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Oakland eyeing another tourney trip

Grizz lead the Summit League, making a name for themselves

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AP Images

Oakland made some noise during non-conference play and is hoping for another tournament bid.

The Associated Press

ROCHESTER, Mich. -- The easiest way to measure Oakland University's basketball success is by mentioning the school's name and watching for the reaction.

"People are starting to know that we're in Michigan, not California," center Keith Benson said.

Led by the 6-foot-11 Benson, Oakland has become the Summit League's dominant program. Although a loss last weekend ended a 20-game regular-season winning streak in conference play, the Golden Grizzlies still lead the league by 2 1/2 games and are eyeing their second consecutive trip to the NCAA tournament.

Oakland lost big in the first round to Pittsburgh last season, but the Golden Grizzlies are hoping for an extended postseason run this time after beating Tennessee and playing Michigan State close in December.

"Playing on a national stage like that, in front of big teams, you really get to see where you place against them," forward Will Hudson said. "On a higher stage, things get exposed, so you know what to work on. We play such a tough schedule and then we learn from it, and then take that into conference play."

The Golden Grizzlies have overwhelmed the Summit League recently, going 17-1 in the 2009-10 regular season before sweeping to the conference tournament title. This season, Oakland (17-9, 12-1) has outscored conference opponents by 16.1 points per game — even after losing 100-88 at IUPUI on Saturday.

The 20-game winning streak was even more impressive considering the grueling travel Summit League teams must endure. The league includes teams in North Dakota, Oklahoma and Utah.

Benson was the school's crucial catch. He averaged only 6.9 points per game as a high school senior at nearby Detroit Country Day, then redshirted his first season at Oakland, but he's grown about 3 inches in college and put on enough weight to become a legitimate NBA prospect at 230 pounds. Benson, a senior, is averaging 17.3 points and 9.9 rebounds this season.

"He just worked extremely hard and got better," coach Greg Kampe said. "I give the kid all the credit in the world."

Hudson, another senior, has come on strong this season, shooting 64 percent from the field. Hudson is from Wisconsin, so when he first found out about the possibility of playing at Oakland, his reaction was predictable.

"I was just like, 'I don't want to go out all the way to California,'" Hudson said. "That was before Oakland was on the map."

Hudson soon found out all about Oakland, a school of about 15,500 undergraduates on a suburban campus not far from where the Detroit Pistons play in Auburn Hills.

Oakland lost to Michigan State 77-76 on Dec. 11, then went to Tennessee and beat the Volunteers 89-82 three days later. That victory earned the school plenty of attention.

"We were like rock stars for three days," Kampe said.

Oakland also lost 92-63 at Ohio State on Dec. 23. Last season, the Golden Grizzlies' schedule included losses to Kansas and Syracuse.

Although the Golden Grizzlies lost to both Michigan State and Michigan, it's possible Oakland could be its state's only representative in the NCAA tournament. Of course, running away with first place in the regular season guarantees nothing, with the Summit League's automatic bid going to the conference tournament winner.

"It's a very pressure-packed situation, especially when you're the team that's been the dominant team," Kampe said. "Our loss Saturday probably took away any hope we had of an at-large bid."

If the Golden Grizzlies do reach the NCAA field, they'll try to become a memorable March underdog. Oakland is one of several teams from lesser-known conferences that could jumble a few brackets this year, including Belmont (Atlantic Sun), Wichita State (Missouri Valley) and Coastal Carolina (Big South).

Every team dreams of a run like Butler's last year, but just a win or two is usually enough to turn an NCAA tournament into a thrill for a team like Oakland.

"Who knows what's going to happen?" Hudson said. "It's definitely a cool thing. I've been here for four years, and it's definitely a humbling experience to look back and see how far this program has come."