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Cal Men's Basketball at 2K Classic Recap

By [Ruey Yen](#) on Nov 26 2014, 5:22p [3](#)



Bears finally got the better of Syracuse, an unexpected nemesis for the last few years. - Jim O'Connor-USA TODAY Sports [x](#)

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Let's take another look at that big Syracuse win from last week (and the game against Texas)!

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I had the pleasure of watching our sturdy [Golden Bears](#) in action for two games at the Madison Square Garden. The [California Golden Bears](#), of course, got a signature win against Syracuse. Here are some additional looks and thoughts on a pretty exciting two days of Cal men's basketball.

For a much more professional cut of the highlights (from the ESPN2 broadcast but mixed with the radio calls), check out this video from the official Cal Bears youtube page.



Some personal story (feel free to skip this section)

For those who have met me or have been keeping track of what I say back when I start writing with the "LEastCoastBears" handle, you would know that I used to live around the DC area and I've played a role in the game viewing of the Cal DC club. How I got suckered into doing that had to do with the 2009 Cal-Syracuse game in the Coaches vs. Cancer tournament that used to take place at Madison Square Garden (but has now moved over to Brooklyn to be in the Barclay Center). In DC, the Cal alumni group does/did share a bar with the Syracuse folks near the Dupont Circle area. The arrangement was basically that Cal has got the priority for Football but Syracuse gets the priority for basketball. The Cal-Syracuse game seems like a natural thing to have a joint viewing. In case you don't remember, the 2009-10 season was the 2nd year of Mike Montgomery as the Cal head coach, and that was the team that eventually won the first Pac-10 title in forever. Cal, picked as the favorite to win the Pac in the preseason, was overrated with a No.13 ranking.

Anyhow, no other Cal folks really cared about changing their Thursday night plan to watch this game, and given how the Bears wasn't competitive after Jamal Boykins picked up two quick fouls (which caused the first official timeout), I was the only Cal folks in a packed bar of Syracuse folks by halftime. Thanks to this, I was soon appointed some type of game viewing role within the club, even if the majority of the men's basketball game starts super late in East Coast time.

Fastforward to the NCAA tournament in 2013, when Cal drew Syracuse in the 2nd round of a game that took place in San Jose. Out here in DC, we had a joint game viewing with the Syracuse club again - the added bonus here was that the winner of that game would be coming to DC for the regional in the next week. Given this is the NCAA tournament, there was now a pretty healthy Cal crowd. Unlike our usual joint viewing of things with Stanford alum or the occasional other Pac-12 folks, some Syracuse fans didn't quite enjoy sharing the same bar with opposing fans. While the one drunk Syracuse fan, who did start threatening people when he thought [Allen Crabbe](#) and the Bears are getting back in that game, does not represent the fanbase (the guy ultimately didn't do anything anyhow), it does add to the fuel of desiring that win over the [Orange](#).

No personal story for the Syracuse game last year, just thought that we would have made that game a lot more interesting if [Richard Solomon](#) didn't have to miss the game after being poked in the eyes by Arkansas the night before.

Bottomline, **I personally really wanted to see a win over the [Syracuse Orange](#).**

Madison Square Garden



Madison Square Garden does have the name "the world's most famous arena" trademarked, but it's also considered by some as "the mecca of basketball." This is apparently the 80th year of college basketball being played at MSG.

After making the trip to MSG for the women's basketball vs. UConn game last December, I was very excited to be back for the two games this year.

For Thursday's game, there were quite a few Cal fans in attendance, even if obviously there were even more Syracuse fans (Syracuse's media guide cover shows that they have "New York's College Team" trademarked, they also refer to MSG as "home away from home"). In addition to plenty of the Cal in NYC alum coming out to root for the Bears, I even spoke to a few folks who traveled to NYC specifically for the Thursday's game.

The "GO" "BEARS" chant was audible several times during the Thursday game. While I thought it was perhaps a bit premature, the "BEAR TERRITORY" chant was also audible with about 5 to 6 of game time left.

The Cal crowd for Friday is a lot smaller. Part of this is obviously logistical since one doesn't know when the Bears will play on Friday until late Thursday night. The more hardcore Cal fans also chose to travel back on Friday for the Big Game.



Some basketball related thoughts:

The Cal rotation is going to be just 9 men deep this year [**Late note:** Apparently there is news now that Chauca is clear to play, not sure whether he will crack the rotation though]:

We have the starters in [David Kravish](#), [Christian Behrens](#), [Jabari Bird](#), [Jordan Mathews](#), and [Tyrone Wallace](#).

Then we have a backup center in Kingsley Okoroh, a backup stretch 4 in [Dwight Tarwater](#), the long winspan of Roger Moute a Bidias, and another PG in [Sam Singer](#).

Out of the rest of the guys who traveled to MSG with the team: I don't suspect we will see much of [Nick Hamilton](#), [Cole Welle](#), and Brenden Glapion. Kameron Rooks is the other Cal players who I spotted in NYC (which is not unexpected since the other walk-on kids don't typically get to make the road trips) and he's of course out for the season.



David Kravish is the senior leader on this team. He is very well spoken in the press conference. The Integrated Biology (who also said that he is pre-med) major was asked about his post-graduation plan. He is starting to lean toward playing pro-ball. While Kravish has always been a good outside shooter, he has extended his range to the college 3's this year. He made a 3 in both games.

It's a small sample size, but David Kravish has been good at not picking up cheap fouls. That's all a part of the senior leadership.



Jabari Bird is still a work-in-progress. He is definitely gifted enough athletically to shoot that outside shot over people, but he still needs to bulk up more to finish better around the rim. Given his size, Bird definitely has a future in the NBA. Unless he takes a huge step forward during the conference play, I am not sure he is a surefire 1st round pick if he goes pro right now. Defensively, Bird has made quite a few glaring mistakes. The sophomore is pretty solid right now but can get so much better. I hope we see him live up to his potential in a Cal uniform.

Jordan Mathews was the MVP of the Syracuse game. He carried the Bears for a stretch in the 2nd half. Given how well he plays in MSG and in LA last year, I would say that Mathews definitely shines under the spotlight.



Tyrone Wallace gives the Bears yet another likely future NBA player in the current starting lineup. It's fair to say that Ty is still figuring things out as the primary ball handler. On that aspect of his game, he is a pleasant surprise to me. Given how he played last year, I certainly thought the learning curve would be steeper. He did have 4 turnovers to 6 assists against Syracuse, but I thought he did a fine job in leading the Bears to aggressively attack the Syracuse zone (that understandably is a bit raw). Against Texas, Wallace had to take over the game to keep the Bears in it. If fantasy college basketball is a thing, I would love to get a swiss-army knife guy like Tyrone Wallace on my team.

At least so far this year, it does appear that Behrens is good enough to play. Sure, his minute in the Texas game is limited due to foul trouble, but he is able to provide some minutes and those 5 fouls.

The biggest difference between the Syracuse and Texas games? Christian Behrens scored the first points against Syracuse but quickly picked up 2 fouls against the much bigger Texas.

Kingsley Okoroh exceeded my previously low expectation of him. Since Kameron Rooks is out for the year, a big question for this season is whether Okoroh can provide at least 10-15 minutes a game of quality play. I was pleasantly surprised by how well Okoroh moved to find the open space (for some easy dunks) and how he pretty much held his own against the big Texas team. I think his continual development this season may determine whether the Bears will be in the middle back of the Pac or amongst the top 3 team in the conference.

Tarwater's shot making has been great so far. I think he is a more versatile player than [Jeff Powers](#) was for the Bears last year. He can fulfill that stretch 4 position that Monty tried to use Rickey Kreklow for at times last year.



Roger Moute a Bidias can provide some solid minutes. He and his wingspan are a factor defensively for the Bears, even if his good work does not register in the boxscore at all.

Sam Singer is pretty good defensively, and he is on his way to become the next [Jorge Gutierrez](#) (and Singer is even taller and bigger than Jorge...if his listed height and weight are to be believed). Singer's shooting needs more work though.

The Texas game, possibly due to both foul trouble AND players showing visible signs of being tired, had quite a few interesting mix of lineup. While Tyrone Wallace was the one constant, everyone else was swap around pretty interchangeably. I will try to keep an eye on whether Cuonzo Martin does settle on a set lineups or whether he will continue to mix things up (if you're going to mix things up, that is obviously going to be done this early in the season).

Cuonzo Martin

For both games, the Cal bench of on the side of the press section. I got a decent look at the coach demeanor of Cuonzo Martin during both games.

The first thing that jumps out at me was how Cuonzo stands for the entire game. What is particularly interesting is that there is actually no seat saved for him on the sidelines.



While he is constantly standing and yelling out instructions (often on defense, and quite a few time specifically to the freshman Kingsly Okoroh), I thought Martin is quite calm. This is kind of a contrast to Mike Montgomery who is much more animated when he does get out of his seat.

Jordan Mathews was asked about his new head coach after the Syracuse game. He said, "If you are playing defense right by him, he's on the sidelines talking you through the whole defensive possession. It helps because, even though we have our own energy, we feed off his energy."

I do like the focus, intense, but not at all frantic that Cuonzo Martin imparts on his team that doesn't vary super drastically whether the Bears are ahead (in the Syracuse game) or behind (like in the Texas game).

It is also worth noting how this Cal team is playing a fun up-tempo game, unlike Cuonzo's previous Tennessee team. I would say that Cuonzo is adepting to the team that he inherited quite well, so far.

My impression of the Cal Bears team from the 2K Classic

Does the split in MSG last week change my outlook on the rest of the year for the Golden Bears? Heading into the week, I did like the chance of the Bears getting a split. Although I knew that Syracuse was young and beatable, the smart money would have been on the Bears beating an Iowa on Friday instead.

The win over Syracuse should be a much better quality win (not to mention how playing Texas will help our Strength of Schedule). All this might be the difference between the Bears making the tournament vs. another trip to the NIT comes next March. We do have to remember that there have only been 4 games that counted so far, but it is super nice to have this Syracuse win under our belt.

I do think we have to take the Syracuse win with a huge grain of salt given how poorly the Orange played. While I would love to credit the Bears for their solid D, I do think the Syracuse inexperience was largely to blame. How the Bears held the Texas Longhorn kind of within check in the second game may be a much more encouraging sign from the defensive stand point.

Unlike two seasons ago, when the Bears were also predominantly a team that leans on their wing players. This year's squad has the ability to make 3's. This, the possibility for the team to get hot from the perimeter, should allow the Bears to pull off an upset or two this season. My previous concern on the Cal frontline was alleviated by the play of Okoroh and Behrens. While it is easy to get too excited and say how the Bears showed that they have NBA-level players in the Syracuse game and thus we will easily be a top 40 team all year, I do think that is what the Bears have demonstrated.

So my previous expectation of the Bears being a top 60 team this year has been upgrade to think the Bears as a top 40 (possibly even top 30) team after this tournament. We have enough talent to do well, but also glaring holes that needs to be mended as the season goes on.

Sights from around the tournament

The official name of this tournament is "2K Classic benefiting Wounded Warrior Project"

This tournament is raising awareness and money for the wounded warrior project. I do believe they are still taking donations for this.



Somewhat paradoxically, all the teams except for Cal, had a "wounded warrior" present to be recognized during the game. Syracuse actually had two guys.

2K Sports is a video game company, so it was no surprise that the halftime entertainment is watching a couple guys playing video game on the big screen. These guys are no esports "athlete" though (if it was Starcraft, though, [Cal is the current collegiate champions](#)), and they had to play with NBA team.



Like the Cal athletics department have done several times on the road, like in Kansas City for Women's Volleyball final four and NCAA tournament, a local area high school band is invited to play the Cal fight song among other things.



This version of Cal Band Jr hails from somewhere in New Jersey.

Cal actually provide these kids a "Cal Basketball t-shirt". The Texas counterparts were just wearing plain white t-shirts for some weird reason (where's all that Longhorn Network money?).

Friday Game

The Bears took in a part of the consolation game before their game.



Syracuse fought off a furious late comeback attempt by Iowa, to make the Bears' win over 'Cuse to look that much better.

Friday was actually a pretty tough day for Cal Athletics. Men's Water Polo were beaten by Long Beach State, which effectively ended their shot at a NCAA tournament berth. Cal Men's Basketball lost to Texas. Cal Women's Soccer season also came to an end when they lost to Florida 2-1 in the NCAA 2nd round.

I was checking in on that game via my computer before the Cal-Texas game and during timeouts.



This was the final result for the Friday contest:



Texas looked pretty legit as a top 10 team. They got to hoist the tournament trophies at the end (Cal's Kravish was named to the all tournament team).



Thursday's win

The main point of this post is to focus on the big win on Thursday. So here are more images and videos of this signature moment.

From my seat with a homage to Paul Greengrass' shaky cam style, this is the end of the Cal victory over Syracuse.



Here is that splendid final tally from Thursday night.



Bears are happy about this win.



With this being a "neutral" court, the Bears saved their best celebration for the locker room.