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George Schroeder: Winning CBI title gives Ducks' season a certain sheen

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The longest basketball season in Oregon's modern history ended with a mosh pit at midcourt. Right on top of that (almost) nonexistent stripe.

Oregon beat Creighton 71-69 Friday night. And then the Pit Crew stormed the court. Johnathan Loyd body-surfed atop the students. Joevan Catron accepted emotional hugs, one after another, from teammates. And everybody celebrated a moment of pure delirium.

Yeah, for a few moments, CBI fever was contagious.

Which only brings us to this: What's it mean? And what's next?

The buzz is back. Start there. The CBI is a minor-league tournament, but there was significance.

During what was supposed to be a season of transition, the Ducks executed a surprising turnaround, and won back an apathetic fan base. There's a sense the program has turned around, too, which only means this:

We should expect more.

If there's a warm glow from a bunch that exceeded very low expectations, great. Next season, the Ducks must be better — and that's not a given.

"We've got a lot of work to do," Dana Altman has said several times in the last few weeks. He said it again Friday, and he's right.

Back to that in a bit. First, let's acknowledge how far this team came, and what it accomplished.

There was a time — say, December — when plenty of people figured it might be the longest season, and that wasn't a good thing. The Ducks were picked to finish 10th in the Pac-10, and no one was arguing, not into early January.

But somehow, they became “dangerous,” according to Catron. “It’s tough to put into words,” he said of how the Ducks finished.

Along the way, we learned that the Ducks hired a very good coach in Altman. The program’s in good hands.

They also have a fantastic homecourt advantage — and no, we don’t mean the barely visible midcourt stripe.

The odd court’s weirdest feature finally affected a game. And at the most critical time, when Creighton’s Antoine Young committed a backcourt violation with 17.2 seconds left in a tie game.

That led to E.J. Singler’s driving layup with 2 seconds left, and the celebration just afterward, and then to this admission from Oregon’s sophomore forward:

“I’m happy they made the court like that,” Singler said. “It was kind of funny. (Young) had no clue he was behind halfcourt. You don’t see that anywhere else.”

No, you don’t. And don’t be surprised if by next season, we don’t see it here. Or rather, we can actually see the line.

But the Ducks have a homecourt advantage, and it’s a lot more than the court’s design. At times Friday night, the volume from 9,335 fans at Matthew Knight Arena approached crackling loud. You know, when your ears start buzzing.

Optimists will watch the Final Four today and note that VCU won the CBI last year.

But let’s also remember that Oregon State won two years ago. Then the Beavers went to the CBI again last year (and didn’t win it). And this season, they slipped back and didn’t play in the postseason.

Which team does Oregon become?

No one should expect VCU. But next season the CBI won’t do. This program’s standard is the NCAA Tournament — although given the returning roster, I’m not sure that’s realistic.

Almost everyone returns. But Oregon is going to miss Catron, and it’s hard to overestimate how much. It’s not just his points (a career-high 29 Friday) or the production on the floor.

Catron’s biggest contribution was leadership, emotion and a motor that never slowed, much less stopped.

The combination will be hard to replace. Which is why in the locker room after the game, Altman talked to the returning Ducks about the “investment” they have to make to capitalize on their success.

“It’s not gonna be good enough for us to be a little better,” the coach said. “We have to

be a lot better. Expectations are higher. That's a good thing.”

So was the CBI. So was the celebration. Asked how he would remember the season, Catron answered:

“Winning” — which is exactly right.

But then someone wondered if he'd ever experienced a similar postgame celebration. He had, way back as a freshman, when the Ducks beat No. 1-ranked UCLA at Mac Court.

That Oregon team, you'll recall, went on to the Elite Eight.

CBI fever was fun. Its meaning will be determined later.

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