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Storylines, intrigue will fill the Garden

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It's been eight long months since college basketball was played in Madison Square Garden.

Time to end the drought.

The 2K Sports Classic benefiting Coaches vs. Cancer will do that in fine fashion beginning on Thursday night, when No. 4 Pittsburgh faces Maryland at 7 p.m. ET and No. 16 Illinois tangos with No. 22 Texas in the ESPN2 doubleheader.

Here's a cheat sheet to get you ready before the Garden lights come on:

Players To Watch: Wow Factor

Brad Wanamaker, Pittsburgh: He is matching teammate and breakout star Ashton Gibbs point for point (each averages 19.3 points), but the other things Wanamaker does make him worth watching. He is a typical Pitt player -- rugged, tough and fearless -- who isn't happy unless he's stuffed his entire stat line. To go along with his scoring output, the senior is averaging 5 rebounds, 6 assists and 2 steals per game and is shooting 65 percent from the floor.

Jordan Williams, Maryland: The Terps' sophomore big man (who is considerably less big thanks to a 20-pound weight loss) is the focus on a young Maryland team. Everyone knows it, but that doesn't mean anyone can stop it. Williams has posted a double-double in all three games, averaging 21 points and 13.7 rebounds. Granted, the opponents weren't anything like Pitt, but the All-ACC rookie selection is a dominant force worth watching.

Demetri McCamey, Illinois: Picking up where he left off last season, the point guard is scoring and dishing with equal effectiveness. The senior is averaging 14.7 points and 8 assists per game, right in line with last year's numbers of 15.1 and 7.1. Last season, McCamey was one of just four players in the nation to average more than 15 points and 6 assists per game. Now, he's the last one standing as the other three -- John Wall, Evan Turner and Greivis Vasquez -- have moved on.

Jordan Hamilton, Texas: Last season, Hamilton was part of the Longhorns' problem, a dynamic but unreliable player who sometimes produced (27 against Oklahoma State) and sometimes did not (zero against Kansas). But in one year, Hamilton has grown up plenty. The sophomore is averaging 22.6 points and 7 rebounds, but more important, he is setting an example for a young Texas team.



Jordan Williams has three double-double in three games this season.

Players To Watch: Undercard

Gary McGhee, Pittsburgh: The underappreciated senior big man may not be flashy, but he is as steady and reliable as they come in the paint. His numbers (5 points, 6.3 rebounds) won't wow anyone, but his presence down low -- especially on the defensive end -- serves as an anchor for the Panthers.

Cliff Tucker, Maryland: For a young team that was worried about replacing the prolific scoring of Vasquez, Tucker is exactly what the doctor ordered. In the senior's first 98 games, he scored 15 points all of two times. This season, the forward has collected 15 in each of Maryland's first three games.

Jereme Richmond, Illinois: The first McDonald's All-American to choose the Illini since Dee Brown, Richmond was a huge recruit for coach Bruce Weber. Richmond has had a relatively quiet first three games, averaging 7 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists and 20 minutes during three blowouts. The freshman's talent is evident, though.

Tristan Thompson, Texas: His high school teammate and fellow Canadian, Cory Joseph, earns the start (only the 25th freshman to start his first game at Texas), but it is Thompson who has been making the headlines. The freshman out of Findlay Prep has become a reliable presence in the post, with 14.6 points and 7 boards for the Longhorns.

Thursday's Key Matchups

Maryland's guards vs. Pittsburgh's pressure: The Terrapins have the edge with Williams on the inside, but that only works if Maryland can get the ball to him. The Terps have been plagued by turnovers early in the season, averaging a whopping 20 cough-ups in three games. Veterans Sean Mosley and Adrian Bowie have to take better care of the basketball, especially against a disruptive Pitt team that likes nothing more than to pester and pressure the ballhandlers.

Mindset vs. Mindset: Tortoise meet hare. Like most of its league brethren, Texas likes to score. The Longhorns are averaging 86 points this season and posted 81 per game last season. Like most of its league brethren, Illinois doesn't worry so much about scoring (just enough will do). Yes, the Illini have averaged 82 points in the early going, but don't be fooled. This is the same team that won games last year scoring 51 (against Michigan) and 54 (against Penn State). Who dictates tempo and style? That's your winner.

Other Items Of Note

Shooting bricks: There is nothing charitable about the free throw line for Texas, and in a close game the charity stripe could be the Horns' undoing. Last season, UT shot just 63.3 percent from the line, good for third-worst in all of Division I basketball. This season the ugly continues, as Texas has managed to bump its numbers to all of 64.3 percent. Take out Jordan Hamilton (9-of-10 in first two games) and that number drops to 58.7.

You can win without NBA players: If you get the right "other" players. Just ask Jamie Dixon. Since he took over at Pitt in 2003, the Panthers have produced exactly zero first-round draft picks (although those



Demetri McCamey will be one of many talented guards on the Garden floor.

who passed on DeJuan Blair may wish that weren't the case). And yet Pittsburgh ranks as the fifth-winningest program in that span with 191 wins. The Panthers stand behind a few schools you might have heard of: Duke (206 wins, four first-rounders), Memphis (206 wins, five first-rounders), Kansas (203 wins, six first-rounders) and North Carolina (197, nine first-rounders).

All in the family: It will be interesting to see where the rooting interests lie for the Gibbs family when Pittsburgh takes on Maryland. Ashton, of course, is last season's breakout star and a key reason that so much is expected of the Panthers this season. But his little brother Sterling, a top point guard in the Class of 2011, is headed to College Park next year.

Inside information: When Bruce Weber learned Rick Barnes visited the Utah Jazz for a few days this year, the Illinois coach got curious. And sure enough, when the Illinois coach popped in the game tape, he realized quickly that Texas was, indeed, running some of the plays the Jazz use and that just might be an advantage -- an advantage for the Illini, that is. Former Illinois point guard Deron Williams is with Utah, and player and coach remain close. "Texas is running their stuff, and we'll see if they have the same names for the plays," Weber told the Decatur Herald & Review. "That will be interesting because we have Utah's playbook from Deron."

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