

YAHOO! SPORTS

Texas takes big step forward



By Jason King, Yahoo! Sports 7 hours, 22 minutes ago

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NEW YORK – The Texas basketball squad exited one of the nation’s most legendary arenas shortly before 1 a.m. Friday, and as they boarded the bus that awaited them, it was obvious the Longhorns were already looking forward to coming back to Madison Square Garden.

So what if their next game was in 15 hours?

“If we’re able to squeak out a win,” freshman Tristan Thompson said, “I’d say we had a pretty good [trip].”

Thompson was a bit off-base.

No matter what happens in Friday’s game against fifth-ranked Pittsburgh, Texas’ jaunt to the Big Apple can already be deemed a success.

Sure, beating the Panthers would be the cherry on top, but even if the Longhorns lose, they can still head back to the Lone Star State with smiles on their faces after defeating No. 13 Illinois in the semifinals of the 2K Sports Coaches vs. Cancer Classic.



“They were tougher than us,” Illinois coach Bruce Weber said, and those words were surely flattering to the unranked Longhorns, who for months heard nothing but barbs and criticism following a miserable finish to the 2009-10 season.

You know the story by now. Texas earned a No. 1 national ranking after opening the season with 17 straight wins. But Rick Barnes’ squad floundered down the

stretch by losing 10 of its final 17 games, including a setback against a mediocre Wake Forest squad in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

“It feels nice,” forward Gary Johnson said, “to have something good happen for a change.”

Indeed, the eyes of Texas are once again affixed on the Longhorns, only this time it's for all the right reasons. It's been nearly a year – since a victory over Michigan State in Austin last December – that the program has experienced a win this big. Barnes may try to downplay it, but it's true.

With four senior starters and one of the Big Ten's top freshmen in Jereme Richmond, Illinois certainly didn't enter the game over-ranked. The Illini's blend of experience, depth and length make them a legitimate league title contender in one of the nation's top conferences.

Barnes is hoping the Longhorns will have that same opportunity in the Big 12. After three games and six months of offseason workouts, there's one central theme that continues to encourage him.

“Chemistry,” Barnes said. “We're a whole different team than last year.”

The Longhorns' biggest problem in 2008-09 was that they never could get on the same page. Seniors Damion James and Dexter Pittman often seemed like they had their own agendas, and underclassmen such as Jordan Hamilton and J'Covan Brown had problems with attitude and work ethic and were often selfish with the ball.

After the season ended, Hamilton watched tape of himself and realized how much he hurt the Longhorns by taking ill-advised shots. When offseason workouts began he apologized to each and every one of his teammates and vowed to become more of a leader.

The gesture was among a number of things that gave Barnes hope that this year would be different.

“We talked in the spring about getting back to what Texas is all about,” Barnes said. “They encourage each other now. They trust each other.”

Barnes has also been pleased with the reaction to his decision to start two freshmen, Thompson and guard Cory Joseph. There is no jealousy or animosity, Barnes said. Only respect and support.

“They didn't come in with a sense of entitlement,” Barnes said. “They're starting because they earned it.”

Playing in just his third college game, Joseph gave Texas a 75-73 lead on a pull-up jumper with 24 seconds remaining in regulation before a basket on

the other end by Illinois' Richmond forced overtime. Instead of being dejected and pouting about losing a nine-point lead, Barnes said the Longhorns "never flinched."

Instead, Texas scored the first eight points of the extra period and kept going on their way to a mild upset that ended half past midnight. Asked about his team's attitude in the huddle in the game's final minutes, Thompson said: "It was winning time. Forty minutes wasn't enough to settle who was going to win, but overtime was great. We knew we had to come out there and turn it up another gear."

Hamilton (25 points) and Thompson (20) led Texas in scoring, but Barnes said it was his team's gritty mentality that made the biggest difference in the end.

Texas, for instance, scored just one basket in the final eight minutes of regulation but still defended well enough to keep itself in the game. Another encouraging sign was that the Longhorns outrebounded an Illinois squad that features two 7-footers and two 6-9 guys in its rotation.

"We showed some toughness," Barnes said, "and we beat a great basketball team."

The question now is whether people will start calling Texas a great team, too. Three of the so-called Big 12 title contenders – Kansas State, Baylor and Missouri – have shown early flaws. And Kansas is still awaiting word on whether standout freshman point guard Josh Selby will be eligible.

A lot of preseason polls had Texas listed fifth behind those schools in the Big 12 power rankings, but now it appears the Longhorns belong right there in the mix. Assuming, of course, that they continue to make strides like the one they took against a good Illinois team.

"There was a lot of hype about Illinois," Johnson said. "Every time you turn on the TV, you hear about them. They're one of the teams everyone is talking about."

Just as it was last year, Texas may soon become one of those teams, too.

Maybe this time, the Longhorns will be able to handle it.

