

Underdog Oakland has Tigers' attention

Pastner expecting 'an absolute battle' with Golden Grizzlies

By Dan Wolken

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Just a few minutes after the University of Memphis completed its 81-49 victory Tuesday over Central Arkansas, the buzzword in the Tigers' locker room was Oakland.

Though the [Tigers](#) (3-1) don't play again until Monday night at FedExForum, coach [Josh Pastner](#) didn't waste any time moving the conversation to Memphis' next opponent. And by the time Pastner got done talking about [Oakland](#) (2-3) -- a university in Rochester, Mich., that plays in the [Summit League](#) -- one might have thought the Tigers were getting prepared to play the Lakers.

"Oakland will be a battle, an absolute battle," Pastner said. "They've lost a game or two, but they're well-coached, they're good, they have everyone back plus transfers, they're picked to win the conference and they can win a game or two in the NCAA Tournament."

While it's true Oakland presents one of the more intriguing matchups of Memphis' early schedule, what happens over the next four days is less about Oakland — which [lost 89-59 to top-ranked Kansas](#) on Wednesday — and more about how effectively the Tigers set a target and prepare over four days for a meaningful game.

After working only on conditioning Wednesday, Pastner gave Memphis today off and will resume with two-a-day practices Friday and Saturday.

"They're a possible Sweet 16 team," sophomore guard [Elliot Williams](#) said. "I haven't seen them, but I'll watch a lot of film. I heard they're a great team and we have to be ready. We have to prepare for them like it's an NCAA Tournament game."

Based on the comments from Memphis' players, Pastner has already spent a lot of time talking about Oakland. Tabbed by multiple publications as one of the mid-major teams to look out for this season, the Golden Grizzlies put together an ambitious non-conference schedule with games against Wisconsin, Kansas, Michigan State, Oregon and Syracuse.

Though some of the luster came off Oakland when it dropped its opener against Eastern Michigan, Pastner insists it's a team capable of beating the Tigers if they don't play well. But if Oakland pulls the upset, it won't be because the Tigers didn't show the underdog enough respect.

"They're a great team," senior guard [Willie Kemp](#) said. "They have their whole team

back and some transfers in, they're picked to win their league and they have an NBA prospect down low. We have to be ready to play."

Though Oakland is indeed among the favorites to win the Summit, along with traditional power [Oral Roberts](#) and [IUPUI](#) (which plays the Tigers on Dec. 28), beating Memphis would be a huge accomplishment. In the last five years, Oregon is the only high-major opponent Oakland has beaten.

So why is Memphis so wary of Oakland? It may be more about the Tigers. Though they earned a measure of respect for their 57-55 loss to No. 1 Kansas, they ultimately need to win some games that will look good for the NCAA Tournament committee. If the Tigers don't take advantage of opportunities against the likes of Syracuse, Tennessee and Gonzaga, they won't have any margin for error in the rest of the non-conference schedule.

"This is a résumé game for either team for postseason," Pastner said. "We've got to play much better. They're very good, I'm telling you."

Oakland is a scary kind of team for Memphis because of experience -- the Golden Grizzlies have two seniors and three juniors in their starting lineup -- and size. Their best player, 6-11 forward [Keith Benson](#), averages a double-double and is on the NBA radar.

Memphis, on the other hand, will undoubtedly spend the next few days working on rebounding and toughness under the basket. The Tigers are only out-rebounding their opponents by plus-1.5 per game and were even on the boards with Central Arkansas despite a major athleticism advantage. Pastner told his players the same kind of rebounding effort would be a "recipe for an L" against Oakland.

"We've got a tough one coming up," junior guard [Roburt Sallie](#) said. "Oakland is picked to win their conference, they've got a pro, and it's going to be a great game."

Tigers' next game

Who: Oakland University, located in Rochester, Mich.

When, where: 7 p.m. Monday, FedExForum



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