

Vandals ready for rivalry game

Idaho hosts BSU tonight at 7

By Sandra Kelly, Daily News staff writer

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Idaho coach Don Verlin admits he doesn't know a lot about the in-state rivalry between Idaho and Boise State.

He knows it's a big game. He knows it's a game Vandals throughout Idaho look forward to and take seriously.

For Verlin and his Vandals, though, it's a WAC game on their home court, and they need the W.

"We haven't talked about it at all, to be honest," Verlin said. "We have to treat Boise State just like we treat Nevada, New Mexico State or anyone else. We do know it is a rivalry game, and we embrace the rivalry, but it is another game for us. We haven't gotten caught up in all that stuff."

It helps that four of Idaho's five starters haven't played against Boise State.

This time last year Mac Hopson was riding the pine as a redshirt while Kashiff Watson, Marvin Jefferson and Brandon Wiley were honing their skills at the junior college level.

The Vandals have mixed and matched those skills with other transfer players and those who are Vandal veterans, and the results have surprised many.

Idaho enters tonight's game 9-10 overall and 3-3 in the WAC. Coaches throughout the conference have said playing Idaho is no longer a game they can mark as a win when they are flipping through their schedules.

"Surprised? Not really. When we recruited we worked hard on getting good guys and good people who wanted to work together and be a good basketball team," Verlin said. "Surprised at how well we've done in the WAC? Yes. We've gone on the road, and except for the La. Tech game we've competed right down to the wire. We won in Nevada, went to the wire with Utah State and at New Mexico State. I'm very happy and a little surprised at how well we've competed on the road, and I think we're getting better and better every game."

The Broncos have had their way with the Vandals in the past. They have won 13 straight against Idaho, but BSU coach Greg Graham said despite the record, he's never headed into Moscow thinking they are matched up against a patsy.

"It's always a different game for us," Graham said. "It's always been a rival game. ... They are playing well and they have a very good record at home."

Graham said Idaho started a little slow, but after adjusting to each other and a brand new coaching staff, the team is playing well.

"They are playing very well, and it's a game that will be a tough one for us," Graham said.

The Broncos (14-5, 5-2) have a number of weapons. Solid guard Anthony Thomas averages 11.7 points a game, while Mark Sanchez averages 7 points in conference play, but 12.6 overall. He also leads BSU in rebounds, and he shoots 68 percent from the free throw line.

Paul Noonan and Kurt Cunningham also average nearly 10 points a game, while Iko Okoye leads the WAC in blocked shots with 2.57 a game.

The only loss the Vandals have in Cowan Spectrum this year was to Washington State just before Christmas, and Verlin said he's counting on the home court intensity to help his team.

"Playing in the Dome is different for most people," Verlin said. "It's the only dome in the conference, and it's tough to shoot in our place. Our guys do a great job of bringing it. ... I don't know if it's any one thing. They like playing at home and they are excited about it."

Verlin said he may not understand the intricacies of the rivalry game, but he said he knows Boise State is a quality team.

"They've beaten us 13 straight times," he said. "I don't think the guys will get caught up in all the rivalry stuff. We want to beat Boise - and Nevada and Utah State and San Jose State. The important thing is to focus on the task at hand, because Boise State is a very good team."

Tipoff for tonight's game is set for 7 in the Cowan Spectrum.

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