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UH considers CBI a head start for next season

Cougars find any postseason experience vital

By MICHAEL MURPHY Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle
March 17, 2009, 10:55PM

TIM JOHNSON AP

Houston coach Tom Penders says any postseason experience for his young team will help them prepare for next season.

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Last year's trip to the College Basketball Invitational tournament was a parting gift for the five seniors on the Houston Cougars' roster. When the Cougars accepted a bid to this year's CBI field, UH coach Tom Penders described it as more of a housewarming gift for next year's group.

The Cougars (21-11) open this year's CBI with a trip to Corvallis, Ore., where they will play the Oregon State Beavers (13-17) tonight in Gill Coliseum in a first-round game of the West Regional.

Penders and the Cougars are looking at the game — and however many more they play — as a chance to get a head start on next season.

"We have so many new players (this year) that any kind of postseason experience is good for them," Penders said. "Last year it was more like a reward for the disappointment at the end (not getting a bid to the NCAA Tournament or the NIT) and gave our seniors an opportunity to play on.

"This year it's about improving for next year because except for (seniors) Marcus (Cousin) and DaShaun (Williams), we'll get everyone else back. I think it's valuable because of the extra practice time.

"We've already had some practices and now we'll have a game. We'll see where it goes from there."

If the Cougars win tonight's game, they advance to play the winner of the first-round game between Green Bay and Vermont.

The Cougars won their first two games in last year's CBI, at Nevada (80-79) and then at home over Valparaiso (91-67), before losing to eventual champion Tulsa (73-69).

The players who weren't around for last year's postseason run want a taste of it for themselves.

"This is all new to me," said Cougars' guard Aubrey Coleman, who is averaging 19.7 points and 8.5 rebounds, both team-highs. "Like the conference tournament — that was exciting to me, even though we didn't get by Memphis (losing 74-49 in the semifinals).

"I don't know what this (the CBI) is like. I'm excited to play in it."

Oregon State, coached by Craig Robinson, employs a deliberate offense, with an emphasis on picks, backdoor cuts and shot-clock utilization. The Beavers use a 1-3-1 zone defense that has guard Seth Tarver, one of the Pac-10 leaders in steals, at the point.

Even though they finished with a sub-.500 record, the Beavers, who beat NCAA Tournament-bound teams Cal (twice) and Southern California, were the surprise of the Pac-10 after last year's 6-24 season (0-18 in conference play).

"They're one of the most-improved teams in the nation," Penders said. "They went from no wins in the Pac-10 to seven.

"And they'll have a packed house there."

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