

Basketball | Summit League Tournament

USD, SDSU To Meet In Women's Final

Seekamp Propels Coyotes Back To Title Game



DAVE EGGEN/INERTIA

Nicole Seekamp of South Dakota dribbles past defender Kelsi Byrd of IUPUI in the first half of their semi-final round Summit League Championship Tournament game Monday afternoon at the Denny Sanford Premier Center in Sioux Falls.

BY JEREMY HOECK

jeremy.hoeck@yankton.net

SIoux FALLS — New venue. Same Nicole Seekamp. The University of South Dakota senior had another big game at the Summit League Tournament, which moved next door from the Sioux Falls Arena to the shiny new Premier Center. It didn't matter. She once again rose to the task. "I like the atmosphere here," Seekamp said after scoring 23 points in Monday afternoon's 69-58 semifinal win over IUPUI. "It's scary to think if you lose you're done," she added. "It's my senior year. I don't want to be done with this team." And she's not.

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Jackrabbits Survive Oral Roberts 59-48

BY JEREMY HOECK

jeremy.hoeck@yankton.net

SIoux FALLS — After overcoming one hill, the South Dakota State women's basketball team now has another one. That first obstacle, though, was unlike any other. Although they couldn't contain Oral Roberts 6-foot-7 center Vicky McIntyre, the Jackrabbits hit enough big shots late to secure a 59-48 semifinal win Monday at the Summit League Tournament in Sioux Falls. "She's obviously strong and she's big," SDSU freshman Elle Thompson said of McIntyre, who finished with a triple-double in a losing effort. "And you have to still

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DAVE EGGEN/INERTIA

The South Dakota State bench celebrates in the second half of their semi-final round Summit League Championship Tournament game Monday afternoon at the Denny Sanford Premier Center in Sioux Falls.

Hoeck: Seniors Lead Coyote Men's Resurgence

Jackrabbits Oust USD With 78-65 Decision

BY JEREMY HOECK

jeremy.hoeck@yankton.net

SIoux FALLS — As Tyler Larson left the court in the waning minutes of a lop-sided loss, he embraced head coach Craig Smith.

The senior shared an extended moment with his coach, finally patting him on the head before making his way to the bench.



Jeremy HOECK

There was a sense of finality to the scene, albeit in a disappointing setting.

"As far as basketball and life, I've been through a lot, and I really look up to him a lot," Larson said after a 78-65 loss to South Dakota State in Monday night's Summit League Tournament semifinals in Sioux Falls.

Watching Larson and fellow senior Brandon Bos — both playing for their third USD coach — leave in such an emotional way, it came across as a kind of torch passing.

Perhaps the two main reasons the Coyotes were even in the semifinals handing the reins over to Smith, who was wrapping up year one with the program.

A first year that could have gone one of two ways: The returning players not buying into a new coaching staff's scheme, or coming together and taking the program to new heights.

"Sometimes when you're new to a program, some times the hardest guys to coach are the seniors," Smith said. "They're rooted in their ways. It's hard to change the stripes of the zebra."

Smith had come to USD with much fanfare, having spent two years with Tim Miles at Nebraska before their stints together at Colorado State.

When he was hired nearly a full year ago, Smith made clear that his expectations were high: Talk of reaching the NCAA Tournament wasn't going to be motivation, it was going to be an expectation.

"When we first met him, we were a little skeptical," Larson said. "After a couple weeks, we saw he's the real deal."

"That he was going to turn this program around."

And Smith did that in short order.

Not only did the Coyotes (17-16) exceed expectations by winning nine Summit League games after being picked No. 8 in the pre-season poll, they won a first-round game at the tournament for the first time.

"With a new coaching staff, what we accomplished this year is a great step," said Bos, who is the only senior — with Larson and James Hunter — to spend all four years in Vermillion.

"The fact that we're so upset by losing in the semifinals shows that we had high expectations," Bos added. "We really thought we had a chance to go all the way this year."

The semifinal loss shows, however, that the Coyotes are progressing, but that progress is going to come in small steps.

Despite having beaten the Jackrabbits by 16 points in their regular season meeting nine days earlier, the Coyotes were doomed by their up-and-down nature.

"We know where we're the bar's at," Smith said. "We've tasted it now to some extent, and our guys need to be champing at the bit to get better."

That's exactly what SDSU was: Better.

The Jackrabbits (23-9) were better offensively — hitting 11 three-pointers — and more effective defensively, holding USD to 27 percent in the first half.

And now they're back in the championship game after exceeding expectations of their own. South Dakota State, with nine players on the roster who had never suited up for the Jacks, was picked fourth.

"This team has really been an unbelievable gift for me this year, I really enjoyed them," head coach Scott Nagy said. "I've had winning teams before that I haven't overly enjoyed, but I've enjoyed this group."

Who the Jackrabbits will face was decided in the late game Monday between North Dakota State and Oral Roberts. But it's not going to be unfamiliar territory for SDSU: It won consecutive titles in 2012 and 2013.

"I remember the first time I went through it, I was so emotional about it, because we had been through so much," Nagy said.

So too have the Coyotes. Smith has a recruiting class coming in, as well as four players who redshirted this season, that should be able to keep the program on an upward trajectory.

"That's what made Brandon and I buy in, that he's going to do great things for this program," Larson said.

By virtue of winning 17 games and reaching the conference semifinals, there's also a good chance the Coyotes are not done for the season.

Whichever tournament that could be — the CBI or the CIT — isn't really a factor right now for Smith, he said. He was too busy commending the leadership of his departing seniors.

"When you go to the office every day, or put your head on the pillow, you don't have to worry about those guys," Smith said.

You can follow Jeremy Hoeck on Twitter at twitter.com/jhoeck. Discuss this story at www.yankton.net.

S. DAKOTA ST. 78, S. DAKOTA 65
S. DAKOTA (17-16)
Burnette 2-7 0-3 4, Bos 4-14 3-3 12, Kasperbauer 1-3 2-2 4, Hunter 1-4 1-4 3, Larson 5-11 6-10 19, Norris 4-7 7-9 15, Harris 0-2 0-0 0, Thoseby 0-0 1-2 1, Mayot 0-0 0-0 0, Davis 2-2 0-0 4, Robertson 0-3 1-2 1, Sparks 1-1 0-0 2, Totals 20-54 21-35 65.
S. DAKOTA ST. (23-9)
Parks 7-14 4-7 21, Bittle 3-4 1-19, Marshall 4-12 2-41, Tellinghuisen 2-5 3-4 8, Larson 2-5 4-4 8, Flatten 1-2 0-0 3, Broman 0-1 0-0 0, Moffitt 2-3 2-2 6, Jacobson 0-0 0-0 0, Horstman 2-2 0-1 4, Severyn 0-0 0-0 0, Devine 0-0 0-1 0, Theisen 0-0 5-6 5, Totals 23-48 21-30 78.
Hailtime—S. Dakota St. 44-25, 3-Point Goals—S. Dakota 4-19 (Larson 3-6, Bos 1-8, Norris 0-1, Burnette 0-2, Kasperbauer 0-2), S. Dakota St. 11-26 (Marshall 4-9, Parks 3-7, Bittle 2-3, Flatten 1-2, Tellinghuisen 1-4, Broman 0-1), Fouled Out—Bittle, Burnette, Norris, Rebounds—S. Dakota 36 (Larson 10), S. Dakota St. 37 (Marshall, Tellinghuisen 8), Assists—S. Dakota 8 (Norris 3), S. Dakota St. 11 (Marshall, Moffitt 3), Total Fouls—S. Dakota 23, S. Dakota St. 25. A—NA.



DICK CARLSON/INERTIA

James Hunter (50) of USD, Connor Devine (30) and Skyler Flatten (1) of SDSU fight for the ball in the first half of their semi-final round Summit League Championship Tournament game Monday evening at the Denny Sanford Premier Center in Sioux Falls.

Column: Too Early To Tell If NASCAR Set For Better Racing

BY JENNA FRYER

AP Auto Racing Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — Two races is just too early to form a definitive opinion about NASCAR's new rules package, which was tweaked as part of a concerted effort to improve the racing.

Has the 2015 rules package made things any better? No, not really. Especially if it's being compared with the high-stakes racing that punctuated the end of last season, when the 10-race Chase displayed some of the strongest competition in years.

NASCAR wants bumper-to-bumper racing every week, with aggressive passing all through the field. So the rules are an evolving process, and the 2015 package was a compromise between what the drivers wanted vs. how many changes tire provider Goodyear could immediately accommodate.

The result was a reduction in downforce — not nearly

enough to satisfy the majority of the drivers — and less horsepower.

It's yet to be seen if the changes will lead to significant improvements because races at Atlanta and Las Vegas the last two weeks didn't look much different from past events on 1.5-mile speedways. Three drivers combined to lead 292 of the 325 laps at Atlanta, where the 28 lead changes weren't all that dramatic. Jimmie Johnson went on to the win, beating Kevin Harvick by 1.802 seconds.

Harvick, Johnson and Joey Logano again dominated Sunday in Las Vegas, where the trio led 234 of the 267 laps. Harvick sort of made it look easy in the end, with a vibration in his car the only thing that kept him from trouncing the field as he took the victory.

The new package was supposed to excite fans and please the drivers, but three-time NASCAR champion Tony

Stewart was fuming on his in-car radio about his car. He seemed to suggest the cars were more fit to compete on Saturday, when NASCAR's second-tier series races.

One vocal driver does not make or break a case against the new rules package, but two races into the season and NASCAR has got to be hoping the on-track action picks up a tick or two very soon.

Some other things learned over the first month of the season:

SOFT WALLS NEED TO BE A PRIORITY: Jeff Gordon has a Tuesday meeting scheduled with NASCAR executive vice president Steve O'Donnell, and the four-time series champion has said he wants a timeline on when energy-absorbing SAFER barriers will be fully installed at all tracks.

Almost all facilities that host national NASCAR events have the Steel and Foam Energy Reduction Barrier in certain walls, but there's been an

outcry for total coverage since Kyle Busch broke his right leg and left foot last month when he crashed into an unprotected wall at Daytona.

Gordon hit an unprotected wall the next week at Atlanta, and Erik Jones hit a portion of wall just past the SAFER barrier in the Xfinity Series race at Las Vegas on Saturday. Gordon and Jones both walked away, but Gordon gave vivid detail in how much harder the impact is when a driver hits a concrete wall vs. a SAFER barrier.

NASCAR and its tracks are doing the right thing in reviewing the safety standards at all facilities, but they must act with urgency in getting soft walls on every inch of a race track that can safely accommodate the barriers.

Even though Daytona International Speedway president Joie Chitwood said after Busch's accident he would