

SMU in NIT action tonight

Written by Administrator
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NEW YORK (AP) — The court at Madison Square Garden got quite a workout over the weekend with the East Regional of the NCAA tournament held there.

Four more college teams are back at the Garden in a hurry as the NIT semifinals will be played there Tuesday and the title game on Thursday.

To hear the coaches and players from the teams in the NIT, it's a thrill to play there regardless of the tournament's initials.

Clemson (23-13) meets SMU (26-9) in Tuesday's first game, with Florida State (22-13) facing Minnesota (23-13) in the second. All the semifinalists won third-round games at home, with Minnesota's eight-point win over Southern Mississippi the widest margin.

SMU coach Larry Brown is back in his old neighborhood, having grown up in Long Beach on Long Island. The 73-year-old Brown, in his 39th season as a head coach, went deepest into the memory file.

"I came to see the Globetrotters play when I was a kid," Brown said Monday. "I went to the matinee and evening games with my brother. It was an unbelievable thrill. I used to go to the Holiday Festival and NIT and the college doubleheaders whenever my brother or uncles would take me. It's always a thrill to watch games at the Garden and if you're lucky enough to play there, and I'm hopeful our kids will feel the same way."

The only Mustang who has played in Madison Square Garden is sophomore forward Markus Kennedy, who transferred to SMU after one season at Villanova.

"It is always a big deal to come to the Garden and it's such a great experience," said Kennedy, second in scoring at 12.2 points per game and leading SMU with a 7.0 rebound average. "The lights are definitely brighter out there. My teammates are excited about playing here, but they will handle it great."

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People have been impressed with the way SMU handled not being selected as an at-large team for the NCAA tournament. The Mustangs were the one team that seemed to have a legitimate argument about being passed over.

"It definitely hurt and the hard part was getting over not being selected after all the hard work we put in," Kennedy said. "But when we got to practice Monday it didn't matter. There are eight teams still playing basketball. A lot of other teams are home watching us play."

Another coach in the semifinals with Garden ties is Minnesota's Richard Pitino. Capping his first season with the Gophers, Pitino is back in a building where he spent a lot of time during his father's tenure with the local NBA franchise.

"Obviously when my dad was coach of the Knicks we went to the Garden a lot," he said. "My greatest memories at the Garden is when I was an assistant at Louisville. We won two Big East championships there and that was a lot of fun. Playing Syracuse on Saturday night with a lot of Syracuse fans in the gym — to beat them was a great thrill."

Clemson junior guard Damarcus Harrison said he and some of his teammates went to Brooklyn on Sunday to see the Nets play the Minnesota Timberwolves at Barclays Center. It was his second NBA game in person.

"It was magnificent. I didn't know how big the arenas are and all the people, and it was so loud," he said. "We are all excited to be playing in the Garden. These games are only going to help us next season as we get more confidence for the freshmen."

Florida State's Okaro White grew up in New York City before leaving for Clearwater, Fla. His memories of the Garden are limited.

"I know it sounds crazy, but I went there as a real young kid. But since I've grown up I haven't been there," he said. "I'm just as pumped up as everyone else who never played there before."

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It's one of the great experiences of your life as a basketball player to play there.

"And to be playing for a championship, that's huge. I've talked to all my teammates. It's huge. Coming to New York, period, is huge."