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Oregon State head coach Craig Robinson and team stand outside Reser Stadium with the CBI Championship trophy. Robinson led Oregon State from a winless Pac-10 schedule last season to a championship in the College Basketball Invitational.

From zero wins to champions

First-year coach Craig Robinson takes OSU from Pac-10 cellar to CBI champions

By: Terry Horstman

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Fifty years from now, there will more than likely be many more banners hanging high in the ancient rafters of legendary Gill Coliseum, but what will always be the most unforgettable will be the one baring the 2009 College Basketball Invitational championship.

Year one of the Craig Robinson era wasn't supposed to be memorable; it was supposed to be a slightly improved version of the exact same roster that went winless in the Pac-10 last season. They weren't supposed to beat the Ducks and they weren't supposed to play in the postseason. But it appears that Robinson and the 2008 Oregon State Beavers missed that memo.

Missing that memo was good enough for the fifth-best one-season turnaround in Pac-10 history. The season included a complete sweep of the Bay Area schools, the first Civil War victory in over two years and a CBI run that, no matter how good Robinson's future teams are, will never be forgotten by Beaver Nation.

"Last year we had a horrible season," said sophomore shooting guard Lathen Wallace. "This year we're playing in the championship for the CBI - it's just great."

The CBI championship summed up the 2009 season perfectly for the Beavers, especially the memorable performance by senior point guard Rickey Claitt in his last game as a Beaver.

"I was shooting and everything was going in," Claitt told reporters following the CBI championship. "I kept shooting until I missed. This is phenomenal for us. This rockets us into next year."

While year two will no doubt be exciting with the momentum built from this year and with the top-25 recruiting class on its way to Corvallis, there's no way to measure just how meaningful the year one group of guys was in rebuilding the history of one of the best programs in the country.

"It's pretty interesting how life and games can take on a life of their own," said Robinson. "Everyone I talked to said this was a bad group of guys and yet this is a team that went 0-18 last year and almost won 10 games this year. So when people ask me to look back on this team, I'll be looking back pretty fondly on this group of guys."

Beaver Nation will be looking back pretty fondly as well, as this group of guys restored the lost pride in Gill Coliseum. From top to bottom, the legendary arena roared to life on a regular basis with a sound not heard in Corvallis in the past couple decades; that sound was noise, and lots of it.

"It's amazing to see that many people here and it's almost full," junior center Roeland Schaftenaar said. "We're really happy for our seniors to play their last game here like that; we're really thankful for the people that come."

The people who came saw quite a show time and again in 2009, from all the close, thrilling victories to players diving after loose balls in the third row. Robinson's year-one team that was supposed to be the team nobody wanted took us all on one of the most fun rides in the history of college basketball, and this year-one team silenced critics with each matchup it took onto the court.

"By the time I got to know them, I couldn't run any of them off because I liked the people that they were and figured we wanted to build this program around some good people, so pretty early on I liked these guys," Robinson said. "It was sometime in the fall I realized people were really wrong about these guys and we could get something going."

Getting something going would be the understatement of the century for the 2009 Beavers. The team finished 18-18 overall, 12 wins better than last season. In conference play the Beavers finished with a 7-11 record, and it doesn't take a mathematician to figure out how much better that is than last year.

However, most of all, Robinson did what OSU hired him to do - he beat the Ducks - but he hardly stopped there. Robinson got this team to believe, he got them to win and in one year he turned the team that nobody wanted into one of the best stories in college basketball.

Years from now, Robinson could be coaching teams in the NCAA tournament, during a time when expectations could be as high as the Final Four. There may be countless banners of bigger achievements to come, but no other team will have the opportunity to restore the heart of Oregon State basketball; that achievement belongs to the 2009 Oregon State Beavers and Robinson's so-called "year-one guys." The 2009 CBI championship banner will hang forever in the rafters of Gill Coliseum in tribute to this one, very special year.

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