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MEN'S HOOPS: CBI wins following at UVa

By Whitelaw Reid / wreid@dailyprogress.com | 978-7250
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The Daily Progress/Andrew Shurtleff UVa forward Mamadi Diane (left) has improved his form during the CBI tournament.

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After Virginia's shocking come-from-behind victory over Old Dominion on Monday night in the College Basketball Invitational, ODU coach Blaine Taylor talked about how it has become chic to be cynical of the first-year postseason tournament.

He was certainly right about that.

Before Taylor and Virginia coach Dave Leitao entered the room for their postgame press conferences, media members wondered aloud if UVa players had cut down the nets inside of John Paul Jones Arena.

They joked about players possibly donning Final Four hats and commemorative T-shirts, and whether or not Virginia would hang a CBI championship banner from the rafters next season.

Of course, the CBI - an event for schools that didn't make the NCAA or NIT - had previously been dubbed the "Can't Believe It" tournament.



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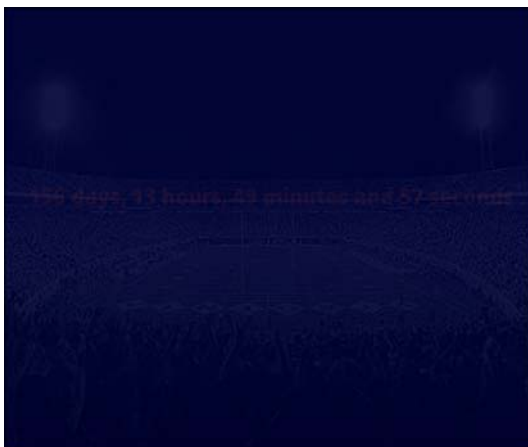


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"I'll tell you what," said Taylor, following his team's 80-76 quarterfinal loss. "I had a hard time watching that game thinking that wasn't an experience that the kids didn't enjoy and wasn't worthwhile."

Taylor was right about that, too.

Thirteen days ago, Virginia's season seemed like it had ended on a

major downer with a first-round loss to Georgia Tech in the ACC Tournament.

But now, after wins over Richmond and ODU in the CBI, UVa has regained a pulse. Ditto for its fan base.

Sean Singletary is mostly to thank for that. The senior co-captain's late-game heroics against ODU have made even the most cynical of folks rethink their feelings about the CBI.

Tonight, Virginia (17-15) looks to keep the good times rolling when it hosts Bradley in the semifinals. The winner will take on the Houston-Tulsa winner in a best-of-three championship series beginning March 31.

"It feels good to be in the Final Four. There are only like 20 or 30-something teams still playing out there," said Virginia junior Lars Mikalauskas, referring to the remaining participants in the NCAA Tournament, NIT and CBI.

"Like our coach [Leitao] said, 'Georgetown is a good team, but they're not playing anymore.' We're still playing and still practicing. We still have a chance to play and become champions and finish the season as champions."

Mikalauskas and with teammates Mamadi Diane and Jamil Tucker were solid in the win over ODU. Each scored in double figures and helped keep Virginia within striking distance until Singletary could take over.

The trio had come off the bench for much of the season until taking over for starters Ryan Pettinella, Mike Scott and Adrian Joseph at the start of Monday's second half. The unit helped propel the team to a 57-51 lead after Virginia had trailed by eight points at the break.

Nobody has seemed to benefit from the lengthier season more than Diane. The mercurial junior has struggled to find consistency since he stepped foot on campus, but seems to be finding a groove in the more relaxed CBI atmosphere.

Diane has scored in double figures in his last six games - tying a career best.

On Monday, he could be seen smiling as he ran down the court after an authoritative, two-handed dunk.

"I really think I am just having fun out there - guys being able to extend [the season] out and play with the seniors," Diane said. "It's just been fun."

"Every game I think I find myself smiling a lot more out there."

The same can be said for the cynics - slowly, but surely.

Dunks

On Monday, Bradley

(19-15) overcame a 14-point second-half deficit to defeat Ohio and advance to tonight's semifinals. The Braves, from the Missouri Valley Conference, haven't played an ACC school since 1995 when they defeated Georgia Tech. Bradley, which beat Cincinnati in its first-round game, is 11-4 all-time versus the ACC. "They have great balance and a very high-octane offense," Leitao said. "They shoot almost 25 three-pointers a game and they make almost 40 percent of them so you really have to guard the three-point line. They do, almost like Duke does, stretch you out and try to play advantage basketball that way. On defense we will certainly have our work cut out for us."...Bradley ranks 15th among Division I programs in 3-pointers per game (9.1). Virginia is 42nd (8.2)...UVA is 0-1 all-time against Bradley. The lone meeting occurred in the 1946-47 season.

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