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K-State handles Gonzaga; Duke up next

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The Kansas State Wildcats are getting a taste of March a bit early. Taking the floor with more enthusiasm than they have shown all season, the fourth-ranked Wildcats led from start to finish Monday night in a 81-64 victory over No. 22 Gonzaga in the semifinals of the CBE Classic at the Sprint Center.

By defeating the Bulldogs, K-State set up what is sure to be one of the most anticipated games of the early college basketball season. At 9 tonight, the Wildcats take on top-ranked and defending national champion Duke in the CBE Classic championship game.

After making a nice run on neutral courts in front of national television audiences last March in the NCAA Tournament, the Wildcats made a name for themselves and entered this season with a high ranking. Still, there were questions as to how they would handle their return to that intensity-packed setting with several new players on their roster and a target on their backs.

But if the way K-State beat Gonzaga in front of 18,630 fans and the ESPN2 cameras is any indication, the Wildcats haven't changed much in the last few months. K-State scored the game's first seven points, took a 49-32 lead late in the first half and held off Gonzaga the rest of the way.

"I think our guys grew as the game went on," K-State coach Frank Martin said.

After scoring many of his game-high 18 points, senior guard Jacob Pullen hopped up court and motioned to the large number of K-State fans in attendance. After a handful of key defensive plays, junior Jamar Samuels slapped the court in excitement.

As the Wildcats headed for the locker room to celebrate, they lifted their arms into the air and screamed the same way they did after postseason wins last year. And just like those memorable outcomes, they now advance to an even more pressure-packed game that will have the nation's attention.

It will be a challenging game for the Wildcats, but they should have no problem handling the nerves that come with it.

On Monday, they handled whatever goosebumps they had by draining three-pointers. They sank 12 shots from beyond the arc, and started off hot by draining nine of their first 11. Pullen made four, and freshman Will Spradling of Shawnee Mission South, who scored 13 points, made two. Rodney McGruder chipped in 10 points.

"We got open looks," Pullen said. "We tell our guys to shoot the ball. That's what we did today."

The Bulldogs were led by 17 points from Robert Sacre and 15 from Steven Gray but were able to make only three of 12 three-point shots and couldn't keep up.

Demetri Goodson hit a layup that cut K-State's lead to 51-45 early in the second half, but Gonzaga could get no closer. Samuels hit a hook shot, Pullen made a three-pointer, Samuels hit a layup, and Curtis Kelly scored his first points of the season, giving the Wildcats a 60-47 lead with 13 minutes, 57 seconds remaining.

K-State cruised from there and led by as many as 22 when McGruder made two free throws that put the Wildcats up 78-56. They also rotated in six different forwards and wore Gonzaga down late in the second half. They won from both the outside and inside.

"The depth we have in our front line is amazing," Pullen said. "We can continue to throw people at you ... That's what we hang our hat on. We feel like we have an army of people. We've got guards, we've got depth. We feel like we're one of the deepest teams in the country."

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