

Minnesota Daily

Men's Basketball: Gophers thrash No. 6 Purdue to reach Big Ten championship

By Marco LaNave

Minnesota seeks its first Big Ten tournament title on Sunday against No. 5 Ohio State.

Published: 03/13/2010

INDIANAPOLIS — Anyone predicting this year's Minnesota men's basketball team would be the program's first to advance to a Big Ten championship would have been mocked less than four weeks ago.

That scenario seemed just as far-fetched after an embarrassing 28-point loss at Michigan on March 2.

Yet, the improbability of it all was obliterated by the Gophers' emphatic 69-42 victory over No. 6 Purdue in the Big Ten semifinals at Conseco Fieldhouse on Saturday.

"You look back at all the hard work we've done over the course of preseason and practice...and how it's all paid off to this moment," said sophomore center Ralph Sampson III, who scored a team-leading 13 points to help Minnesota advance to face top-seeded Ohio State for the Big Ten's automatic bid to the NCAA tournament in Sunday's title game.

"We're very motivated for this game, and we feel that we've come a long way and we have a lot more to go," said Sampson, who added five rebounds, three assists and two blocks.

The Gophers (21-12) stunned the Boilermakers and their fans — who far outnumbered Minnesota's supporters — by building a lead as large as 28 points before halftime and maintaining at least an 18-point margin after the first 14 minutes of the game.

Purdue missed 18 of its first 20 shots and had an 11:25 scoring drought in the first half.

Despite a hook shot by Boilermakers center JaJuan Johnson to beat the halftime buzzer, Purdue scored its fewest points in a half since 1950 and trailed 37-11.

"We simply didn't have anything in our tank today, and obviously Minnesota did," Boilermakers coach Matt Painter said. "The game of basketball will humble you, and today we were obviously humbled."

The Gophers dominated the second-seeded Boilermakers (27-5) across the board, out-shooting them 48 percent to 28 percent and out-rebounding them 50-26. The 50 rebounds was one shy of the Big Ten tournament record.

"The game [Friday] against Michigan State got us really prepared for a tough Purdue team," said sophomore center Colton Iverson, who had five first-half rebounds and scored 11 points to reach double figures for a career-best third-straight game. "Last night [was] a very physical game, and we just came tonight ready to play with the same intensity as we would any other game."

Though they'll try to approach Sunday's title game like any other, it will be an historic one for the Minnesota program, which hasn't been to the Big Ten championship since the tournament began in 1998.

"The game today and the feeling I have right now is the greatest I've ever had as a Gopher," said senior forward Damian Johnson, who was a member of the 2006-07 Minnesota team that lost a school-record 22 games. "I was part of the team that was the worst team in Minnesota history, so that's a big transition. I'm just so happy."

In a season in which two highly-anticipated recruits didn't play and their starting point guard was ruled ineligible after the first six games of the conference schedule, the Gophers still have a chance to accomplish their preseason goal of a Big Ten championship.

"It's big, especially coming from where we did in the beginning of the year," said senior guard Lawrence Westbrook, the only remaining player other than Johnson who played during the 9-22 season three years ago. "Nobody expected us to be here, so it just shows that we persevered."

The two biggest stories of the Big Ten tournament — the Gophers' surge and conference player of the year Evan Turner's performances — will finally meet at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, just hours before the announcement of the 65-team NCAA tournament field.

Turner has averaged 24.5 points in two tournament games and scored 19 points in each of two regular-season games against Minnesota.

In the last three games, though, the Gophers have beaten teams led by the Big Ten's top players, including Purdue's All-Big Ten first-team guard E'Twaun Moore and second-team center JaJuan Johnson.

Moore entered with a 16.8-point average in four career games against Minnesota, but he missed his first eight shots and finished with two points on 1-of-14 shooting. Johnson had 17 points but just four rebounds (his season average was 7.2 entering Saturday).

So no one can blame the Gophers for thinking they've got a proven formula as they face Turner and the Buckeyes.

"It's just another game in the Big Ten, all these teams in the Big Ten have a bunch of great players," said sophomore point guard Devoe Joseph, who has scored at least 10 points in each game of the tournament. "Obviously we have to do a lot to slow [Turner] down, so we're just going to work hard and keep working on our [defensive] principles that coach has taught us."

Gophers coach Tubby Smith, seeking his 16th NCAA tournament appearance in 17 years, gave the credit to his players after Saturday's win but said he will continue to look beyond the win-loss record when evaluating Sunday's game.

"We're going to give our best effort, and we do that and we'll be fine," Smith said. "As long as we do that, we can hold our heads up high, and we can look in the mirror and say we did our best, and that's all we can do."

Saturday's other semifinal: No. 1 Ohio State 88, No. 5 Illinois 81 (2 OT)

Evan Turner scored 11 of his game-high 31 points after regulation to help No. 5 Ohio State survive the first-ever double-overtime game in the 13-year history of the Big Ten tournament.

Illinois, seeking another win to help its NCAA tournament résumé, couldn't convert its possessions at the end of regulation and the first overtime into game-winning baskets.

The Illini lost an 11-point second-half lead when Ohio State (26-7) went on a 20-0 run in a five-minute stretch. But they rallied to twice take a two-point lead in the final 1:18 of regulation. They also lost a four-point lead in the final 1:27 of the first overtime.

Turner, who had 10 rebounds, six assists and 10 of his team's 18 turnovers, fouled out with one minute remaining and the Buckeyes leading 84-80. Guard David Lighty made two layups to seal the game.

Buckeyes guard William Buford had 22 points and 10 rebounds.

All-Big Ten guard Demetri McCamey scored 22 points, and forward Mike Davis added 13 points and 18 rebounds for the Illini (19-14).