

The Register-Guard

<http://www.registerguard.com/>

Beavers embrace CBI's benefits**The tournament means more practices for a team building for 20 wins and next season**

BY CURTIS ANDERSON*The Register-Guard*Published: **Wednesday, Mar 14, 2012 05:01AM**

CORVALLIS — Play on.

Even though the postseason tournament initials are not what the Oregon State men's basketball team was shooting for this year — CBI, as opposed to NCAA, or even NIT — the Beavers are still happy to be involved.

For the third time in coach Craig Robinson's four-year tenure, OSU will host a first-round game in the College Basketball Invitational against Western Illinois tonight.

Tipoff is set for 7 p.m. at Gill Coliseum.

After a bit of uncertainty, the Beavers have embraced the idea of another CBI appearance. They won the tourney in 2008-09.

"Some people had doubts, some people wanted to play," OSU sophomore Devon Collier said. "But when coach brought us all together and gave us reasons why we should, we realized those were good reasons, and once we all had time to think about it, we decided it would be good for us to play."

Those reasons underscored the value of more games and more practices, especially with a team that brings back all but one player next season, unless junior guard Jared Cunningham, a first-team all-Pac-12 selection, decides to turn pro.

OSU enters the 16-team field with a 19-14 record, one victory shy of its first 20-win season since the 1989-90 club finished 22-7.

"This is going to be big for us," said sophomore guard Roberto Nelson.

"We need a lot of confidence going into next year ... so it's good to try to have a 20-plus win season. We'll go into this with our heads high, try to win some games, and have it translate into next year."

This year's CBI tourney has added some heavyweights such as Butler, an NCAA finalist

the past two seasons; Big East powerhouse Pitt; the Pac-12's Washington State; and Princeton, Robinson's alma mater that is making its 31st trip to the postseason.

As for Robinson, he can't ever foresee a day when the Beavers would turn down any postseason invitation.

"Philosophically, we want to play all the time," he said. "But we want to play in the NCAA Tournament. I don't think there's ever going to be a time where we won't want to play games. I understand a place like UCLA that has won 10 national championships, and they don't want to play in the NIT or the CBI. I can't foresee us, in my time here, getting to that point."

What Robinson can foresee is a highly competitive game tonight.

The Leathernecks (18-14) knocked off top-seeded Oral Roberts in the Summit League tournament semifinals, and then came within one basket of earning the league's automatic NCAA bid in a 52-50 overtime loss to South Dakota State in the championship game.

Western Illinois led the entire second half, only to miss a potential game-winning shot at the buzzer after the Jackrabbits tied the game with two free throws with 15 seconds left.

The Leathernecks, who are making their first-ever postseason appearance in 31 years as a Division-I program, will try to control tempo against the Beavers. They average 61.6 points per game.

OSU, on the other hand, led the Pac-12 in scoring (78.9 ppg) for the first time this season.

"They would prefer to play a defensive battle in the 50s and 60s," Robinson said. "We want to get up and down. We have to make sure every shot is a good shot and we play good defense. If they get any lead, a deficit against a team like this is doubled. If you're down five points, it seems like 10 with the pace of the game.

"We have to push the ball when we get our opportunities and try to score in transition. If we can accomplish that, we'll be in good shape."

Western Illinois, located in Macomb, Ill., a town of about 22,000 people 75 miles west of Peoria, is coached by Jim Molinari.

In his fourth season, he orchestrated a remarkable turnaround from last year's squad, which was 2-16 in league and 7-23 overall.

The former longtime assistant at DePaul guided Northern Illinois (1990-91) and Bradley (1995-96) to NCAA Tournament berths in previous head coaching stops. He also once recruited a young power forward out of Mount Carmel High School in Chicago named Craig Robinson.

"Believe it or not, coach Molinari recruited me when he was working at DePaul," Robinson said. "That's when I first met him, and I've sort of been following his career

ever since. He's a terrific coach and a terrific guy. He graduates his players, he knows the game very well, and he's going to have a very strategic game plan for us, so we're going to have to be ready to play."

Copyright © 2012 — The Register-Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA