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NEW YORK (AP) \_ Stanford students have always excelled on the boards. This year, so does the Cardinal basketball team.

Stanford outrebounds its opponents by almost nine per game, the third best margin in the nation. That's a statistic that worries Oklahoma coach Billy Tubbs, whose team plays Stanford for the NIT championship tonight at Madison Square Garden.

"They're a very physical team," Tubbs said. "They're just bigger and stronger than we are."

Stanford is an elite academic school whose students usually get top scores on their college board entrance exams. But it hasn't won any postseason championships in basketball since the 1942 NCAA title.

That could change if Oklahoma gets overpowered by Stanford's formidable front line \_ 6-foot-9 center Adam Keefe and a pair of 6-7 forwards, Andrew Vlahov and Deshon Wingate.

Keefe, a two-time, All Pac-10 selection, is averaging 21.8 points and 9.5 rebounds per game. He and Vlahov combined for 44 points and 21 rebounds in Stanford's 73-71 semifinal victory over Massachusetts.

"Adam is a great player," Tubbs said. "He's big and strong, but he's also a good athlete."

Like Oklahoma (20-14), Stanford had a mediocre regular season. The Cardinal (19-13) finished in a five-way tie for fifth in the Pac-10 after losing four of its last five games.

"I don't think anybody in their wildest dreams thought we would be in this place at this time," Stanford coach Mike Montgomery said. "This is a tremendous boost for our program."

However, Montgomery is worried that his team may be tired after a hectic week of travel. Stanford won road games at Wisconsin and Southern Illinois last week before coming to New York.

"Fatigue is definitely a concern, especially with Adam playing 40 minutes the last three games," Montgomery said. "I'm glad we'll be getting those TV timeouts."

After playing poorly the second half of the season, Tubbs' team was so discouraged it almost turned down an NIT invitation. Now the Sooners are glad they accepted.

With four straight victories, the Sooners have extended their streak of 20-win seasons to 10 and made it to their first NIT final. Not bad for a team that tied for sixth in the Big Eight and lost 11 of 13 games heading into the NIT.

"The NIT has been great for us," Tubbs said. "It's given us a chance to end our season on a positive note."

When Tubbs led Oklahoma to the NIT semifinals in 1982, it served as a springboard for a highly successful decade. He hopes this year's NIT performance will do the same thing for the Sooners, who advanced to the final by beating Colorado 88-78 Monday night.

"The final four of the NIT was the starting point for our program 10 years ago. Hopefully, this will get us started on another 10 years of similar basketball at Oklahoma," Tubbs said.

Unlike most Oklahoma teams in the 1980s, this year's squad doesn't have a star like Wayman Tisdale, Stacey King or Mookie Blaylock. But the Sooners do have a balanced scoring attack, with four players averaging double figures and two others averaging 9.7 points per game. Their leading scorer is freshmen forward Jeff Webster, who gets 18.7 points and 5.5 rebounds per game.

"They've got a lot of quickness and speed," Montgomery said. "It's going to take a great effort for us to keep up with them."

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