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STAGE IS SET

Raucous Don Haskins Center will be scene of CBI finals

By Bill Knight / El Paso Times Posted: 04/02/2009 11:14:45 PM MDT



The Don Haskins Center was sold out for Game 2 of the CBI title series Wednesday. It will be filled to capacity again Friday in the deciding game for the series between UTEP and Oregon State. (Brian Kanof / Special to the Times)

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EL PASO -- Excitement surrounds UTEP's Don Haskins Center, wrapping its tingling tentacles around the old arena like a Ringling Brothers tent.

UTEP and Oregon State will play one final basketball game Friday night at 8 p.m., one more chance to play the game they love in front of a loud and enthusiastic throng of 12,000 people. This will be the final game of the best-of-three College Basketball Invitational championship series. Oregon State took game one 75-69 Monday night in Corvallis. UTEP took game two 70-63 Wednesday night in El Paso.

It is not the NCAA Tournament, not that biggest of dances. It is not even the consolation prize that is the NIT. But it is basketball and people are excited. Players are always excited to play games. They will grow old long before that feeling will drift out of their souls. Fans are obviously excited, too. Friday night's game sold out by mid-afternoon Thursday.

Hoop fever seems to have somehow gripped the hearts of Miner fans again, that same fever that had students

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camping out for tickets in the 1980's and that had sellouts common place for more than four decades. These are the first back-to-back sellouts at the Haskins Center since 2006 -- Feb. 25 for Houston and March 1 for Tulsa. It is the 108th sellout since the doors opened in the Haskins Center in 1977.

This UTEP-Oregon State duel has been a fine basketball chess match. The Beavers are under first year coach Craig Robinson and it is clear they have gotten steadily better as the season has worn

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on, picking up his offense and perfecting the 1-3-1 zone they use so much. Robinson took a team that was 0-for-the-Pac-10 a year ago, a team that was 0-16 in conference play. They struggled a little early but now, at 17-18, the Beavers are a poised and patient team. They shot well early against the Miners and the 1-3-1 again caused some problems. They had chances to prevent Friday night's excitement from happening.

UTEP, a team with senior Stefon Jackson and a band of sophomores and freshmen, is also playing very good basketball -- perhaps its best basketball of the year. The Miners are now 23-13. They extended their defensive pressure Wednesday night and got a little more

transition. And they got the win that created this Friday night frenzy.

Miner coach Tony Barbee said, "We wanted to be more aggressive and we extended our defense. We just decided to trap. Getting our defense in the full court led to us being more aggressive."

The Miners made a run and took the lead and the building was as loud as it has been in years. But Oregon State remained patient and the Beavers were right there at the end with a chance to close this series out early.

Talking about his team's patience, Robinson said, "If you were choosing teams on the playground, there's no question you would pick the athletes (in the Miner lineup). So we have to play with patience. But our guys are playing well and we had every opportunity to win."

Jackson, who scored 28 points Wednesday night, struggled in Corvallis and struggled early Wednesday before beginning his attack on the bucket.

"I never felt like I had to carry my team," Jackson said. "I've got great teammates."

Eventually, Jackson became Jackson again -- driving and scoring and getting to the free throw line. That was another factor. UTEP's attacking offense got the Miners back to the free throw line. UTEP shot only nine free throws in Corvallis but 37 in El Paso. UTEP leads the nation in free throws attempted (995) and free throws made (717). It is an integral part of their game.

UTEP also has a number of record setters ready for this last hoop fiesta. Jackson, of course, is the all-time leader at UTEP and in Conference USA with 2,430 points. Sophomore Randy Culpepper, who has already gone over 1,000 points, is tied with Antoine Gillespie for the school's all-time 3-point record with 168. Sophomore Julian Stone has 227 assists this season -- two short of tying Filiberto Rivera for the single season record at 229.

Those are accomplishments, things to watch. But, more than anything, 12,000 El Pasoans have shown they are excited about watching one more college basketball game.

Both Tony Barbee and Craig Robinson said they asked each of their players if they wanted to play more basketball before this tournament even began. The answer was unanimous.

And so players and fans alike will get to enjoy one more game this season and they will get to add another deafening night of excitement to their memory bouquets.

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