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## Tourney could give Illini some answers

Mark Tupper | Posted: Tuesday, November 16, 2010 1:00 am

CHAMPAIGN - The 13th-ranked Illini basketball team learned a few things Saturday when it worked over Southern Illinois 85-63 at the Assembly Hall.

It learned that all of coach Bruce Weber's deafening chatter about defense, defense, defense rings true when it can harass an opponent into 37.5 percent shooting.

It was reminded that defense creates turnovers, which create fast breaks, which can create easy baskets. It looks like choreographed ballet when a basketball team can fly down the court the way Illinois did Saturday night.

With apologies to Mazda, zoom, zoom, zoom.

And the Illini learned they can flex their muscles, might and depth against an SIU with potential, but one that was playing its season opener and will spend the next month sorting out its own issues

But after feeling a measure of satisfaction at that accomplishment, the Illini woke up Monday and realized they're about to learn a whole lot more later this week. It won't be as easy as it has been.

"This week will give us a barometer of where we are," Texas coach Rick Barnes said on Monday.

Barnes was speaking for all of the better teams in the country, teams that know it's dangerous to take a couple of early victories and project too much about themselves into the future.

Barnes and his Longhorns will be taking on Illinois on Thursday night at Madison Square Garden (all games on ESPN2). Those two teams along with fifth-ranked Pittsburgh and Maryland will gather in New York City for the 2K Sports Classic Benefiting Coaches vs. Cancer.

Texas had no trouble slapping aside Navy (83-52) and Louisiana Tech (89-58) in its first two games, just as the Illini have easily rolled past California-Irvine (79-65), Toledo (84-45), and SIU.

But now come opponents with star-studded rosters, coached by men who have chased national championships and, in the case of Maryland coach Gary Williams, a man who has actually won one.

Bottom line: Looking good against Toledo is not the same as looking good against Texas.

"We've had a good start, but we know this week in New York will be very tough," Weber said as he participated in the same teleconference as Barnes, Williams and Pitt coach Jamie Dixon. "The competition will be as good as any tournament in the country."

Even if Illinois does well in New York, there are no guarantees.

That's a cautionary alert because of what happened to Texas last season.

The Longhorns started the season 15-0 and were ranked No. 1 in the country. They looked terrific beating Pittsburgh by 16, North Carolina by 13, Michigan State by 11 and Arkansas by a dozen.

But Texas started to stumble in mid-January and finished with a 9-10 mark. By the time the Longhorns had lost in the first round of the NCAA Tournament, they were 24-10 and Barnes was wondering what went wrong.

This season Texas has a different look and early-on, it looks like it will lean on a couple of freshmen to go with sophomore forward Jordan Hamilton and senior forward Gary Johnson.

The freshmen come to Texas as a result of the school's recruiting in Canada.

Cory Joseph, a guard who is starting for Texas, is a McDonald's All-American who last season played for the same Findlay Prep High School in Henderson, Nev., that Illinois' D.J. Richardson attended.

The more intriguing prospect is 6-foot-8 Tristan Thompson, an Ontario native who went through Findlay Prep and achieved McDonald's All-American status.

He has been coming off the bench so far, although Barnes admits he has played well enough to start. That could happen in New York because Thompson, who has averaged 14.5 points and 7.0 rebounds in Texas' first two games, could easily replace Matt Hill in the post.

Where Texas has struggled early is shooting 3-pointers (24 percent as a team) and at the free-throw line (64 percent). But two games is a very small sample size, so that could easily swing higher.

These early-season tournaments are great for television and for fans, who hope their team can pass an early test of talent vs. talent. And for the Illini, this is the best test to date of their ability to show toughness when shoved and pushed by a combatant its own size.

Last year, you may recall, Illinois wilted in some of those battles when its lack of toughness proved to be a fatal shortcoming.

Can the Illini measure up this season? A victory over Texas won't prove everything, but it will seem a lot more significant than a laugh over Toledo.

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