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Preparation is a tale of the tape

Eastern scouts foe with a week's worth of video

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Coach Jim Boone and assistants Glenn Gutierrez, Dave Pilipovich and Adrian Townsend scour any film they can get, looking for an advantage, pattern or weakness in the opposition. Each play and player is meticulously followed, written down and reviewed.

For hours on end, coaches isolate themselves at home and in their Convocation Center offices, watching and analyzing an average of five opposition games per week.

For Boone who sports a copy of Sun Tzu's Art of War on his desk, preparation is of paramount importance. The Eagle's head coach quotes the Chinese general in regard to his scouting philosophy:

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."

"I actually enjoy watching tape," said Gutierrez, recalling the days when he could scout opposing teams in person at California University and Robert Morris.

He quickly snaps back to the present and hits the play button again.

But will a week's worth of long hours yield a win against Central Michigan?

Coaches hope so.

In a business judged by wins and losses - Gutierrez is in charge of preparing for the Saturday game. The next bottom-line judgment is a week away.

Sunday 2/6

Barely two hours after the Eagles' victory over Indiana-Purdue-Fort Wayne, Gutierrez steps into the elevator bound for the Convocation Center basement. The Super Bowl is about to kick off, but he's headed to the team's empty locker room to watch more basketball. Boone and Townsend are two floors up; Townsend watching



For Jim Boone's Eagles, preparation is of paramount importance.

more tapes of Marshall, Wednesday's opponent, while Boone reviews video of today's Eagle opponent.

The assistants take turns scouting. Gutierrez is responsible for the Central Michigan game six days away, even though a trip to West Virginia is the immediate concern.

The Eagles defeated the Chippewas 86-82 in early January, but that was with the services of leading scorer, post man John Bowler - who is now attempting to play through a very serious herniated back injury.

Now, Gutierrez is charting every possession from that tape. Which plays worked for the Eagles on offense? Which players were on the floor? What kind of defense was Central Michigan using? Who was defending whom? What plays does CMU run most vs Eastern, compared to what they are currently using? How do they get into their offense? Who sets screens? Where are they standing on the floor? What does each player do on the floor? Who are they trying to get the ball to? Did the play work? Why or why not? What defense were the Eagles in? What do they like to run when they need a basket? What about after timeouts and inbound plays?

After nearly two hours, Gutierrez stops the tape at halftime, packs up and heads home to catch the remainder of the Super Bowl and say good-night to his wife and two children.

When the Super Bowl ends, he spends another couple of hours watching and jotting down notes from the second half at his home.

On a good night, bedtime for the coaches is 2 a.m. After 3 a.m., Gutierrez says his focus tends to get a little fuzzy.

Monday 2/7

A 10 a.m. plan to watch another Central Michigan game never happens, so Gutierrez doesn't retreat to the locker-room isolation until noon. He's sitting in a corner chair in front of a large TV and VCR, at a portable desk top.

Spread out are pages of charts. Some list individual players and space for Gutierrez to note each player's tendencies, strengths and weaknesses. Some are for jotting down plays. Gutierrez also uses a legal pad to list 25-40 plays run effectively by Central Michigan - offensively or defensively - that may be noted and shown to Boone and the players as "clips" later in the week.

Gutierrez is watching the most recent tape of Central Michigan he has, a Feb. 3 game against Ball State.

The first opposing game tape can take four to five hours to watch, but the more tape the coaches see, the less time it takes. Since the Eagles started watching Central Michigan the previous week, Ball State's 69-56 victory over the Chippewas took just three hours to watch. Some teams, such as Western Michigan, run about 30 different plays, plus new wrinkles occasionally added in. It can take nearly two days worth of watching the same game to fully grasp what the Eagles would like to see.

As for the Chippewas, Eastern Michigan coaches (and some players) have been

around long enough to know exactly what Central Michigan likes to do and how they want to defend.

One problem: The Chippewas' last three games (Ball State, Western Michigan and Toledo) were played without a suspended Kevin Nelson, the leading scorer (19.7 ppg) in Mid-American Conference games. Coaches don't know if he'll play Saturday.

Tuesday 2/8

This is a travel day, so after a morning practice, the team heads six hours southeast to Huntington, W.Va., for Wednesday night's game.

Among the duffel bags and equipment cases are three or four VCRs to be set up in the coaches' rooms. For now, the team's entire focus is on Marshall, so coaches review more film of the Eagles' home win on Nov. 30, and as many other taped games of Marshall as they can.

Wednesday 2/9

In between team walk-throughs and final preparations for tonight's game, Gutierrez squeezes in more advance scouting for Central Michigan, looking at more video for potential clips to show Boone on Thursday.

After hanging on for a narrow win in the two teams' November meeting, coaches knew whoever won the rebounding battle would be key the second time around. Sure enough, the Thundering Herd win 81-75, the Eagles playing without leading scorer John Bowler almost pull-off the upset. The bus pulls back into Ypsilanti around 5 a.m., a six-hour ride that felt like 10 for many on board.

Meanwhile, Nelson and teammate Sefton Barrett returned from their suspensions in Central Michigan's loss to Northern Illinois. Playing his first game since Jan. 26, Nelson scores 22 points. The Eagles can't wait to get their hands on a tape of that game. It's expected to arrive Friday morning.

Thursday 2/10

It may be a day off for the players, but Boone is back in the "War Room," next to his office, where he can watch film on a large projection screen. After four hours of sleep, he relives Wednesday night's loss in search of areas the Eagles need improvement. Blocking out was the obvious sore spot, and some second-half sloppiness on offense will be addressed.

By early afternoon, Gutierrez and Boone sit down to discuss what Gutierrez's hours of Central Michigan film work have determined and to watch additional tapes.



Boone and his staff put endless hours and effort in the scouting of each opponent.

With scouting reports, statistics and tapes spread across the large table in the “War Room”, the coaches go through the Chippewas' roster, noting who plays, how much, and whether players' minutes have changed during the past nine games.

Boone reviews three sets of statistics that Gutierrez has prepared, one set is of all CMU Mid-American Conference games, one set is of the last 5 games, and the final set of stats is the entire years worth, but only vs. other mid-major teams. Boone feels that stats vs. major college teams or non-Division I teams will not be an accurate portrayal of what the Eagles need to learn.

Questions, Questions, Questions. How did Central Michigan succeed on offense against the Eagles back in early January? How did Eastern Michigan succeed? Were there any significant changes or plays not seen in their first meeting? How is Nelson scoring, what roles does Watson play in Nelson's field goal attempts?

Armed with the same blank papers and charts that Gutierrez has now filled in, Boone jots notes on each player based on what Gutierrez saw on film: How does Central like to initiate their offense? Based on recent stats, who's hot? Who's not? How should the Eagles defend certain players? What player(s) can the Eagles leave to go help elsewhere? Will Central Michigan continue to defend using ball pressure?

Then the two coaches watch Central Michigan play Bowling Green, in which the Chippewas give the Falcons everything they can handle before falling late. It's also the more recent game the Eagles have with Nelson and Barrett in the lineup. Gutierrez has already watched the game, and he has a list of potential clips to show players the Chippewas' most common formations and what each individual player does and doesn't do best.

Pause. Rewind. Play.

After a couple more hours of watching and writing, a few basic themes emerged for the Eagles to work on in Friday's practice:

- Don't let Nelson catch the ball.
- Don't even think of giving him an open look in transition.
- Don't let Watson drive down the lane, but if he does stay at home with Nelson.
- Protect the ball against Central Michigan's defensive pressure.

Having just watched the Chippewas push Bowling Green to its limit, Boone jotted down a final note, tapped his pen on the table and said: "These guys scare me."

Friday 2/11

A tape of Wednesday's Central Michigan-Northern Illinois game doesn't arrive. The men's and women's coaches head to The Sidetrack Bar and Grill in Depot Town for the second of three basketball luncheons during the season.

After a couple hours of eating and schmoozing local boosters and athletic administrators, they head back to re-watch footage of Central Michigan and make sure all their practice to-do list is complete.

Boone and Pilipovich are on one end working with the big men on power moves. Gutierrez and Townsend are on the other end with the guards, demanding the players not give up drives down the middle, switch on all screens and not to leave Nelson (played by walk-on, Eric Williams in a red jersey complete the same number as Nelson wears for CMU) alone under any circumstance.

The Eagles spend a good amount of time working on getting the ball to point guard Michael Ross and in the Eagles' half-court offense, trying to replicate the man-to-man pressure of Central Michigan, by first running the offense without use of the dribble.

Toward the end, the Eagles walk, then run through the Chippewas' offense and how to guard each person when they're on the floor. The focus shifts to sprinting back on defense and locating Nelson in transition, then trying to run through screens the Chippewas might set up to free Nelson or get the ball inside.

After 90 minutes, the team heads to the locker room to watch a few of the clips Boone and Gutierrez have picked to best illustrate what Central Michigan is capable of: Nelson left alone or in transition, Giordan Watson driving to the basket or Steve Harris in the low post.

Saturday 2/12

Normally, the Eagles play at 7 p.m. on Saturdays, but as part of a doubleheader with the women's team, the men play at 4 p.m.

Their walk-through is 11 a.m., and lasts no more than 30 minutes, but it would take a knife to cut through the intensity of the Eagles players and coaching staff.

Coaches bring a TV/VCR to the game floor to show another film clip of a Central Michigan play. Then the players walk through what they just watched. Lastly, the players run through the same play again at game-speed. Again, the intensity level, the communication of the defensive players talking their way through the CMU offense, the sound of the squeaking shoes - The Eagles seem ready!

The three-step process is repeated for however many clips the coaches feel are important enough to remember, without overloading their minds.

On this day, another week of long hours, late nights and solitary film study seemed worthwhile. Led by Danny McElhinny, the Eagles hounded Nelson. Ten of his 17 shots were from outside, and the MAC's leading scorer needed 17 shots to get 18 points.

Watson had six assists and four steals, but also committed four turnovers and missed 11 of 13 shots.

The Eagles lost a big lead, but cruised to a 79-72 victory. The work pays off!

Gutierrez could easily take credit for the win, since he was in charge of scouting for this game.

In a season with much at stake, there's no time to worry about who did what when the next judgment day is just four days away.

"My thing is we're all in this together, no matter who's scouting," Gutierrez said. "It's not me winning, it's Eastern winning. That's the goal."