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Jays prepare for best-of-3 finals format

By Steven Pivovar

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



REBECCA S. GRATZ/THE WORLD-HERALD

Creighton and Oregon have played their way into a best-of-three showdown for the CBI championship, with the opening game set for Monday at 7:05 p.m. at Qwest Center Omaha.

Series basketball is pretty much a foreign concept to college teams.

Nonconference schedules are never put together with a best-of format in mind. Teams will face conference foes multiple times during the season, but hardly ever in successive games. Tournament play is one-and-done.

Except in the College Basketball Invitational. Creighton and Oregon have played their way into a best-of-three showdown for the CBI championship, with the opening game set for Monday at 7:05 p.m. at Qwest Center Omaha.

Of the players and coaches who will be involved, Creighton assistant Steve Merfeld might be the only person who has experienced playing a series of games on the collegiate level. Merfeld was on Bradley's staff when the Braves played in the first CBI finals series in 2008.

"It's obviously different than what most of us are used to," Merfeld said. "You can end up playing the same team three times in a season but when it goes back-to-back like this, it's just so different.

"And this, with Dana's involvement, makes it an even more unique situation."

Oregon is guided by Dana Altman, who coached or recruited all of Creighton's key contributors. Any advantage that Oregon might have in that regard is countered by the fact that Darian DeVries, who spent 12 seasons on Altman's staff, was retained by new coach Greg McDermott.

"Darian knows all of Dana's tendencies," he said.

Bradley lost to Tulsa in three games in the inaugural CBI. The Braves dropped the first game in Tulsa, won handily at home to even the series and then lost to the Golden Hurricane in the final game, which was played in Tulsa.

The CBI has changed the format, with the first game to be played in Omaha before the series shifts to Eugene, Ore., for the second and, if necessary, third games.

"That makes more sense," Merfeld said.

Some observers suggest the CBI's series concept makes no sense at all. Ray Cella, media director for the sponsoring Gazelle Group, said the concept was the brainchild of Gazelle President Rick Giles.

"He felt that one of the reasons people love college basketball is the passion fans have for their school," Cella said. "That passion is sometimes lost in conference and postseason tournaments because those games are played at neutral sites."

The first two CBI championship series each went three games, with Tulsa and Oregon State winning. Virginia Commonwealth swept St. Louis last season.

Cella said the response the CBI has received from participants in the first three championships has been positive.

“We have heard nothing but raves,” Cella said. “One player last year said that it reminds him of the NBA playoffs because it gives a team a chance to rebound from a poor outing.”

Recalling his championship series, Merfeld said the format requires each team to make game-to-game adjustments.

“The first game was played straight up, just like a regular game,” Merfeld said. “The second game, the team that loses normally adjusts a lot because its back is against the wall. The team that wins the first game goes into the second with basically the approach, knowing that if they lose, they can then adjust for game three.

“That makes the first game extremely important in a series like this. You want to put the onus to adjust on the other guy.”

Merfeld recalled one of the major adjustments the Bradley staff made after dropping the opening game 73-68 was to alter the offensive approach to put more pressure on Tulsa’s big men. “We felt like their big guys couldn’t handle ball screens,” Merfeld said, “so we went exclusively to ball screens and drilled them pretty good.”

Bradley scored an 83-74 win in the second game.

“They turned around in Game 3 and said, ‘You’re right, we can’t guard your ball screens,’ ” Merfeld said. “They decided to zone us. We got up on them like 16-3 but they stayed with the zone, and they ended up beating us.”

Tulsa pulled out a 70-64 victory in the third game.

Merfeld said he remembers the players having a good time with the format.

“Kids are kids,” he said. “They enjoy the games, they enjoy the atmospheres. To get to the finals, you’ve obviously won three games, and there’s some excitement within the team and in the community.”

Unfortunately, Merfeld will not be a part of that excitement. The 49-year-old Merfeld decided at midseason that he needed to do something about a painful right hip. Hip replacement surgery was scheduled for March 28, with the idea being that the Bluejays probably wouldn’t still be playing.

March 28 is Monday. After briefly considering postponing the surgery, Merfeld decided to go through with the operation.

Now he’s scrambling. The surgery will require several days of hospitalization, and the hospital where he’s having it performed does not receive HDNet, which televises CBI games.

“I don’t even know if they have radios there,” he said, chuckling. “I’ve got to find me a radio.”

• **NOTES:** Creighton’s Doug McDermott was one of 21 players named Friday to the CollegeInsider.com freshman All-America team. McDermott is just the fourth freshman since 1996-97 to score 541 points, grab 270 rebounds and make 42 shots from 3-point range. The other three — Kevin Durant of Texas (2006-07), Carmelo Anthony of Syracuse (2002-03) and Quentin Richardson of DePaul (1998-99) — were named national freshmen of the year. ... Creighton has sold more than 5,200 tickets for Monday’s game, said Adrian Rider, CU’s director of ticket sales. Season ticket-holders have until 1 p.m. Saturday to purchase their same-seat locations at the Qwest Center box office. Starting at 1:15 p.m., tickets will be available through Ticketmaster.

Contact the writer:

402-679-2298, steve.pivovar@owh.com

twitter.com/PivOWH

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