OU women eye national crown

By C.J. Risak
staff writer

Getting this far brings with it a multitude of problems — emotional, physical, strategic.

But perhaps the most important thing for Oakland University's women's basketball team to remember is perspective. Keep the hoopla that accompanies a trip to Los Angeles to play in the NCAA Division II Final Four where it deserves to be — as secondary stuff, after the games. Don't get beat because you didn't give it your best shot.

"We're going to control (the team's perspective) as a coaching staff as best we can," said OU's Bob Taylor. "We can't think of this as a joyride. We can look back on it afterwards and reflect.

"The thing we're out there to do first is play Bentley."

Which is what the Lady Pioneers are scheduled to do at 6 p.m. (9 p.m. Detroit time) Friday. Host-team California State Polytechnic Institute-Pomona battles defending NCAA II champion Delta State (of Cleveland, Miss.) at 8 p.m. (Pacific Time) Friday.

WINNERS MEET for the NCAA II title at 8 p.m. (PT) Saturday. Losers play a consolation contest at 6 p.m. (PT) Saturday.

OU advanced to the Final Four with a determined 66-61 victory over Central Missouri State Friday in Warrensburg, Mo. Senior center Debbie Delie provided the spark, pouring in a game-high 28 points, grabbing 13 rebounds and blocking four shots, as OU improved to 27-4 and reached the NCAA II semis for the first time since 1982.

The Lady Pioneers' first-round foes, Bentley College (of Waltham, Mass.), is 30-3 (with 22 wins in a row) after a 74-69 homecourt triumph over Bellarmine (Ind.) Saturday. Cal Poly-Pomona improved to 28-3 with a 67-64 win at home over North Dakota Saturday, while Delta rocked Lock Haven (Pa.) 80-59 Saturday, upping its record to 30-1.

Is OU the longshot? Considering the Lady Pioneers are the only one of the four teams that wasn't in the NCAA II semifinals last year and that they have the worst record and lowest ranking (18th in the final poll) in the field, well, probably.

BUT THERE are certain factors favoring OU. Like its road record: The Lady Pioneers were the only team to win its quarterfinal game on the road.

Then there's the Delie factor. She has the highest scoring average among those in the Final Four, pumping in 22.4 points per game while making 63.7 percent of her shots; her 9.5 rebounds per game ties her with Pomona's Niki Bracken as the tourney's best. Delie's been even more effective in NCAA II play, averaging 31.3 points and 11.3 rebounds in three wins.

And finally, there's the longshot factor. Not just their underdog status, which should work in the Lady Pioneers' favor, but actual long shots. None of the other semifinalists has attempted *half* as many three-pointers as OU. Delta State has hit a better percentage (36.7 to OU's 34.6), but the Lady Statesmen have attempted only 87 three-pointers all season. OU has tried 439.

One thing is certain: OU will have to be clicking on all cylinders to win a championship. Taylor wasn't even thinking about that, however; he was focusing only on Bentley.

"THEY'RE VERY patient," he said of Bentley. "They like to run a fast break, but if its not there they'll pull it out."

What concerned Taylor about the Falcons was "their depth. And the Bellarmine coach (Charlie Just) told me their man-to-man pressure was the best he's seen all year."

Injuries could be a problem for Bentley. Starting senior guard Lisa Gagnon (10.3 points per game) broke her left hand two weeks ago, but the right-handed shooter still played 22 minutes against Bellarmine. Sophomore forward Cathy Sterner (8.6 points, 6.4 rebounds), however, injured a knee and is out. Sterner was the Falcons' top reserve.

Leading Bentley's balanced attack are 6-foot-1 senior center Stacy Pahl, 6-0 junior forward Cheryl Boettger and 5-9 sophomore guard-forward Tracie Seymour. Pahl averages 12.5 points (54.3 percent floor shooting) and 4.6 rebounds; Boettger, 12.3 points (62.2 percent) and 6.7 boards; and Seymour 11.2 points and 5.2 rebounds.

"I think we're going to have to shoot well," said Taylor, still concerned over OU's 0-for-11 three-point shooting against Central Missouri. "And we're going to have to defensive rebound better than we did against Central Missouri."

FRIDAY'S OTHER semifinal pits the top-ranked teams in the NCAA II against one another. Pomona lost to Delta State 88-58 in last year's final, but that was played at Delta.

Pomona, winners of its last 21 games, has three national titles and three second-place finishes to its credit. The Broncos are led by their 6-2 senior forward, Bracken (19 points, 9.5 rebounds) and 6-1 senior center Marcine Edmonds (13.6 points, 6.9 boards).

Delta has been dominating this season, outscoring opponents by an average of 86.5 points to 60.3 and outrebounding them 49.5 to 32.6. The Lady Statesmen have 26 straight victories, thanks to the play of 6-0 senior forward Crystal Hardy (15.5 points, 7.3 boards), 6-0 senior center Pam Lockett (15.1, 8.8) and 6-0 senior forward Anita Robinson (13.0, 7.1).

For the Lady Pioneers, it all boils down to a very simple realization: They are the inexperienced newcomers, the underdogs. Staying focused on the simple, immediate goals will be pivotal. And hitting their perimeter shots would help, too.

NCAA DIVISION II
WOMEN'S BASKETBALL
FINAL FOUR TOURNAMENT

Friday's semifinals: Oakland University vs. Bentley College (Waltham, Mass.), 6 p.m. (9 p.m. Detroit time); California State Polytechnic-Pomona vs. Delta State (Cleveland, Miss.), 8 p.m. (11 p.m. Detroit time).

Saturday's games: Consolation final, 6 p.m. (9 p.m. Detroit time); Championship, 8 p.m. (11 p.m. Detroit time).

Where: All games at Cal Poly-Pomona.

Records: OU is 27-4 and was ranked 18th in the final NCAA II poll; Bentley is 30-3 and was ranked fifth; Cal Poly-Pomona is 28-3 and was ranked second; and Delta State is 30-1 and ranked No. 1.

Last year's NCAA II championship: Delta State defeated Cal Poly-Pomona 88-58 at Delta to win its first-ever championship in women's basketball.

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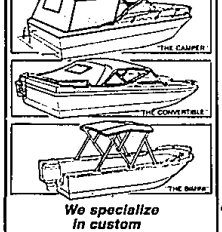

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Pioneers make foe regret boast

C.J. Risak

ASK AROUND for reasons why Oakland University dumped Central Missouri State in Friday's NCAA Division II quarterfinal game and you'd end up with a wide variety of opinions, ranging from statistical (OU's shooting was far more accurate) to strategic (the Lady Pioneers played better defense).

Don't overlook this one, though: OU's determination to win.

Which is not to say the Jennies are not winners. Problem was, they *expected* to win. And that is a dangerous attitude — as any coach should know.

Apparently, CMS's Jon Pye didn't realize it. According to several sources, the Jennies' coach and some of his staff members openly and brashly predicted during the week preceding the OU game that winning the quarterfinal would allow them to host the Final Four.

As OU coach Bob Taylor, one of the witnesses to the boast, put it, "It was like putting the cart before the horse. I think we kind of caught them looking ahead."

UNDERSTAND, WORD travels fast in Warrensburg, population 13,807. This was one tiny town, no more than a rest stop for truckers traveling between St. Louis and Kansas City, surrounded and isolated by farmland.

How small? Heck, there's only one McDonald's!

What wasn't small, however, was the Jennies' following. Not too surprising, I suppose; after all, they and their male basketball counterparts (called the Mules, naturally) are the only shows in town. Kansas City is the closest metropolis, 100 miles west.

So CMS teams are treated first-rate. They're catered to and pampered, with every marquee around listing game times and dates along with best-of-luck wishes.

Then there's their arena — not gym, mind you, but *arena*. Most of the town could fit into it; there's room for 8,500. That's bigger than most Mid-American Conference arenas. The scoreboard was elaborate, too; not the kind that hangs on the wall, but from the roof, NBA-style.

AND YET, as good as their facility looked, and as good as their record was (29-2 coming into the game, including 19-straight wins at home), and as favorable as all factors seemed to be, the Jennies weren't up to the task of beating OU.

The Lady Pioneers did not play well. But after a shaky, nervous start, they knew what had to be done, and they did it. They focused on the game and their opponent, not their environment and situation — or the future.

It takes leadership to accomplish this. The Lady Pioneers have it, and it radiates from an inspirational source: senior point guard Dawn Lichty.

Lichty is from the lead-by-example school. No one could do it better. Her accomplishments leave OU coach Bob Taylor choking with emotion.

"It's unbelievable what she's doing," Taylor said after the quarterfinal win. "I get tears when I think about it. I don't think people realize what she's doing.

"She's playing without an anterior cruciate (after a knee injury). For a forward or center it might not be so bad. But as a point guard, she has to cut a lot and that is a real strain."

Lichty, a Troy native and Zion Christian HS grad, has not just dealt with the injury, which she suffered in pre-season workouts. She is not just getting by. She has excelled, particularly since OU lost starting point guard Ann Serra, also to an torn anterior cruciate knee injury.

TAYLOR WAS worried when Serra went down. They had others who could play the point, but none with Serra's ability (she was among the NCAA II leaders in assists). And Lichty's status after her injury was still in doubt, even though she had been playing most of the season.

Lichty put Taylor's worries to rest. OU hardly lost a beat with her playing point. She doesn't possess Serra's ability at handling and passing the ball — few guards in the NCAA II do — but she retained her defensive prowess (twice named to the all-Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference all-defense team) and added more scoring at the position.

Indeed, Lichty turned in a superb regional performance but was overshadowed by teammates Debbie Delie and Jennifer Golen, the co-MVPs. Lichty proved just as valuable. She connected on all seven of her floor shots in the two wins — and four of them were three-pointers. She also dished out 25 assists, 17 in one game.

In the tournament, Lichty is averaging 10.3 points (on 72.7 percent floor shooting), 10.7 assists and 2.0 steals a game.

And yet, don't mistake Lichty for a true point guard. Her 13 turnovers in tournament play indicate she would be better suited to off-guard.

But her ability to ignore her injury, dismissing it with a shrug, show she has traits imperative for a championship team — a determination to win and to disregard all other factors. Hopefully, her desire will prove infectious among the Lady Pioneers.

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