

Published Apr 2, 2011
 Published Saturday April 2, 2011

What's next? Bluejays hope CBI is a catalyst

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REBECCA S. GRATZ/THE WORLD-HERALD

Creighton's Gregory Echenique scored in double figures in each of the Bluejays' College Basketball Invitational games and could be the Missouri Valley's best center next season.

Did Creighton's finish in basketball indicate that the Bluejays might have crossed a threshold?

No, we're not talking about the weird finish to Friday's 71-69 loss at Oregon in the College Basketball Invitational. The Ducks' winning basket with two seconds to play came after Creighton's Antoine Young had stepped back across the nearly invisible midcourt line at Matthew Knight Arena, resulting in a turnover that set up Oregon's final shot.

The Bluejays' overall strong showing in the CBI gave them a shot of energy to take into the offseason. Of course, beating San Jose State, Davidson, Central Florida and Oregon (in the first game of the championship series) is not the same as knocking off Southern California, Georgetown, Purdue, Florida State and Kansas.

Those are the teams Virginia Commonwealth beat to reach the NCAA Final Four. The Rams won the 2010 CBI.

"There's been a lot said about VCU and how it benefited them," Creighton coach Greg McDermott said. "Missouri State won a championship last year, and it benefited them this year. You're playing basketball when no one else is playing. You're practicing when no one else is practicing."

The Bluejays finished 23-16 in McDermott's first season. There was no real marquee win. In the final analysis, they beat the teams they probably should have beaten and lost when they should have lost.

That could have made for a somewhat nondescript inaugural season before the modest taste of success in the CBI.

"This tournament meant a lot to our team," Young said. "We got some more experience. We took advantage of it, and we played really well."

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THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UNSETTLED

The Good: Four Reasons for Optimism

- **CREAM OF THE CROP:** Creighton will start next season with arguably the best point guard, center and power forward in the Missouri Valley Conference. Point guard Antoine Young has made huge strides in the past two seasons, and Creighton's run in the College Basketball Invitational highlighted his skills as a distributor. He had 44 assists in the six games, and he remains Creighton's best threat to create his own shot: His quickness and maneuverability make him difficult to stop. Doug McDermott went from redshirt candidate to the Bluejays' all-time most productive first-year scorer, finishing with 581 points while becoming the first freshman since 1952 to earn first-team all-conference honors. No Bluejay benefited from the CBI more than the 6-foot-9, 269-pound Gregory Echenique, who seemed to find a second wind in the tournament as he scored in double figures in each of the six games. His productivity was a result of his willingness to work harder inside, and he handled the inevitable double teams much better in the postseason than in the regular season. The rest of the lineup will continue to benefit from the double- and triple-teaming on Echenique. What is

especially encouraging for long-range development is that only Young will be a senior next season.

- **VALLEY FAVORITES?** Oregon's Dana Altman knows a thing or two about the Missouri Valley, having spent the 16 previous seasons as Creighton's head coach. Altman spent some time studying this season's developments in the league on the Ducks' flight to Omaha to play in the CBI championship series. His conclusion? "It looks like it's going to be between Creighton and Indiana State next year," Altman said. "It doesn't look as if anyone can match their experience, and that's what usually wins in that league." The Sycamores will lose guards Aaron Carter and Jake Kelly but return everyone else from their NCAA tournament team. Wichita State, the champion of the National Invitation Tournament, also should be in the mix — the Shockers were the deepest team in the league this season. Three of their four seniors were frontcourt players, leaving them a solid backcourt to build around in addition to returning 7-footer Garrett Stutz up front. Almost every other team in the league figures to face some major issues. Creighton could make a giant stride.

- **THE CBI BUMP:** The thought of playing in the lower-level CBI turned off some Creighton bluebloods, but the experience could pay off next season. Coach Greg McDermott noted that Friday's 71-69 loss to Oregon in the finale came almost a month after the Bluejays had bowed out of the Valley tournament with an ugly 60-50 semifinal loss to Missouri State. Creighton got to play six games in the tournament and get in three-plus weeks of additional full-team practices. Missouri State used the bump it received from winning last year's CollegeInsider.com Tournament to set up its Valley championship season. Virginia Commonwealth, the 2010 CBI champion, wound up making the NCAA Final Four this season. In addition, the way the CBI ended, with a late turnover that was more a result of Oregon's almost invisible halfcourt line than a CU mistake, will give the returning players added motivation to carry into the offseason. "Coach told us after the game to remember this feeling," Echenique said. "We're going to start our offseason work next week, and this is going to be on the guys' minds. I know I don't want to ever feel like this again."

- **NO MAJOR LOSSES:** Creighton's five seniors — Kenny Lawson, Darryl Ashford, Kaleb Korver, Wayne Runnels and the injured Casey Harriman — are solid young men who have represented the university with class. But the bottom line is that Creighton could never rise above their basketball shortcomings, individually and collectively. Lawson, expected by many to be Creighton's best player, struggled throughout the season before finishing strong. Korver made strides in his final season but never was able to match the expectations that came with his last name. Ashford was an enigma throughout his two seasons at Creighton. The undersized Runnels often found himself mismatched inside. Harriman's bad shoulders left him unable to play. None of the five possessed the personality of a forceful leader that this team desperately needed, forcing younger players to try to fill the void. It would be unfair to pin all of Creighton's problems this season on the seniors, but their inability to lift up their play in their final season kept the team from reaching greater heights.

The Bad: Four Reasons for Pessimism

- **WILL THEY NEED NAME TAGS:** Eight of the Bluejays' 13 scholarship players for next season either have never played in a Division I game or will be coming off a year of inactivity. It will take time to integrate the five new players into the system. CU adds incoming freshmen Austin Chatman, Avery Dingman, Geoff Groselle, Nevin Johnson and a yet-to-be signed junior college guard. Redshirt Will Artino gained experience banging with Echenique and Lawson in practice every day, and he has a different skill set than the other inside players. The staff has to figure out how to best utilize the 6-11 Artino. Big things are expected from Gonzaga transfer Grant Gibbs, but he, too, must shake off the rust of a redshirt season and overcome his injury-prone past. Ethan Wragge also is coming off a season derailed by a foot injury. He is a proven contributor as a perimeter shooter, but he will be 11 months removed from his last game by the time Creighton opens the 2011-12 season. An August exhibition trip to the Bahamas might help smooth out some of the problems that normally arise with such a heavy reliance on new faces. But to expect a seamless transition might be asking a bit much.

- **TRY TO STOP THIS:** In its first season under McDermott, Creighton made strides in shoring up its defense, especially in the halfcourt. What the Bluejays didn't show is an ability to neutralize their opponent's dominant player. Oregon's Joevan Catron underscored that by going off for 29 points and making his last eight shots in the CBI's final game. The Bluejays are in dire need of a defensive stopper. Echenique could develop into that kind of player inside but must work on overcoming an inconsistency of effort. Josh Jones could fill that need on the perimeter, but only if he can overcome the mental breakdowns that at times have hamstrung his overall development in his first three seasons in the program. Big-time players will get their points, but the Bluejays have to develop greater toughness to keep those points from coming in bunches.

- **EVEN AN IRONMAN NEEDS A BREAK OR TWO:** Young set a school record for minutes played this season, averaging almost 36 per game. Although he's a tireless worker and a guy who loves to play, the heavy workload did take its toll. Creighton needs to find him some relief, but the prospects aren't promising. Jahenns Manigat improved immensely, both as an offensive threat and as a defender. But the sophomore-to-be is more of an off guard than a point guard, and the Bluejays' offense suffered when McDermott put the controls in his hands. He'll continue to get better, but it might be asking too much to expect him to take much pressure off Young. Chatman has prototypical point guard skills, but it's always asking a lot to throw an incoming freshman into a pressure role. His slight build (6-0, 170) also will make him susceptible to getting pushed around by more experienced players. Creighton still has a scholarship to give but is looking for more of a shooter than a distributor. At this point, the best advice for Young is to rest up, because he stands to be just as important next season as this season.

- **CUT OFF AT THE PASS:** One of Creighton's biggest shortcomings this season was the lack of passing skills displayed by its wing players. McDermott offered a one-word solution for that problem. "Recruit," the coach said. Creighton stands to get better in that area with the addition of Gibbs, who has shown in practice a nice knack for passing. But Gibbs alone won't be able to shore up this shortcoming, and the Bluejays stand to waste some of the inside scoring punch of Doug McDermott and Echenique if the wing players can't consistently deliver the basketball. Echenique showed greater activity in establishing inside position during the CBI, but it does little good for him to work up a sweat if his teammates continue to miss him when he's open.

The Unsettled: Four uncertainties

- **A TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW:** Doug McDermott had a wonderful freshman season, but what should Creighton fans expect for an encore? An offseason of weight work will undoubtedly make him a stronger player, and he's already displayed a work ethic that separates the great ones from the good ones. Still, it might be asking a lot to expect McDermott to be significantly more productive as a sophomore than he was as a freshman. He will become more of a focal point offensively as the Bluejays will run more of the offense through him. In turn, that will increase the attention opposing defenses will pay in trying to neutralize McDermott's ability to be a difference-maker. The 6-7 forward will need to ratchet things up on defense to become less of a liability on that end of the court. If he can maintain the level of excellence at which he played this season, Creighton will have a better chance at moving closer to the level of play to which its fans had grown accustomed.

• **A QUESTION OF STYLE:** Greg McDermott's set-based offensive style had some Creighton fans grumbling about its slowness and predictability during the season. Then the Bluejays hit the CBI and put the pedal to the metal, showcasing a more entertaining style that produced an average of almost 90 points a game in the first four contests. That was partly due to the nature of the event — facing opponents unfamiliar with Creighton with limited preparation time. In such scenarios, offenses usually have the upper hand that they sometimes lack in conference play when teams are more familiar with personnel and tendencies. But it did raise the question of whether McDermott, having seen what some of his players are capable of doing when allowed a bit more freedom, might be apt to open things up a bit offensively next season. Finding a pace and style that best fits the personnel might be one of the bigger challenges facing the coaching staff heading into the offseason.

• **THE ART OF SCHEDULING:** Mid-major teams such as Creighton continually struggle to put together a schedule that provides them an opportunity to build an attractive postseason résumé that can elevate them above the limitations of the league. With the Valley gravitating more and more toward annual one-bid status for the NCAA tournament, the Bluejays need to get everything they can out of their nonconference games. Creighton will draw a high-profile opponent in San Diego State in the Mountain West-Valley Challenge next fall. But the rest of the schedule, as it now exists, hardly appears to be capable of lifting the Bluejays to greater heights. Creighton will face Iowa in an exempt tournament that also will see the Bluejays take on three low-major opponents. They also have home games on tap against Nebraska and Northwestern and road trips to Loyola and St. Joseph's. Filling in the gaps with teams that potentially could shine up the résumé has to be an offseason priority, but as McDermott said last week, that's usually easier said than done. And if they are successful in getting a high-profile team or two on the schedule, the Bluejays can't waste the opportunity as they have in recent seasons.

• **THE SEARCH FOR LEADERSHIP:** The lack of a commanding presence in the locker room has hurt the Bluejays in recent seasons. One or two players stepping forward in the coming months could be an important factor in the development of next season's team. Young has demonstrated repeatedly that he is capable of leading by action, and he has made strides in being more of a vocal leader during the course of the season. Players and coaches say Gibbs has the personality that might help fill this void, and Echenique, the most physically intimidating of the Bluejays, has started to become more demanding of himself and his teammates. One positive sign this season has been an increase in personal accountability — a number of players have taken it upon themselves to get into the gym on their own time to work on their games.

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