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Oakland well-prepared for tournament

Playing a rough non-conference schedule toughened the Golden Grizzlies.

By Jim Spadafore / The Detroit News

Associated Press

Rawle Marshall says it won't take long for the jitters to go away during tonight's play-in game against Alabama A&M

DAYTON, Ohio -- It was almost a nightmare the way Oakland University opened its basketball season.

Now it's Fantasy Island.

The Golden Grizzlies were 0-7 playing a tough non-conference schedule, which included an 85-54 loss at No. 1 Illinois and defeats against Xavier, Marquette, Texas A&M, Missouri, Kansas State and St. Louis. Later in the season, Oakland lost 92-75 at Michigan State.

But the Golden Grizzlies wanted to play against the best to help them get ready for the Mid-Continent Conference tournament.

It worked. The Golden Grizzlies (12-18), despite having the only losing record in the 65-team field, qualified for their first NCAA Tournament appearance by winning the league tournament. They will take on Alabama A&M (18-13) in a play-in game at 7 tonight at the University of Dayton. The winner advances to play No. 1 seed North Carolina on Friday at Charlotte, N.C.

Oakland coach Greg Kampe said he warned school president Gary Russi and athletic director Jack Mehl that he wanted to play a difficult non-conference schedule but they might not win many of them.

"I don't agree with it but I understand it now for the first time and you have to play by it in Division I at our level, the only thing that matters is the Tournament," Kampe said.

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"There's no rules let says you have to have a winning record to get in the NCAA Tournament. And our president (Russi) told me he doesn't care what our record is. We

wanted to play a tough non-conference schedule. We were on TV 17 times this season. We care about winning the league tournament and getting to the Big Dance."

Still, there were some fans who were disgruntled with Oakland's losing, a 9-18 record entering the Mid-Continent tournament. But then the Golden Grizzlies won three straight, capping it off with a 61-60 upset over host Oral Roberts (25-7) on Pierre Dukes' three-point shot with 1.3 seconds left.

Kampe said his team was prepared for the boisterous crowd in Tulsa because of playing at Illinois and Michigan State, where their crowds yell at a fever pitch.

Every time an opponent made a run against Oakland in the league tournament he reminded them of their past experiences in hostile environments.

"The (Oral Roberts) crowd went nuts but we didn't fold," Kampe said. "One of the things we said during timeouts this is nothing guys because we've been here before. This isn't the Izzone (MSU's student cheering section). This isn't the Orange Krush (Illinois' cheering section). I reminded them of that on 50 occasions during that (Mid-Con) tournament."

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Now Kampe and the Golden Grizzlies are media darlings.

"There were some fans and people who believed something was wrong, but our president and our athletic director know what we've tackled," Kampe said. "We made this transition to Division I and we've played some of the best teams in the country. We might end up losing by 25-30 points but we play some of the best. I really believe this schedule prepared us."

Well wishers

Kampe said he has heard from friends and coaches congratulating him and the Golden Grizzlies. Among the callers were Lions coach **Steve Mariucci**, MSU coach **Tom Izzo** and Marquette coach **Tom Crean**.

Izzo called in the wee hours.

"It's been great to hear from everyone of them," Kampe said. "Izzo called at 4 o'clock this morning. He's getting about as much sleep as I am."

Shooting machine

Oakland utilizes a $20,000 Noah basketball shooting system, which was purchased last fall. The Noah system uses a combination of camera, computer and speaker to help players improve their shooting.

"The idea is if you can consistently shoot the ball at the angle of release and learn how to do muscle memory of that angle you can make your shot," Kampe said.

No looking ahead

Kampe admits it'll be hard for both his team and Alabama A&M not to look ahead to a game against North Carolina.

But his players are focusing first on A&M.

"There's definitely going to be jitters the first couple of minutes, but then it'll go away," senior **Rawle Marshall** said.

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