

Tulsa claims inaugural CBI Championship

TULSA, Okla. - One by one, Tulsa's players climbed a ladder to cut down their own portion of the nets. It wasn't to commemorate a trip to the Final Four or a conference championship, but the feeling from college basketball's newest postseason tournament was still filled with the same level of joy. Remnants of a sellout crowd chanted "TU! TU!" and cheered with each snip of the nets as the Golden Hurricane celebrated a 70-64 win over Bradley on Friday night and the first ever championship of the College Basketball Invitational.

"It's been a long season, but it is great to win any kind of championship," senior Rod Earls said. "I'm going to miss playing with these guys."

Third-year Tulsa coach Doug Wojcik pumped his fist repeatedly and mouthed "Thank you" during his time atop the ladder, the culmination of a groundswell of support created by his team's participation in the CBI.

"The energy in the building, the fans, the excitement, the enthusiasm, that's why you do what you do as a coach," Wojcik said. "This is a special moment in my life and hopefully a lot of people's lives in this building tonight that they'll never forget."

Ben Uzoh scored 17 points and Tulsa (25-14) rallied after falling behind 162 to make it a drama-filled game fitting of a championship.

Earls hit a 3-pointer from the left side to give Tulsa a 60-59 edge with 2:24 to play, and Uzoh followed by going 1-for-2 at the foul line.

Bradley had two chances to tie it at the other end, but Jeremy Crouch missed a jumper and a tip-in attempt by Theron Wilson also was off target. Earls got fouled on the rebound and hit both of his free throws to stretch the lead to four.

Brett McDade hit two more foul shots after a missed 3-pointer by Daniel Ruffin, the point guard from Bradley's team that upset Kansas and Pittsburgh in the 2006 NCAA tournament, and Tulsa hit enough free throws after that to clinch its third postseason tournament title.

The team was presented with a crystal trophy and a banner to hoist in the rafters alongside ones commemorating the school's NIT championships in 1981 and 2001.

"CBI, NIT, NCAA, it didn't really matter to me," forward Calvin Walls said. "I said, 'You know, if we're going to be in this tournament, it gives us an opportunity to go out there and show people what we could do and how good of a team we are and that we could win a championship, no matter what tournament it was.'"

Each game of the best-of-three championship series was won by the home team, and Tulsa had its second sellout crowd of the season at the Reynolds Center to create a raucous atmosphere. Fans from the student section stormed the court at the final buzzer.

Walls and Earls each scored 14 points in their final collegiate game, and tournament MVP Jerome Jordan added 11 points, 12 rebounds and eight blocks for the Golden Hurricane.

Wilson led Bradley (21-17) with 17 points, Andrew Warren scored 14 and Ruffin added 10. "Other than the loss, it is a great way for our seniors to stow away in their memory bank college basketball," Braves coach Jim Les said. "For our young guys, it is only going to benefit them as we head into next season."

Tulsa, which was ahead of at-large NIT selections Nebraska and Minnesota in the NCAA's official RPI ratings, felt it was deserving of a bid in the older tournament but embraced the chance to return to the postseason. The program had fallen on hard times after a decade-long run that included eight NCAA tournament bids, the last one coming in 2003, and Wojcik was brought in after back-to-back nine-win seasons. "

"Coming in, I just saw the history of the program. It was NCAA tournament after NCAA tournament. I didn't get to experience that early but coach came, the wins started stacking up and here we are now," said senior Brett McDade. "I think they're going to keep rising. Next year, I know they're looking to go to NCAA tournament."

"It's just great to be part of the foundation."

After a surprising run to the Conference USA championship game, the team's momentum built and average attendance for the CBI was higher than the regular season. Game 3 attracted the first sellout crowd in several years for an opponent outside the top 10. Memphis drew a sellout earlier this season, and Oklahoma and Gonzaga also filled every seat for games in the past four years.

On one possession at the end of a 5-minute, second half stretch that featured 11 lead changes, the crowd of 8,455 was loud enough that Wojcik's team couldn't hear him hollering instructions from the end of the floor in front of the Tulsa bench.

"This is priceless for us," Wojcik said. "This tournament, for people like Bradley and for people like Tulsa, it is the best thing going. We would both have been in the NIT anyway had that not changed, and this is better because we've been able to play on home courts."