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COUGARS CAPTURE THIRD-STRAIGHT MWC BASKETBALL TITLE

When it comes to BYU sports, Bronco Mendenhall has the rock star status, but Dave Rose has the better record and results.

This is no knock on Mendenhall. The accolades and adoration from Cougar fans is well deserved, but Dave Rose has quietly been more productive.

We know. You can't compare apples and oranges or football and basketball, but here we go.

Both were hired in the same year. Both are working on their fourth seasons.

In the inaugural year for both, Mendenhall began his ascent to BYU rock reverence with a .500 season and a 6-6 record.

He then rocketed up the charts with two consecutive MWC football championships, with two all-league quarterbacks.

When it came time for that third straight championship, it didn't happen.

Rose went 20-9 his first season. Since then, he has reeled off three MWC titles and NCAA appearances.

He has a four year record of 51-13 in regular season MWC games. In MWC games on the road, he has been amazing, compiling a 20-12 record in conference road games in four years.

Exception

He did it all with four different point guards in four seasons, none of whom, with the exception of Jimmer Fredette this season, could be considered top tier among other point guards in the league.

As a matter of fact, as detailed in the letter of last week, he won the first three years with what we would call nondescript guard play. Now that he has good guards in Fredette and Jackson Emery, we expect Rose to start winning his share of games in NCAA play.

Mendenhall has produced more euphoria, but empirically, Rose has produced more MWC championships in the same time frame.

That championship tally was improved this past week when the Cougars clinched a share of the MWC basketball crown with a 78-68 come-from-behind win over Wyoming in Laramie and a nail-biting 54-49 victory over Air Force in Provo.

Lee Cummond led the Cougars in scoring in both games. Against the Cowboys he had 24 and finished his career in the Marriott Center by scoring 17 against the Falcons.

The Cougars finished the season with a 24-6 overall record and a 12-4 conference mark.

They also finished in a three-way tie with New Mexico and Utah for a piece of the league hardware, but earned the No. 1 seed for the MWC post-season tourney.

It was the result of BYU's sweep of San Diego State this season. Utah and UNM both split their games with the Aztecs.

BYU AND MWC TOURNEY SET

With a share of the MWC title in the bag, BYU also has secured a spot in the upcoming NCAA tournament.

No MWC team that has won or shared the regular-season conference basketball championship, has not been invited to the NCAA dance.

Based on that history, that means that BYU, Utah and New Mexico all should have their tickets punched for a berth in the tourney.

Where it will get very interesting, however, is if a team other than one of those three, wins the MWC tournament this week.

Despite some prognostications to the contrary, we just don't see the league getting four invites to NCAA play.

We also don't see BYU winning the MWC tournament.

Even with the No. 1 seed, BYU didn't receive any favors with the brackets.

The Cougars will open play on Thursday against the winner of the play-in game between Air Force and Colorado State.

A win there and BYU would move to a semi-final contest on Friday against either UNLV or San Diego State.

Regardless of which team the Cougars face, we don't see a win for BYU in that game.

BYU's history against UNLV in Las Vegas is not pretty in recent years and SDSU will be itching for a chance to avenge their two losses this season against the Cougars.

In addition, both the Rebels and Aztecs will be extremely motivated in trying to move from the proverbial bubble to an assured NCAA invite.

The game time and television information for BYU is as follows:

Thursday, March 12...BYU will face either Air Force or Colorado State. The tipoff is at 1:00 pm Mountain Time and the game will be televised on the Mtn.

Friday, March 13...If BYU wins the opening round game, they will advance to the semis against either UNLV or SDSU. That game will tip at 7:00 pm Mountain time and will be broadcast on CBS C.

Saturday, March 14...Two wins will get the Cougars to the championship game. Most likely that would be against either Utah or New Mexico. That contest will begin at 5:00 pm Mountain time and will be televised live by Versus.

SEASON NOT OVER, BUT IT'S NOT TOO EARLY TO LOOK AHEAD TO NEXT YEAR

The fact that BYU earned a share of its third consecutive Mountain West Conference basketball title should not be surprising.

Since Dave Rose took over, BYU has been good, gotten better and looks to even be better in the future.

Here is what we find interesting.

The four other teams that competed for the title, Utah, New Mexico, San Diego State and UNLV, were all senior dominated squads.

Except for Lee Cummond, and granted, he is a nice exception to have, BYU's other starters and first guys off the bench were all underclassmen.

Of the top 13 scorers in MWC play, all were seniors except for Jimmer Fredette who is currently third in league scoring as a sophomore and Jonathan Tavernari who stands at the No. 9 spot. He is a junior.

Here are the seniors that currently are in the top twenty in scoring in the league and that will not be back next year: Brandon Ewing, Wyo; Marcus Walker, CSU; Luke Nevill, Utah; Lee Cummond, BYU; Tony Dandridge, UNM; Lorenzo Wade, SDSU; Kevin Langford, TCU; Wink Adams, UNLV; Sean Ogirri, Wyo; Lawrence Borha, Utah; Andrew Henke, AF; Kyle Spain, SDSU; Daniel Faris, UNM, Tyson Johnson, Wyo and Tyler Kepkay, Utah.

The MWC was a senior dominated league this past season. Other seniors included Joe Darger and Rene Rougeau of UNLV, Richie Williams and Ryan Amoroso of SDSU, Shaun Green of Utah and Chad Topper of UNM.

Look for the first three all-league teams to be dominated with the seniors listed above.

What's the point?

On paper, it looks like BYU should be the odds on favorite to be selected as the team to beat for next season.

Now here's the real kicker.

We have been very willing to point out our view that BYU was weak in the post this season.

Chris Miles has played better as the season winds down, but he was often criticized by BYU fans for being erratic and inconsistent.

Miles should be the dominant center in the Mountain West Conference next season. Unless some teams bring in some very good post players next year from high school or the juco ranks and unless some teams have some dominating centers that they are redshirting, Miles will be the best big man returning in the conference next season.

Name another returning big man in the league that is better than Miles.

You can't do it.

BOOKS, BASKETBALL PLAYERS AND THE INTERNET

When it comes to high school basketball, times have changed.

The internet has made everybody a scout and evaluator of talent.

You can go to almost any internet site that revolves around BYU athletics and get a myriad of evaluations and scouting reports about current basketball prospects, especially in Utah.

Some say these prospects are great. Others, who watch the same players, call them overrated.

Here is the truth about high school basketball players and their abilities as Division I prospects and players.

You can't judge a book by its cover and you can't thoroughly judge a high school player by his play in high school.

If you want to see how a kid really stacks up, you have to follow him on the AAU trail when he is going up against comparable or superior talent.

You have to see him in action when everyone on the court has to be guarded instead of when he is defended by two and a half defenders because there are other players on his squad that don't have to be accounted for.

Everyone loves an underdog in high school and hates a goliath.

To truly evaluate a big man, you need to see him operate against another talented big guy.

That is why high school play alone is not at the top of the evaluation of prospects for college coaches.

They see the good kids nationwide beginning every April and through the summers.

They make their judgments and decisions in Orlando, Las Vegas, Denver, Arkansas and Houston, not in Sandy, Orem and Taylorsville.

That said, two big-time BYU recruits, one in the bag and one BYU hopes to bag this coming November, put on nice performances in the recently concluded Utah State 4-A and 5-A basketball championships.

Tyler Haws and his Lone Peak teammates came up short in their quest for a third-straight 5-A title, losing to West Jordan in the championship game, but he had some nice numbers in the tourney.

Here is his scoring line for the four games he played: In a 50-38 win over Jordan, Haws scored 20; a 55-38 win over Riverton netted Haws 24; he scored 22 in a 66-46 win over Bingham and finished up with 20 points in the 63-52 loss to West Jordan.

Teammate Nate Austin, a BYU signee as a center, scored 19, 22, 8 and 16 in those same contests.

In the 4-A ranks, it was a similar story with favorite Provo HS getting beat in the championship game by West HS. BYU's top recruiting priority for next year, Kyle Collinsworth, is a 6-7 point guard for the Bulldogs. Also on that squad is recent Cougar signee, Brandon Davies. Here are Collinsworth's numbers in the tournament: In a 57-39 win over Murray, Collinsworth scored 12; In a 39-32 win over Highland, Collinsworth had 17. In the state semi against Bountiful, Collinsworth dominated the game with 23 points. A 56-44 loss to West saw him score 17.

In those same four games, Brandon Davies scored, 19, 9, 6 and 10 points.

Here is our take on Haws, Collinsworth, Austin and Davies after watching them on the AAU circuit, and in high school.

Haws and Collinsworth are known quantities. They are the two most talented and consistent players in their respective high school divisions in Utah.

There is a reason that Haws was pursued so heavily before signing with BYU in November.

There is a reason that Collinsworth is now receiving the same kind of recruiting attention.

Haws will see significant minutes next season as a freshman for BYU. It will be interesting to see how he performs when surrounded by other talented players that will prevent opposing coaches from game planning their defenses around him.

In our opinion, he still needs to work on his outside shot and become a more consistent shooter. His mid-range jumper is adequate, and he has proven that he can get to the basket and free throw line against any and all comers, but he will need to work on his three-point shooting at the next level.

If he can be a consistent threat from beyond the arc, he can be scary good in college.

Collinsworth will be a very good college point guard. He is worth the hype and recruiting attention with his present skills. What could make him extra special is some more growth. If he gets a few inches taller, he will be a national recruit because he will be a big with point guard skills. He isn't in the Magic Johnson class, but you get the picture.

For a guy that saw his first significant playing time as a senior, Nate Austin played well. He will be three years away from enrolling at BYU. If he can get stronger, he can be a threat because he has some range on his jumper.

We will go on record now with a prediction that Brandon Davies will explode and become a big time college player, if he can stay on track academically.

Here's the deal with Davies, in our opinion.

He currently is just a Bambi in basketball. With added maturation of his body and skills, he should evolve into a stag and stud at the next level.

He has the ability, in our opinion, to be the kind of front court player you saw when Wake Forest came to town.

He will be the guy, of all the BYU signees, that will benefit the most from leaving a high school sys-

tem and playing at the college level and beyond.

He has a lot of work to do, but if BYU can get him some legitimate big-man coaching and if he can become a consistent free throw shooter, he has a chance to make serious waves in college and serious money beyond college.

Don't get hung up on the meager numbers that Davies produced in the state tournament.

If he can get in school at BYU and stay there, come back and see us in three years. Print and save this prediction.

Davies will become the dominant big man BYU has lacked forever.

BYU ROCKING THE RECRUITING CRADLE

Since Bronco Mendenhall took over as BYU football coach a few seasons back, the recruiting model for the Cougars has drastically changed.

Not only has the criteria for what BYU is looking for in a football player been refined and focuses, but the Cougars have no problems at all in pulling the trigger and offering player a scholarship early in the process.

Most of BYU's recruiting is done before most of its signees enter their senior season.

BYU has already offered several prospects who will only be juniors this coming fall.

They have no problem in offering sophomores either as evidenced by the early commitments of Adam Timo and the offers on the table this past year for Harvey Langi.

Now BYU has really gone early in their offers.

The Cougars have already extended an offer to a freshman. That's right. BYU has offered Devonte' Neal, a 5-11, 170 pound wide receiver from Cesar Chavez High School in Laveen, Arizona.

BYU wasn't the first to offer. Arizona State and Boston College beat BYU to the door in offering.

There will be plenty of others pouring in before this kid is through.

It looks like a long shot to us, but BYU is in their pitching. What's the connection?

We don't think Neal is LDS, but his dad, and personal trainer, Luke Neal, was on the football staff of Ricks College for a while before the school dropped the sport.

As a frosh, he led Chavez HS with 44 catches for 608 yards and 7 touchdowns.

He is coached by Jim Rattay, a legendary high school coach in Arizona and Ohio. Rattay took over the Chavez job this past season and put Neal on the varsity roster.

In Rattay's illustrious coaching career, which includes five state championships in Arizona and two in Ohio, he has only allowed two other freshmen on his varsity rosters. That would be current Oakland Raiders tight end Zach Miller and University of Cincinnati starting H-back Marcus Waugh.

Neal's YouTube highlights are impressive, but more impressive are his speed.

As an eighth grader running for Centennial Middle School, he posted the fastest 200 meters time in the nation for his age group by running 22.02. He also turned in a 10.98 100 meters and a 52.02 400 meters.

Like we said, we expect this to be a long shot recruit for the Cougars because his stock is going to continue to rise and he will most likely be a nationally sought after recruit.

Still this is the earliest offer we know of for BYU since we have been following football.

TELEVISION TIMETABLE

BYU vs. AF or CSU

Thursday, March 12 at Las Vegas

Tipoff: 1:00 pm Mountain Time

TV: Mtn

If BYU wins

BYU vs. UNLV or SDSU

Friday, March 13 at Las Vegas

Tipoff: 7:00 pm Mountain Time

TV: CBS C

If BYU wins

BYU vs. Utah, New Mexico, TCU or Wyoming

Saturday, March 14, at Las Vegas

Tipoff: 5:00 pm Mountain Time

TV: Versus