

Perseverance pays off for Penguins with trip to NWAACC tournament

Clark College men rely on versatility during trying year

By KURT ZIMMER

Columbian staff writer

Battling against a size disadvantage throughout an injury-plagued season, the Clark College men's basketball team clawed its way into the Northwest Athletic Association of Community Colleges championship tournament.

The Penguins (17-9) tip off the NWAACC tournament Thursday at the Toyota Center in Kennewick, facing Yakima Valley at 10 a.m. The bad news for the Penguins is that their top three scorers have fallen so ill that none were even at the O'Connell Center for Monday's practice.

Clark coach Mike Arnold expected a better regular season before injury, illness and homesickness wreaked havoc with the roster, and is impressed by what the Penguins have achieved so far.

"We battled so much injury and so much sickness," Arnold said. "We had eight weeks in a row of having at least one guy out. As you look at our season as a whole, we've had very good chemistry. Our kids have worked very hard, and overall, we feel pretty good."

Clark started the year by losing three interior players, two to serious illness and one who left the program. As a result, the team faces a height disadvantage across the board with no player taller than 6-foot-5.

The Penguins have overcome that problem most of the year. Now there is a new issue.

Derek Thurston, Brandon Jones and Garrick Ashenfelter — who combine for 41.1 points a game — have fallen ill.

"You do the math," Arnold said. "That's 40 percent of our offense that's sick right now. How they're going to be on Thursday is anybody's guess."

The focus in practice this week was to prepare other players to step into scoring roles, and hope for the best.

"It's a challenge, but it happens," Arnold said. "We've got versatile players, but nobody who shoot it like (Thurston and Jones) does."

As if injury and illness trouble were not enough, four Penguins players have experienced death in the family during in the last six weeks — three in the last week alone.

With their size problem, Arnold said, the Penguins are primarily a perimeter-oriented team and utilize a variety of presses and trapping defenses, but rely primarily on man-to-man defense. Shot selection is crucial to the team's offense, the coach said, so the Penguins are scoring and preventing taller foes from being able to dominate the rebounding.

With a freshmen-laden roster, the Penguins lost their first three games before recovering. They lost their last three games to claim the West Region's third seed for the tournament. They put together a pair of winning stretches, including an upset win over West No. 2 seed Tacoma and two competitive losses against region winner Highline.

"We feel like if we've got everybody healthy, we can play with anybody in the NWAACC," Arnold said. "It would help if we had our horses, but we have other horses, so we'll ride those."

The double-elimination tournament goes through Sunday. Clackamas is No. 1 in the final NWAACC poll.

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