For San Jose State, CBI berth is A-OK

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Given that, San Jose State could find itself with an advantage Tuesday night when it takes on Creighton in a College Basketball Invitational game at Qwest Center Omaha.

Neither team set out in November with the goal of being a participant in the game. At the same time, when the Spartans say they are excited to be in this tournament, it’s not lip service. The CBI is San Jose State’s first taste of the postseason since 1996 and just the fifth overall.

“Every program in America aspires to be in the NCAA tournament, but you have to keep things in context,” San Jose State coach George Nessman said. “San Jose State basketball has been bad since the early ‘80s. Playing in this tournament is a huge step for our program and for our younger players.

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“And it’s important that our seniors get a chance to experience some success. They’ve been here when times were a lot thinner and tougher. I’m very happy that they’re getting a chance to end their careers in the postseason.”

The Spartans will bring a 17-15 record into the 7:05 p.m. first-round game. Creighton, playing for the first time since March 5, is 19-14 as it opens its 14th straight postseason.
Most of those who have come on grander stages, although this is the second straight year the Bluejays are ending their season in one of the two lower-level tournaments. They played in the CollegeInsider.com Tournament last March, reaching the semifinals before losing to Missouri State.

Creighton’s players and coaches have said all the right things, about how playing in the CBI is a chance to get the seniors more games as well as furthering the development of the team’s younger players. But human nature suggests the Bluejays might not embrace the CBI with the same fervor as the Spartans.

Senior center Kenny Lawson says that’s not the case.

“Any time you get a chance to play, we look at it as a blessing,” Lawson said. “We didn’t make it to where we wanted to go, but this is a chance for guys to get better for next year and for the seniors to get a chance to play again.”

Lawson and his fellow seniors had hoped the Feb. 26 game against Northern Iowa would be their last at home.

“I didn’t want to come back here and play again,” said Lawson, who was hoping that any postseason play would come at a neutral site in the NCAA tournament. “But I am back here, and I’m proud of getting the opportunity to play here again.

“I want to keep winning.”

To do that, the Bluejays will have to find a way Tuesday to stall San Jose State’s backcourt firepower. The Spartans have the country’s No. 3 scorer in senior Adrian Oliver, who is averaging 24.3 points and has seven games of 30 points or more.

He teams with point guard Justin Graham, a 6-foot-4 senior who averages 14.3 points and 4.4 assists, and 5-11 Keith Shamburger, one of four SJSU freshmen since 1972 to average double-figure scoring (12.0).

“Their guard court alone is averaging 50 points a game,” Creighton coach Greg McDermott said. “It’s going to test us defensively to try to keep their guards in front of us and defend the 3-point line, because it’s obvious their guards are playing at a very high level right now.”

Oliver, the first Spartan to earn two first-team All-Western Athletic Conference honors since San Jose State joined the league in 1996, has had just one game this season with fewer than 10 points. He had 29 in San Jose State’s first-round win over Idaho State.

Utah State held him to 16 in a 58-54 win that knocked the Spartans out of the tournament.

“He’s the most talented player in our league,” Nessman said. “He’s on the NBA’s radar and will be a guy that can get a chance to play professionally. He’s just a real complete offensive player, and a great kid that has really been devoted to our program. He’s raised our level of play.”

McDermott said Oliver reminds him of Bradley’s Andrew Warren, a 6-6 wing who led the Missouri Valley in scoring. Oliver, two inches shorter, can get to the rim and the free-throw line. He’s made 82.6 percent of his 219 free throws.

“He can shoot the 3-point shot,” McDermott said, “and then beat you off the dribble.”

San Jose State’s 17-season win this year is the school’s most since 1981, when the Spartans won 21 games and played in the National Invitation Tournament. Just six San Jose State teams since 1950 have won as many as 17 games.

“Our guys were disappointed when they lost in the WAC semifinals, but we came back to practice with a bounce in our step,” Nessman said. “Our guys are excited about this opportunity, and sometimes at this time of the year, the teams that advance are the ones that want it the most.”

-NOTES: Creighton sold about 2,000 tickets Monday. Season ticketholders have from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesday to purchase their same seats, with sales to the general public beginning at 1:15 p.m. on Ticketmaster. ... Creighton is 3-0 against San Jose State, with the victories coming in 1969, 1971 and 1988. ... A victory would be the Bluejays 300th of his coaching career. ... Creighton and Austin Peay are the only teams to have participated in each of the four postseason tournaments (NCAA, NIT, CIT and CBI) over the past five seasons. Lawson and teammate Casey Harriman were redshirts on the 2007 NCAA team, then played in two NITs and one CIT. Harriman won’t play in the CBI — he underwent career-ending shoulder surgery in January.

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