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Johnnies, freshmen set for a Garden party against No. 15 Arizona

ROGER RUBIN

Thursday, November 17, 2011

When they were being recruited, many of the six new St. John's players were taken on a tour of Madison Square Garden. They walked the hallowed halls, stood on the historic court and felt the history. Tonight is the night they've been waiting for.

The Red Storm (3-0) makes its first Garden appearance of the season against 15th-ranked Arizona (3-0) in the second semifinal of the 2K Sports Coaches vs. Cancer Classic. The first semifinal is between No.19 Texas A&M (2-0) and Mississippi State (2-1) at 7.



St. John's coach Steve Lavin shows team video of wins over Pitt and...

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"I just can't wait. I feel like it will be real exciting, electric," said freshman Moe Harkless, who grew up a Knicks fan in Queens. "Ever since I started playing basketball, every kid dreams of hearing their names called in the big arenas. For New Yorkers it's always been the Garden and the Knicks."

"As far as environment, there is nothing like Madison Square Garden," said sophomore Nurideen Lindsey, a junior-college transfer. "I've seen games there. . . . Now I get to play my games there. It's great."

The Johnnies toured the American Cancer Society's Hope Lodge Wednesday evening before a dining at Smith & Wollensky Steakhouse and heading to the team hotel. The dinner spot and hotel were part of the Storm's pregame routine last season before it stunned nationally-ranked Pitt, UConn, Notre Dame and Georgetown at the Garden.

Coach Steve Lavin knows he cannot fully prepare the six newcomers in his seven-man rotation for the energy that the moment will bring, but he tried by showing them video of the wins over Pitt and UConn. Harkless was at the win over Pitt and said that when Dwight Hardy made his last second reverse layup to win the game "the place was crazy."

"We turned the volume up some so they could get a sense of the crowd and a little bit of the flavor of Madison Square Garden," Lavin said. "Also, to get their hearts started - there's nothing wrong with a little bit of adrenaline."

"I just want them to run it all out," junior Malik Stith, the lone returner in the rotation, said. "Use the energy to your advantage... by playing hard."

Arizona has a much bigger front line than the Johnnies do - as many foes will - and one of the best freshmen in the country in Josiah Turner.

It also just got back Bronx product Kevin Parrom, who is recovered from being shot in the leg and hand Sept. 23 on a visit to the city. The 6-6 junior had six points in 18 minutes in his first game back against Ball State last Sunday.

The cause in this tournament is dear to Lavin, who will coach his third game since successful prostate cancer surgery Oct. 6. His father is a prostate cancer survivor. His maternal grandmother died from pancreatic cancer. And his niece, Sophia, lost her right eye to retinal blastoma in 2001.

"I've always had an amplified awareness of how important it is to champion the cause of finding a cure for cancer," he said. "I had a very personal awareness of how vital and critical it is that we continue to support the fight against cancer."

TWEET DECK Norvelle Pelle, one of three incoming St. John's recruits ruled academically ineligible, said on Twitter that he's re-opened his recruiting. The 6-9 forward from Long Beach, Calif., didn't sound as if he would re-up with the Storm, thanking the fans for the "luv and support yall showed me."

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