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CBI helped pave way for CU's run to NCAAs

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Creighton's Jahenns Manigat scores against the Oregon during last year's CBI. Antoine Young said the tournament helped the Jays build momentum for the 2011-12 season.

Creighton's development into a NCAA tournament team this season has roots that can be traced back to last spring.

That's when the Bluejays were playing in the College Basketball Invitational, one of the alternative tournaments that have sprouted up the past few years. It can be a humbling experience, as the participating teams have been judged unworthy of spots in the more established NCAA and National Invitation Tournaments.

That can leave some teams approaching the event short on enthusiasm. Instead, the Bluejays embraced the opportunity. They won their first three games to make the championship series. They defeated Oregon and their former coach in the first game of the series, then lost two straight to fall just short of the title.

Looking back, the Bluejays say now, the CBI proved valuable in a number of ways.

"It was an opportunity to keep playing," Creighton guard Antoine Young said. "And it gave us some momentum going into the offseason."

It also gave Creighton almost a month of additional practice. It allowed the coaches to start blending players such as redshirts Will Artino and Grant Gibbs into the practice mix. Ethan Wragge, who missed most of the season with a foot injury, also had a chance to see some practice time.

The players due to return this season often were matched up against the team's five seniors and walk-ons.

"That gave Ethan, Will and Grant a chance start playing with our other players," Creighton coach Greg McDermott said. "We started to develop a little bit of chemistry as a group."

Another upside of the CBI was that it gave a team that had experienced an up-and-down 2010-11 season a chance to finish on an uptick. Creighton scored double-digit victories against San Jose State, Davidson and Central Florida to reach the championship series.

There, the Bluejays faced an Oregon team coached by Dana Altman, who had left Creighton after 16 seasons. Creighton opened the best-of-three series with an 84-76 win in Omaha before losing 71-58 in the second game at Oregon.

The Bluejays lost the deciding third game 71-69 on a basket in the final seconds.

"That was a good experience for our team," McDermott said. "Any time you have an opportunity to win a championship, regardless of whether it was in the CBI or some other tournament, it helps your program develop."

Just ask VCU. The Rams played in — and won — the 2010 CBI. They wound up making it to the Final Four of the NCAA tournament last spring.

It's premature to predict that Creighton will follow a similar path this season, although anybody who has watched the Bluejays can see the growth the team has made.

They've won 28 games compared to 19 at a similar point last spring. The Bluejays had difficulty closing out tight games last season, losing eight times

in contests decided by five points or fewer.

This season, the Creighton is 7-1 in games decided by four points or fewer.

"We lost a lot of close games last year," McDermott said. "You hope that you learn from those experiences and you make the changes necessary that when you get in that situation again, you don't make the same mistakes.

"We've had some good fortune at times, and we've made some of our own good luck at the same time."

One of the experiences Creighton didn't forget was the disappointment it brought back from the Missouri Valley tournament last March. The Bluejays knew that their only shot of making the NCAA tournament was to win the Valley's automatic berth, but they lost in the semifinals.

This season, Creighton swept through the tournament, winning a tight quarterfinal game against Drake, routing Evansville in the semifinals and outlasting Illinois State in overtime to win the championship.

"Even though last year we were disappointed that we lost, we got a chance to play more basketball afterwards, and that really helped our team," Creighton center Gregory Echenique said. "That definitely made this team a lot better. Coming into this year, we knew that we were capable of winning this tournament.

"Also, we remembered how we felt then, and we didn't want it to happen again."

The Bluejays made sure it didn't, and McDermott made sure after Creighton wrapped up the title that he recognized five players who are no longer around. When McDermott took over the program in the spring of 2010, he inherited five seniors — Kenny Lawson, Kaleb Korver, Wayne Runnels, Casey Harriman and Darryl Ashford.

"If those guys don't embrace us, there is no chance of us moving this program forward as quickly as we have," McDermott said. "Even though we didn't win as much as we wanted last year, those guys accepted their roles, even if they didn't like them all the time.

"That leadership and example has been critical to the leaders that we have on our team today. Those five deserve as much credit for our success as anybody."

• **NOTES:** Creighton sophomore Doug McDermott was named a second-team All-American by The Sporting News on Tuesday. He also was named to the United States Basketball Writers Association's all-district team. That honor puts him in line to be considered for USBWA All-America honors. Two Wichita State players — Joe Ragland and Garrett Stutz — were also named all-district. ... McDermott was also among the 15 finalists announced Tuesday for the John R. Wooden Award given annually to the nation's best player. Ohio State's Jared Sullinger and freshman Austin Rivers of Duke and teammates Michael Kidd-Gilchrist and Anthony Davis of Kentucky also are finalists. The winner will be announced on ESPN at the Final Four in New Orleans, and the award will be presented April 6. The rest of the finals are: Damian Lillard of Weber State, Scott Machado of Iona, Isaiah Canaan of Murray State, Jae Crowder of Marquette, Marcus Denmon of Missouri, Draymond Green of Michigan State, Kevin Jones of West Virginia, Kris Joseph of Syracuse, Thomas Robinson of Kansas and Tyler Zeller of North Carolina.

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