

THE CITADEL EMBODYING COLLEGE BASKETBALL'S SLOWEST SEASON

By Danny Reed

A recent blog post by college basketball stats aficionado Ken Pomeroy said the 2014-15 college basketball season could end up being "the slowest-paced season that college hoops has ever seen."

This assessment does not speak to the overall length of the season itself but rather the decrease in number of possessions that each team has had in a given game and the lower point totals that are resulting from that.

Coincidentally, The Citadel has typified this year's trend more than any of the other 350 Division I teams.

The Dogs rank last (351st) in the NCAA in Adjusted Tempo, a metric that Pomeroy uses to calculate the number of possessions a team has per 40 minutes of action.

"We're still trying to do the same things that we've done in the past, but I think we've got a more mature group," said fifth-year head coach Chuck Driesell, who prepared his Bulldogs for their SoCon opener hosting Chattanooga on Thursday. "More importantly, what our guys have done a good job of is understanding their roles, understanding what a good shot is for them and what a good shot is for their teammates."

Through the first three-plus weeks of the season, Division I teams are averaging just over 68 possessions per game, the lowest such mark in the last 14 years. There have been 31 games in which teams have combined for fewer than 100 points. Last season at the same point, that total was three games.

Over the last few years, this slower trend can be attributed to a slew of sweeping rule changes that have limited defensive contact with the ball handler, and even more ideological shifts in the ongoing block-charge interpretation dilemma have thus far reverted back to what was seen during the 2012-13 season, which to this point is considered the slowest-paced campaign on record.

"I think the issue with the charge call may be preventing or discouraging teams from attacking the paint," said Pomeroy. "It's one of the overwhelming factors for why we have lower game scores and fewer possessions."

Since the length of a majority of possessions is being extended in order to decrease the overall number of possessions, the ability to efficiently score while having fewer possessions becomes paramount.

This measurement is known as points per possession, a way to more accurately gauge offensive efficiency. For example, most teams usually average one point per possession. Above average teams average around 1.1 points per possession, while elite teams measure 1.2 points per possession and up.

The Citadel would hardly be classified as a fast-paced team. In fact, since these metrics began tracking for the 2001-02 season, the Dogs have only twice averaged more than 67 possessions per game.

This year, though, the Dogs have been historically pace-conscious.

"Our offense must find a way to effectively manufacture points by getting the best shot available," said Bulldog assistant coach Rob Burke. "Shot selection, both where the shot is taken and who is taking the shot, is the most important part of the offense."

In Driesell's first four seasons as The Citadel's head coach, his offenses have averaged 64.9 points per game on 64.4 possessions per game for a fairly decent 1.001 points per possession average.

Through the first eight games of this season, The Citadel is averaging just 57.8 possessions per game but is scoring 66.6 points per contest for an impressive 1.15 points per possession, which would easily be the highest mark for the Cadets since these metrics began tracking, even higher than 1.06 points per possession accrued during the 20-win 2008-09 season.

That doesn't seem like much of a difference, but when that tenth of a point is factored in regarding more than 2,000 possessions throughout the season, that difference could be staggering.

Driesell noted that the experience of this year's squad has been vital in the statistical shift.

"We're being smarter and playing more as a team to find the higher percentage shot somewhere within the possession," he opined. "They're not thinking about running the play now, they're thinking about reading the defense."

Those numbers are somewhat skewed, however, since The Citadel has played against three non-Division I opponents. Pomeroy's numbers, though, take that into account, as the Dogs rank seventh out of the 10 SoCon schools nationally in adjusted offense, or the amount of points a team would score per 100 possessions adjusted per the level of the opponent.

The point is that through the first quarter of the 2014-15 season, The Citadel's offense is certainly on the right path.

Take this year's season opener against VMI in the All-Military Classic at West Point. The Keydets lead the country in adjusted tempo (77.7 possessions/game) so far and have led the NCAA in scoring six times in the last nine seasons. The Dogs took only 42 shots for the game but averaged 1.1 points per possession, while holding VMI to its lowest number of possessions in head coach Duggar Baucom's 10-year tenure.

VMI won the game on a last-second three, but the game was played at The Citadel's pace, and the offense was remarkably efficient.

"I think much of this comes down to personnel," added Pomeroy. "Every team has a different situation and looks to adopt a style that's best for them in order to be successful."

In fact, over the last 14 seasons, The Citadel has averaged at least one point per possession for an entire season seven times, averaging 13 wins during those seasons. In the other seven seasons, the Dogs averaged just six wins.

To further illustrate the importance of this statistic, the Dogs have not won a game in which they averaged less than one point per possession since Feb. 18, 2012, a 48-46 decision at Chattanooga, which also marked the fewest points in a victory for the Cadets in 40 years.

Since Pomeroy's figures are adjusted for competition, The Citadel's total numbers will never look appealing amongst national leaders. So, those numbers should be compared to other like teams, i.e. the Southern Conference, in order to have an accurate picture.

A particular SoCon school that has utilized these means for a number of years is the Wofford Terriers, who have led the conference in scoring defense in three consecutive seasons and have made three of the last five NCAA Tournaments.

Offensively, Wofford averages just over 62 possessions per game, which ranks 318th out of 351 teams in adjusted tempo. The Terriers score just over 68 points per game, good for 1.1 points per possession, a very efficient offense according to the aforementioned metric.

So, can college basketball continue to get slower or will more changes surface? Since official rule changes occur on a two-year cycle, next season could see more alterations.

"I could see a 30-second shot clock and widening the charge circle among other things," Pomeroy said. "But there has to be a fundamental change in the way the game is called in order to reverse this trend."

For Driesell, the game still comes down to executing a specific plan, one that fits the best interest of the team.

"We're trying to play good basketball and get the right guy the right shot that he's comfortable with," he said.