

MSU vs. Oklahoma in NCAAs: Scouting report, pick

By Joe Rexrode, Detroit Free Press

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Free Press sports writer Joe Rexrode scouts Friday night's East Regional semifinal game between No. 7 seed MSU and No. 3 seed Oklahoma:

Backcourts

The matchup of the game is MSU's Denzel Valentine on Big 12 player of the year Buddy Hield. Valentine has had an outstanding defensive run lately — especially the job he did on Dez Wells and then Sam Dekker in the Big Ten tourney — but Hield never stops attacking. MSU also needs Valentine to match or exceed his total number of field goals in the tournament so far — five. Jordan Woodard gets into the lane and creates for Oklahoma, though like adversary Lourawls (Tum Tum) Nairn he is not much of a shooter. The shooter is Isaiah Cousins — 45.3% from three — and another key here will be his performance from outside vs. Travis Trice's. Trice is playing the best ball of his life.

Edge: Even

Frontcourts

Branden Dawson can guard either of Oklahoma's big men, and he'll probably see both Houston transfer TaShawn Thomas (6-foot-8, 242 pounds, 11.4 points, 6.5 rebounds) and Gonzaga transfer Ryan Spangler (6-8, 235, 9.9 points, 8.2 rebounds), while perhaps switching out to Hield at times. The question is which of those two guys will be dealing with Dawson. Spangler is a relentless rebounder who can shoot a bit, while Thomas does most of his work close to the basket. MSU starting center Gavin Schilling had his best game in a while in Sunday's win over Virginia, with most of his contribution coming in the form of perfectly executed defensive help. The Spartans need more of that from him.

Edge: Even



The MSU basketball team waves to fans at the Carrier Dome after the Spartans' NCAA tournament practice March 26, 2015, in Syracuse, N.Y. (Photo: Rod Sanford, Lansing State Journal)

Benches

Oklahoma's top reserve is guard Frank Booker, a 6-4 guard who aids the pressure defense and is third on the team with 36 three-pointers. The Sooners also get help from 6-1 guard Dinjiyl Walker and forwards D.J. Bennett and Khadeem Lattin. MSU's bench has been huge in the past few weeks, though Bryn Forbes' surge is more recent than that. Matt Costello will be important in this game inside, and the Spartans need Marvin Clark Jr., Alvin Ellis and perhaps Colby Wollenman to give good minutes. If the Spartans can get some mileage out of their depth, they'll be better late.

Edge: MSU

Coaching

Lon Kruger's ability to take programs and turn them around quickly is incredible, really. He wins everywhere, almost right away. He has Oklahoma fans realizing that March isn't just for spring football anymore, with more momentum for this program since Billy Tubbs roamed the sidelines and Mookie Blaylock led the press in the late 1980s. Kruger has been to one Final Four, with Florida in 1994. Needless to say, though, Tom Izzo has established himself as one of the best coaches in NCAA tournament history. It should be noted that the Sweet 16 is Izzo's least favorite stop before the Final Four — he's a human 8-4 in this round.

Edge: MSU

Overall

This is a really interesting situation for MSU in terms of style. For much of this season, a team that wanted to play fast would have been embraced warmly by the Spartans. Big Ten teams try to slow MSU down as a rule, and this MSU team has been much better in transition than in the halfcourt. But that halfcourt offense has become a strength, and MSU's defenders haven't had to worry much about getting back this season. They do Friday night. The Sooners have the skill and the athleticism to win a fast game against the Spartans. The guess here is that it settles into a middling pace and that MSU continues this dream run with just enough stops and important shots — and another big dose of Dawson.

Prediction: MSU 72, Oklahoma 67

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Check out his MSU blog at freep.com/heyjoe.