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VCU wins first game of CBI championship series



P. KEVIN MORLEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

Jon Smith (left) of Saint Louis battles with VCU's Brandon Rozzell for an inbounds pass from T.J. Gwynn (background). VCU controlled the ball.

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Joey Rodriguez didn't know how many points he had scored during a two-minute blitz in the second half that put Virginia Commonwealth in control of Game 1 of the College Basketball Invitational championship series last night. But he knew he was hot.

So VCU's junior point guard looked at Rams coach Shaka Smart and called "Hook 1." That's Rodriguez's play, in which he comes around a high screen from a big man and either turns the corner into the lane, steps back to shoot a 3-pointer, hits the big man rolling to the basket or finds another shooter stepping out high.

Rodriguez dribbled around the screen and found just enough of an opening in Saint Louis' defense to launch a shot from behind the 3-point line. It went in as Rodriguez was fouled.

He completed the four-point play, capping a personal 14-point spree that helped the Rams get the jump on Saint Louis with a 68-56 victory in the best-of-three series before 4,386 at the Siegel Center.

VCU (26-9) can wrap up the CBI championship tomorrow when the series moves to St. Louis. Game 2 is scheduled for 8 p.m. EDT.

An 11-point VCU lead at halftime had dwindled to three with 14:15 left. Rodriguez felt the Rams were stagnant.

So he drove into the lane and missed a layup but followed it up when defenders fell away. Then he nailed a 3-pointer after Bradford Burgess got a steal, made two free throws, connected on another 3-pointer after a steal by Darius Theus and finished the burst by calling for "Hook 1."

"That's his play," Smart said. "We might as well call it 'Joey.' It's a fine line as a point guard doing what's best for the team and calling your own number. When he has it going like that, those are one in the same."

Rodriguez finished with 22 points. He was 7 of 12 from the field, including 4 of 5 on 3-pointers, and had six assists and two turnovers. In four CBI games, he has averaged 19 points.

"I felt like I had openings that I didn't take advantage of in the first half," Rodriguez said, "so I did in the second half."

Rodriguez's eruption put VCU up 55-42 with a little more than 12 minutes remaining, and Saint Louis (23-12) never recovered.

The Billikens, with a lineup of freshmen and sophomores, have yielded the ninth-fewest points per game (59.7) in Division I this season. But they had trouble handling Rodriguez, 6-11 junior Larry Sanders and the Rams' pressure.

Sanders was active on both ends from the outset, scoring 10 of VCU's first 12 points. He was 9 of 17 from the floor and had 20 points, 12 rebounds, four blocks and three steals.

Saint Louis committed 16 turnovers. VCU, which had 12 steals three by freshman Darius Theus -- scored 25 points off turnovers.