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How does a No. 5 seed sound?



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Richard Pitino held his son, Jack, in his arms and hoisted him in the air as the celebration got started. In front of him, his Gophers men's basketball team jumped up from the couches and cheered.

"I couldn't see," Pitino said. "I was excited that we were a 5 (seed). Then the players couldn't get out of the way; I'm trying to see, 'who are we going to play?'"

They'll play Middle Tennessee State in the first round of the NCAA tournament. There's been talk for much of the season that the Gophers would be part of the big dance this year. With Sunday's selection show, it's official.

The seed, their position in the bracket and the location are all "awesome," according to starting center Reggie Lynch, who watched the Selection Show with his teammates and other supporters at a private viewing party at U.S. Bank Stadium.

"Even though we knew our name was going to be called, the emotions and the shivering and getting ready for it is still there," Lynch said. "Even though we know it's coming."

The Gophers (24-9) have a No. 5 seed next to their name in the South region and will play 12-seed Middle Tennessee State on Thursday at about 3 p.m. in Milwaukee. It's the first time going to the big dance under Pitino and the first for the Gophers since 2013.

The No. 5 seed is the highest in program history, though Pitino said he doesn't worry about that. Another highlight of the draw is playing in Milwaukee, a destination fans can easily reach after just a few hours in the car. Location, location, location. It's the spot Pitino said he hoped for.

If fans can make the drive and create a home-court advantage, that's huge, Pitino said.

"Other than that, you throw all the seeds away because they really don't matter," Pitino said.

This will be the fifth matchup between the Gophers and Middle Tennessee. They last played in 2012 when the Gophers won 78-72 in the NIT quarterfinals. Coach Kermit Davis led his team to a 30-4 record this season, and they've won their last 10 games. They beat No. 2 seed Michigan State in last year's tournament.

Lynch agreed that the seed doesn't matter when it comes to the play on the court. He sighted Michigan winning the Big Ten Tournament over the weekend as a No. 8 seed.

"No game is an easy basketball game, especially during March," Lynch said.

The Gophers fell to Michigan in the tournament semifinals, 84-77.

The Gophers had an incredible turnaround this season and have generated plenty of excitement winning back fans. They're back in the NCAA Tournament with a chance to make a run.

If there's one fly in the ointment, it's the sudden lack of depth after losing starter Akeem Springs to a season-ending injury. He left with four minutes remaining in the Big Ten Tournament game Friday against Michigan State with an Achilles injury.

The loss certainly shouldn't be blown out of proportion. Springs isn't the whole team. There's still Nate Mason, Jordan Murphy, Lynch and Amir Coffey, for example. Still, the loss hurts for the Gophers. Springs was their main guy from 3-point range, leading the team in attempts per game with 5.5 and making 67 in 32 games.

Springs has been touted by his coach and teammates as a vocal leader for the Gophers all year. He'll still be there on the sideline, Dupree McBrayer said.

"He's kept a smile on his face the whole way," McBrayer said. "He doesn't want us to see him down. That's what makes him great."

Springs' absence will likely mean more minutes for McBrayer and also, Pitino said, guys like Stephon Sharp, Michael Hurt and Ahmad Gilbert Jr. They'll have three days to prepare them for Middle Tennessee.

One other tidbit: Pitino and his father, Rick Pitino, will become the first father-son duo to coach in the tourney in the same year. Rick's team Louisville got the No. 2 seed in the Midwest region and will face No. 15 Jacksonville State on Friday. Richard said he's very happy their teams weren't pitted against each other in the brackets. It wouldn't have been right, he said.

"I would have hated for that storyline to have been about us," Pitino said.