

Pitt can build on defeats of Texas, Maryland

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By Ray Fittipaldo, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Frank Franklin II/Associated Press

Pitt claimed the 2K Sports Classic tournament championship after beating Maryland and Texas.

Pitt never has been a team that is easy on the eyes under Jamie Dixon, who coaches a gritty style that can be grating to the game's purists. This can be especially true when the Panthers play early in the season and are still working out the kinks.

After Pitt's victory against Texas in the 2K Sports Classic benefitting Coaches vs. Cancer championship game Friday night, a reporter asked what Dixon thinks when people say that his team "wins ugly."

Some coaches in Dixon's position might have been insulted by the question. Dixon took it as an opportunity to make a self-deprecating joke and then wore the ugly tag as a badge of honor.

"It's better than losing ugly, I guess, or losing pretty," Dixon said after Pitt beat Texas, 68-66. "Offensively, we're one of the most efficient teams year in and year out. We outrebound people and we don't turn it over. To me, those are pretty good stats. I don't know what adjective you want to use, but those are the important things. We have good kids who play hard and believe in each other. That's what helps you win."

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If the no-frills approach is not sexy enough for members of the national media, Dixon says so be it. He is not going to change his formula for success. That much was evident after the Panthers grinded their way past Maryland and Texas to earn the tournament trophy.

The fifth-ranked Panthers were far from perfect in their victories at Madison Square Garden, but they remain unbeaten while four other ranked teams already have tasted defeat. No. 8 North Carolina, No. 11 Gonzaga, No. 13 Illinois and No. 16 Butler all absorbed losses through the first two weeks of the season, and only Gonzaga lost to another ranked foe.

"We have something to build on," Dixon said. "And we'll learn from these two wins."

Dixon believes he has already played three teams that will make the NCAA tournament in March. He said by the end of the season, Texas, Maryland and Rhode Island will all be ranked among the top 40 teams in the nation when it comes to the Ratings Percentage Index.

And by sweeping the two games against the Terrapins and Longhorns, Dixon set his team up to enter conference play with an unblemished record for the fourth time in his eight seasons as Pitt's head coach. The remaining game against a team from another power conference is against No. 23 Tennessee Dec. 11 at Consol Energy Center.

The other non-conference games will also be played within the city limits against mid-majors and lower-level Division I programs. The next time Pitt has to leave the city to play a game is Jan. 4 when the Panthers visit Providence.

There is plenty of room for improvement between now and then, Dixon said. The Panthers struggled to pull away from Maryland and Texas after holding double-digit leads in the second half of each game. There are some issues with defense --

Maryland and Texas both shot better than 42 percent -- and the offense can use some fine-tuning. Even the rebounding can stand to improve after the Longhorns won that battle Friday night.

Coaches who manage to win these early tournaments breathe a sigh of relief because they know it is difficult to be at your best when the season is still being measured in days. The "ugliness" quality of the tournament championship aside, Dixon can walk away feeling good about his team's depth.

Dixon used 11 players in both games, and reserves accounted for more than one-third of the team's scoring against Maryland and Texas. The bench scored 30 points in the 79-70 victory against the Terrapins and 20 against the Longhorns.

It is quite possible that Dixon will pare the rotation later in the season, but he showed he was not afraid to call on his bench to provide some spark.

"I think we found out how deep we can be," reserve guard Travon Woodall said. "We had a lot of guys who work hard in practice and play well in practice, but we didn't know in game situations who we were going out there with. But we know now we can go to war with all 11 guys that coach Dixon is playing with. They're all doing a great job."

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Check out Ray Fittipaldo's Pitt B-Ball blog and Paul Zeise's Pitt Stop videos about football exclusively on [PG+](#), a members-only web site from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Our [introduction to PG+](#) gives you all the details.



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