

Verlin brothers ready to rekindle sibling rivalry

By Dale Grummert Of The Tribune

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Don Verlin



Ron Verlin



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When Idaho coach Don Verlin renews a rivalry with his twin brother tonight, the dynamics will clearly be different. He's calling the shots this time, whereas in the past they both played support roles.

But Verlin seems to know what kind of atmosphere to expect when the Vandals play Pacific at Stockton, Calif., in the quarterfinals of the CollegeInsider.com tournament (CIT). Tipoff is at 7 p.m.

"I'm predicting a low-scoring, physical game," Verlin said Sunday. "It's going to be very similar to a league contest, where both teams know what the other is doing."

In other words, he's expecting an echo of the lively Big West Conference rivalry that developed between Utah State and Pacific in the late 1990s.

For seven years until Utah State joined the Western Athletic Conference in 2005, Don and Ron Verlin went head-to-head at least twice a season while assisting longtime mentors - Stew Morrill of Utah State and Bob Thomason of Pacific,

respectively - whose precise, deft-shooting teams seem almost interchangeable at times.

"Very similar - almost identical," Don Verlin said, "and that's what made them such good games. Hopefully it will be a good game Monday night."

Don Verlin, the first of the 43-year-old brothers from Loomis, Calif., to land a collegiate head-coaching job, has swiftly invigorated a long-struggling Idaho program, tying for third place in the WAC and claiming the Vandals' first postseason win since 1982.

That the latter breakthrough came in this fledgling CIT, designed primarily for mid-major schools that miss out on greener pastures, doesn't seem to trouble Verlin and his players.

"I transferred here to get this program, Idaho, on the map, and that's exactly what we're doing," Idaho point guard Mac Hopson, formerly of Washington State, said after Idaho's 69-67 first-round CIT win over Drake last week. "I'm not showing it, but I'm really excited inside. It's just huge for our program."

But the Vandals (17-15) will be decided underdogs against the Tigers (20-12), who have won 80 percent of their home games over the past two decades.

In the CIT, the value of playing a home game is treated literally, with host teams required to put forth a \$28,500 guarantee to cover the opponent's travel costs. Home teams promptly won seven of eight first-round games last week, with Pacific ousting Portland 82-76 at Stockton.

During the Verlin brothers' Big West rivalry, Utah State won nine of 15 games against Pacific. In their last encounter, the Aggies won 65-52 in the title game of the conference tournament in 2005, avenging two regular-season losses to the Tigers.

The Verlin vs. Verlin aspects of the duels were especially pointed because Don specializes in offense and his brother handles primarily defense.

Not that it's easy to draw distinctions between them in general.

"When we were kids, he was a little more fiery than I was," Don Verlin said. "But I'm not sure that's the case now."

After all year, one of them's a head coach.

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