

# Ocker: Don't downplay benefits of Oregon's CBI appearance

In my opinion | Pinch hitter

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When people talk about March Madness, the College Basketball Invitational is probably about the furthest thing from basketball fans' collective conscience. Don't let that fool you, however. The third-tier tournament is a valuable source of experience for teams, and it allows players to hold on just a little bit longer.

Without the National Invitation Tournament's strict rule of only extending bids to teams with above .500 records, the CBI has the third pick of postseason teams. Though the teams invited aren't NCAA Tournament-quality, that doesn't mean they're not quality teams — tournament finalists Creighton Bluejays finished 23-16 and the Oregon Ducks went 21-18.

"We did win 20 games, which I know we had to play a lot to get to 20, but we did win 20 games, so winning breeds winning," Oregon head coach Dana Altman said after Wednesday's game. "Hopefully, it will help us down the road. We've got a long ways to go with our program, we're not kidding anybody, but at least guys are playing hard."

While both teams have been able to pad their records with wins in the tournament, the biggest impact the CBI has on college basketball is giving practice time and postseason experience for growing teams.

Creighton's Greg McDermott and Oregon's Altman are both first-year coaches at their programs, and the two-plus weeks of meaningful practices both coaches have had with their teams will certainly make an impact next season. Incidentally, the tournament's last three champion coaches were in their first years at their schools. The six 2010 CBI teams that made this year's NCAA Tournament went 6-17 in the big dance, compared with NIT teams going 7-32 and CollegeInsiders.com Tournament teams going



Alex McDougall

Sophomore forward E.J. Singler was the hero of Oregon's Game 3 victory over Creighton on Friday. Singler hit a game-winning runner with two seconds remaining to put the Ducks ahead for good, 71-69.

1-16. This is demonstrated by the fairy-tale Final Four run of Virginia Commonwealth, which won the CBI in 2010.

"It's not the NCAA Tournament. It's not the NIT," Altman said after Wednesday's game. "We've got a long ways to go to elevate our program there, but it's an opportunity to play."

After winning the tournament Friday night, Altman did not change his tune.

"It does us no good if we just are satisfied with this; this is not where we want to be," Altman said. "It was exciting, it was fun, but we've got higher aspirations, just like Creighton does."

The games also matter to the players involved. The experience they acquire in a postseason setting can be helpful for the next season. The extra time in full practices gives players additional opportunities to work on their games with the coaching staff around to help them out.

"Tomorrow, it will be a month since we played in our conference tournament, so those four weeks for us, with the extra practices and the six extra games, have been invaluable," McDermott said.

Oregon sophomore forward E.J. Singler said the CBI gave his team an emotional boost heading into the offseason.

"I think this tournament really helped us really create a lot of confidence going into next year, giving us experience into the postseason," Oregon sophomore forward E.J. Singler said Friday. "And that was one of the reasons why we did it, was to get that experience."

Even in a losing effort, Creighton sophomore center Gregory Echenique was able to look at the tournament in a positive light for his team's future.

"We have to remember this feeling and pretty much use this for next year," Echenique said. "If we compete hard like this and remember this feeling, then we know that we won't want to be again in that locker room, sad because we lost. We're trying to make it to the NCAA, and that's our goal."

The factor of motivation for next season was something Creighton junior point guard Antoine Young pointed out after Friday's game.

"It's a big motivation, especially with this taste in your mouth coming back," Young said. "I think it will trend over to next year."

The teams were also able to generate an extra month of practice and six games' worth of postseason experience by playing in the tournament.

"I would say that a lot of people aren't playing right now and we are," Echenique said. "There's a lot of teams that wish they could be playing for something, and we had the chance."

These games take on a special significance for the seniors playing in them. Oregon's Joevan Catron and Jay-R Strowbridge are both fifth-year seniors with no shot at playing in the NBA; all five of Creighton's seniors are in the same position. Every extra chance they get to step on the court is an opportunity to live their dream for 40 more minutes.

"I definitely didn't want my season to end on a loss," Catron said Wednesday.

After winning the tournament Friday night, Catron looked back on his career at Oregon, and what the CBI offered him on a personal level.

"I'm glad we won. I just kind of had a reflection moment when I sat down, you know, looking over my career," Catron said Friday. "To end it this way is just great."

Catron's performance Friday was the best of his career, as he tallied a career-high 29 points in his final game in an Oregon uniform.

"I was just happy to end the season on this, on a win, (and) have Joe go out the right way," Singler said Friday. "I thought he had a tremendous game."

Creighton's Young also pointed out how the CBI offered a special moment for the Bluejays' seniors.

"It was good for our seniors to go out like that, play some extra games with us," Young said. "Most seniors don't know when their last game is going to be."

Apart from mattering to coaches and players, the games also matter for fans of the teams involved. The first game of the best-of-three finals in Omaha had 12,381 fans in attendance, a CBI record. It's a far cry from the 70,000-plus people at the Final Four, but saying nobody cares about these games would be a stretch.