

HB Arnett's ***COUGAR SPORTSLINE***

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ANOTHER LUNKER AND LEAGUE TITLE LURKING FOR BYU

Last week BYU won two basketball games. They were just two of a total of 22 wins on the season, but on the fishing and finishing scale, they were both whoppers.

After reeling in and weighing these two wins, BYU is back once again in its usual place as bass master of basketball in the Mountain West Conference.

Thanks to two incredible wins, a 69-59 comeback victory over San Diego State on the road and a 63-50 payback pounding of Utah in Provo, Dave Rose and BYU are on the verge of landing their third consecutive MWC basketball championship.

Rose has proven that he can fish and finish in this conference and the Cougars have once again proven that since Rose took over at the help of this team, BYU is still the big fish in the league. The Cougars are the lunker that the rest of the league is still trying to bait, hook and catch.

With a little help from New Mexico on Tuesday in Albuquerque when the Lobos take on Utah, BYU could be heading into the MWC post season tournament as the No. 1 seed in the conference.

Mind Own Business

The Cougars still have their own business to take care of. They need to win their last two regular-season games against Wyoming in Laramie on Wednesday and winless Air Force in Provo Saturday night to either win an outright title or secure a piece of that championship crow.

What else is new?

Speaking of alliterative accolades in referencing the two wins, we forgot the biggest fish of all.

Jimmer Fredette.

Statistically, how about this line in the proverbial hook, line and sinker summary of both games?

Against San Diego State, all Fredette did was score 28 points. He kept BYU in the game in the first half scoring 10 of those points while the Cougars were having their worst scoring half of the season. At the intermission, SDSU led the Cougars 33-20.

At one point in the second half comeback, it was Fredette that reeled of 9 straight points and spear-headed the unbelievable comeback.

The talented sophomore was 10-of 19 from the field and a perfect 6-for-6 from the free throw line against the Aztecs. He also added an additional 5 rebounds and 5 assists.

Hot Hand

With Fredette's hot hand, Utah didn't have a prayer against the Cougars, except for the opening invocation by a BYU booster that extolled the Utes as Sugar Bowl Champions.

That generated a smattering of boos from the crowd, but it was the generation of Fredette's 25 points, that did the Utes in.

It was Fredette's ability to get to the rim against Utah's big man Luke Nevill that got our attention.

The fact he was able to convert when he got there was even more impressive.

Fredette was 8-of-16 from the floor and 8-of-9 from the charity stripe against the Utes.

Utah's defense never invited Jonathan Tavernari to the party. He was held scoreless.

Lee Cummond finally arrived at the festivities in the second half to lend some help to Fredette.

Cummond ended with 16 points, most of which came in the final twenty minutes of action.

While Fredette was scoring, Chris Miles was defending. He actually had a nice night offensively with 13 points and 8 rebounds. He even was 5-of-6 from the free throw line.

Nice Line

That is a nice line, but his best numbers were against Nevill.

He held the sure-to-be MWC Player of the Year to just 9 points and physically took a toll on the senior from Australia.

With the BYU win, Utah and Nevill are now both "down under" to the Cougars in 5 of the last six contests.

UTAH WON'T COOPERATE

Now that we have finished gushing, it's time for some reality.

BYU is good. As a matter of fact, they are very good, but we don't think they will be good enough to get a piece of the MWC title.

They have lost too many league games.

At 10-4 in conference play, the Cougars are still behind Utah at 11-3.

We don't expect the Utes to lose to New Mexico in Albuquerque.

We don't expect Luke Nevill to be held in check again.

If that scenario holds true, it means that the Utes will have clinched the MWC title before BYU and Wyoming tip off the next night in Laramie.

Winning in Laramie is not easy this year. Only one, team, Utah has done it so far this season.

If the Cougars are still in the hunt for a piece of the title, we expect them to respond and win.

If that incentive isn't there, BYU is still good enough to win, but what would be a very difficult game, just became much harder.

Wins over Wyoming and Air Force this week would give the Cougars a 24-6 overall record and should lock up an NCAA post season invite regardless of what happens in the race for a piece of the championship.

SETTING THE SEEDS

If Utah does lose to New Mexico and BYU wins out, it would mean that the Cougars and Utah, or possibly even New Mexico, (they finish the season on the road at Wyoming) could finish tied for the MWC championship.

In either scenario, BYU would be the No. 1 seed in the MWC tourney as long as San Diego State remains ahead of UNLV in the final standings.

Here are the standings as of this final week.

Utah.....11-3....20-8
BYU.....10-4....22-6
New Mexico.....10-4....19-10
SDSU.....9-5....19-8
UNLV.....8-6....20-8
Wyoming.....7-7....18-10
TCU.....5-10....14-15
CSU.....4-11....9-20
Air Force.....0-14....9-18

In case of a tie for a championship, the seeding is determined in how the teams did in head-to-head competition. BYU, New Mexico and Utah all split their games.

The next tie breaker is how those teams did against the teams below them in the standings.

If SDSU remains ahead of UNLV, BYU would be the No. 1 seed because the swept the Aztecs and the Lobos and Utes split with SDSU.

If UNLV moves ahead of SDSU in the standings, then BYU would be the second or third seed depending if it ends with a two-way or three-way tie for the regular season championship.

Based on how it looks like the season will end, and assuming that SDSU remains in front of UNLV in the final standings, the Cougars would be better served in the tournament as either the No. 2 or No. 3 seed instead of the No. 1 seed.

As the top seed they would get a relative easy game against either CSU or Air Force in the opening game. A win would then most likely get UNLV in the second round.

Both UNLV and SDSU would be in the same bracket as the Cougars.

Assuming Utah is the No. 1 seed, as a No. 2 or No. 3 seed, the Cougars would open either against TCU or Wyoming and then most likely get New Mexico in the second round.

NCAA PLAY IS ALL ABOUT GUARDS AND BYU FINALLY HAS SOME

Most long-time NCAA tournament fans and pundits will agree that when it comes to post season play, guard play is extremely important.

The same holds true for the Cougars.

BYU hasn't won an NCAA game since 1993.

They haven't had good guard play in the tournament forever.

Let's go back in time with BYU guards.

Try these names on for size and see if you come away thinking that BYU has been good on the guard line for the last decade.

Ben Murdock, Sam Burgess, Austin Ainge, Jimmy Balderson, Michael Rose, Rashaun Broadus, Luiz Lemes, Kevin Woodberry, Terry Nashif, Ricky Bower, Danny Bower, Matt Montague, Daniel Bobik, Trent Whiting, Terrell Lyday, Todd Christensen and Jordan Archibald.

Stunning? Shocking? Sobering?

Take your pick, but anyway you cut it, BYU has not had much talent at the guard line for a long time.

Travis Hansen and Mark Bigelow were sometimes used as guards, but they mainly were more of wing players who played in the front court.

Of this list of guards only, we would have to say that Lyday was the best of the bunch.

To emphasize how guard play impacts NCAA tournament action, here are the scoring lines of BYU guards in post season play for the last several years.

2008, lost to Texas A&M in NCAA first round. Sam Burgess- 6, Ben Murdock-0, Jimmer Fredette-10
2007, lost to Xavier in NCAA first round. Austin Ainge-12, Jimmy Balderson-10, Mike Rose-15
2006, lost to Houston in NIT, Austin Ainge-3, Rashaun Broadus-8
2004, lost Syracuse in NCAA first round, Luiz Lemes-12, Kevin Woodberry-0 (on the other guard line, Gerry McNamara whipped the Cougars by himself when he scored 43)
2003, lost to UConn in NCAA first round, Kevin Woodberry-5
2002, lost to Memphis in NIT, Matt Montague-2, Daniel Bobik-15
2001, lost to Cincinnati in NCAA first round, Terrell Lyday-12, Trent Whiting-12

With maybe the exception of Lyday, Hansen and Bigelow, if you count them as guards, BYU's guard line has not instilled any fear or special game planning of opposing post-season coaches.

Serviceable would be the appropriate adjective in our opinion.

That may be changing.

Jimmer Fredette is more than serviceable. He is good and can be very good on occasion. His back-court teammate, Jackson Emery is also a very good athlete and good guard.

The two of them are sophomores.

BYU's best guard play in many years appears to be here now and should get better in the next two seasons.

Both Fredette and Emery are both sophomores with two more seasons to play together.

The real question is what can this duo do in post season play where it is usually all about guard play?

We are just a couple of weeks away from finding out.

We expect to like what we see.

BLANKETS AND BEYOND

When BYU faces Air Force in Provo on Saturday, it will be the last game in the Marriott Center for three seniors.

Lee Cummond, Archie Rose and Gavin MacGregor will all be making appearances in their last Cougar contest and receive their senior blankets.

MacGregor can still appeal for an injury redshirt year from the NCAA and if granted return again next season.

We think his appeal will be determined by the academics of recently signed post man Brandon Davies.

He is the very talented 6-11 post man from Provo HS who signed early with BYU last November.

While BYU is saying that Davies is on track to get matriculated at BYU, if, for some reason, he doesn't qualify academically, we would expect him to show up next season on the roster of Brewster Academy, a prep school in New Hampshire.

That is also where Charles Abouo, spent last season after leaving Logan HS.

Davies is a serious talent. We have heard that there are some at Provo who consider both Davies, and junior guard, Kyle Collinsworth as players that are considered in the same talent range and Provo's all-time talent, Devin Durrant.

If Davies makes it to BYU for next season, he would be a boost for the Cougars post play.

That means that BYU would have Chris Miles and James Anderson back, along with Noah Hartsock, who has shown that he will be a definite factor next season as a power forward or a stop-gap post.

Add Davies and you have four legitimate big men for next year. If Davies doesn't show, up than MacGregor coming back if granted an appeal would be another option.

We have already detailed the guard line returning from the Cougars. Lamont Morgan, Jr. will join Jimmer Fredette and Jackson Emery, and the return of Micahel Loyd, Jr. will just add additional speed

and quickness to the Cougars guard line when it comes to the open court run game and defense.

They key guy to replace will be Lee Cummond.

Look for Tyler Haws to take up that slack. He will see significant time as a freshman next season. He has the same competitive juices as Cummond, is a terrific rebounder for his size and knows how to get to the rim and then to the free throw line.

With Haws and Fredette, both of who are 80-plus percentage free throw shooters, BYU should live at the line next season.

We still would not be surprised to see Dave Rose and his staff sign another player this spring.

Here is how we see BYU's basketball scholarship list for next season.

Charles Abouo, 6-5, 210, SO, G/F

James Anderson, 6-11, 230, SO, C

Jackson Emery, 6-3, 185, JR, G

Jimmer Fredette, 6-2, 200, JR, G

Noah Hartsock, 6-8, 215, SO, F

Michael Loyd, Jr., 6-1, 170 SO, G

Chris Miles, 6-11, 240, SR, C

Lamont Morgan, Jr., 5-10, 170, SR, G

Matt Pinegar, 6-0, 190, SO, G

Jonathan Tavernari, 6-6, 215, SR, G/F

Tyler Haws, 6-5, 180, FR, G

Brandon Davies, 6-10, 215, FR, C

If MacGregor does come back, that will take up the 13 allotted scholarships. BYU has a lot of wiggle room this coming spring and summer to assess their needs and if needed go get another player from the juco ranks

With Miles, Morgan and Tavernari all set to move on after next season, that gives Rose all the scholarships he needs to give out to his top priority of Kyle Collinsworth, and his brother Chris, who will be back from an LDS mission and also a scholarship to DeMarcus Harrison, the 6-5 LDS guard from South Carolina.

SPRING SPORTS UPDATE

BYU captured both the Mountain West Conference men's and women's indoor track titles this past week in Colorado Springs. The BYU women took the MWC swimming and diving championship. The Cougar men finished fourth in that same meet.

In baseball, BYU is now 3-5 on the year after taking two games out of three from Portland this past weekend in Provo.

It was the earliest home opener in history for the Cougars.

In softball, the BYU women are off to a less than spectacular start with a tough schedule of ranked teams. The lady Cougars are currently 10-10 on the year.

TELEVISION TIMETABLE

BYU vs. Wyoming

Wed, Mar 4 at Laramie

Tipoff: 6:00 pm Mountain Time

TV: Mtn

BYU vs. Air Force

Sat, Mar 7 at Provo

Tipoff: 7:00 pm Mountain Time

TV: Mtn

MWC Tournament

March 11-14 (Wednesday thru Saturday)

Las Vegas

TV: Mtn, Versus, CBS C