There are two ways Tennessee's basketball team can get into the NCAA Tournament.

One, they can buy tickets and serve as spectators.

Two, they can get hot and stay hot.

They pretty much cooked their goose with early season losses to Oakland, to Austin Peay, to College of Charleston. The Vols lost twice to in-state rival Memphis, once in double overtime.

Last week, there were four SEC teams tied for fourth place, with two first-round byes still up for grabs.

Going into tonight's games there are two teams – Alabama and Tennessee. Vanderbilt is only a game ahead of the Tide and Tennessee and Vandy has to visit Tennessee Saturday.

If Tennessee can win its final two regular season games, the Vols would have finished by winning eight of their last nine games. NCAA Tournament selection committee members tend to favor teams that finish strong.

Perhaps they could justify a spot for the Vols by virtue of a 10-6 SEC record and that the most embarrassing losses came early in the season, under a new coach in Cuonzo Martin, who was still putting his system in place and the Vols were still learning it.

Win the final two games in regular season, they would be 18-13 overall. If they get that far, I think they would have to win two, perhaps three games in the tournament. It is doable, but a difficult proposition for a young team that has been inconsistent at times.

There is no margin for error in this equation. As Larry the Cable Guy would say, the Vols need to “Git ‘er done.’’

Tennessee is not along in trying to wiggle its way into the NCAA Tournament field.

Mississippi State had high expectations coming into the season. ESPN.com’s Joe Lunardi still has the Bulldogs in his Tournament bracket, despite a 64 RPI rating and a strength of schedule ranked 61. State is now 6-7 in SEC play and reeling after five straight losses.

They dropped to a No. 12 seed after getting blown out by Alabama Saturday, and Lunardi now has Bama as a 10-seed.

Wins are the only thing that will improve Tennessee’s stock.

The Vols are No. 92 in the Real Time RPI rankings, but they stand at 35 in the strength of schedule department.

Each win will bring those numbers down, especially if they knock off Vanderbilt going into the SEC Tournament.

The Vols are not even on Lunardi’s radar screen right now. But closing wins over LSU and Vanderbilt should put them in the conversation, which could then continue in the SEC Tournament.

That would give them two wins over second place Florida and a split with Vanderbilt.

Martin knows his team has to earn its ticket.

“We are fighting for our lives,’’ he admitted at his Monday media session. “We’re fighting. We don’t have the luxury or margin for error to be happy or be successful or think we’ve doe something special.

“But,’’ he cautioned, “we have every right just like everyone else to win ball games.’’

Two factors could help the Vols. Freshman man-child Jarnell Stokes should be playing in the TSSAA high school playoffs right now. He is still a baby.

Kenny Hall has missed four games after being suspended by Martin. His return, if there is one, could only help the team if he comes back with the right mindset.

What the Vols do not want to do is finish under .500. They need to stay hot, get better and set the tone for next season. Whether that includes an NCAA Tournament bid or not.

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