenkins](#), [Jeffery Taylor](#) and [Festus Ezeli](#)] on their roster. ... But I'm excited about our chances."
