



Loyola head coach Porter Moser reacts to a non-call by the officials in the first half of an NCAA college basketball game against Indiana State in the quarterfinals of the Missouri Valley Conference tournament, Friday, March 6, 2015, in St. Louis. (AP Photo/Tom Gannam)

BY DAN McGRATH

Postseason college basketball is being played in Chicago this year. You just have to look pretty hard to find it.

There were about 1,265 of us spread among the 4,486 seats of Loyola's revved-up Gentile Arena for the game Wednesday between the Ramblers and the Seattle Redhawks in a semifinal of something called the College Basketball Invitational.

I was there on business and kept my emotions to myself. But the noise level created by fellow spectators indicated they were thoroughly entertained by Loyola's 63-48 victory, which featured a game-sealing 14-0 run late in the second half and an on-every-loose-ball tenacity that suggested the Ramblers were committed to the task at hand, obscure as it might be.

"When all is said and done, we probably won't make any money, but it's good for us in so many other ways," athletic director Steve Watson said. "A lot of teams might not have been too excited to play in this tournament, but our kids have bought in. When was the last time you saw this gym this excited?"

The 16-team CBI is the brainchild of the Gazelle Group, a Princeton, New Jersey-based marketing and promotions firm. The first three rounds are single elimination, then it gets a little hokey with a best-of-three final series that dilutes the win-or-go-home urgency that makes postseason college ball so enticing.

It might rank light-years, galaxies and solar systems behind the NCAA tournament and even its dowdy stepsister, the National Invitation Tournament, as a prestige event, but don't tell its participants the CBI is of no consequence.

"I'd equate it to a bowl game in football," said Seattle coach Cameron Dollar, who played the big room as a guard for UCLA's 1995 national champions. "First of all, it means you had a good season. It's a chance to reward your seniors and continue to develop your younger guys. It's been a great experience."

Loyola sees it as an opportunity to extend a turnaround season. The victory against Seattle gave the Ramblers 22 victories, their highest total since the Alfredrick Hughes-led 1985 team won 27 while reaching the Sweet 16 of the NCAA tournament. In their second year as a Missouri Valley member, Loyola won eight conference games, doubling its total of last season.

"Anytime you can keep playing, keep practicing in March, experience that 'win or go home' feeling, it's a positive," coach Porter Moser said. "I have not had that 'Here we go again' feeling one time this season. These guys expect to win. That's another sign that the culture is changing."

However they're achieved, 20-plus victories should prevent Moser from having to relive the worst experience of his coaching career. Hired at Illinois State as a 35-year-old in 2003, Moser had a 36-52 record after three rebuilding seasons. The Redbirds hired a new athletic director in 2006. Sheahon Zenger, a former football coach, wanted his own man in the basketball office, and Moser was fired after a 15-16 season in 2006-07. Successor Tim Jankovich won 71 games in his first three seasons with a roster that was largely Moser's creation.

Watson is a basketball guy, having played collegiately at Rutgers and Bowling Green and overseas as a pro for seven years. He might be inclined to want his own guy in the basketball office, but he seems to think he already has him there.

"We're working on an extension," Watson said. "I've had some conversation with Porter's guy. I think we'll get something done."

Moser has three years left on his current contract. He said he doesn't want to be anywhere else.

"There are a lot of steps we still have to take, beginning with winning more games, being stronger and tougher and consistently competitive and filling this building," Moser said. "But I'm working at a Jesuit school, in my hometown, in the conference I played in. I've hit the trifecta."

Loyola faces Louisiana-Monroe in Game 1 of the CBI finals Monday, then travels to Louisiana for Game 2 on Wednesday. If a third game is necessary, it will be played Friday in Louisiana.

Be it ever so humble, the Ramblers are planning to hang a banner. There's room for a few in Gentile Arena.