



Rutgers sweats out 83-75 win over UMass in Legends Classic semifinal

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Saed Hindash/The Star-Ledger

Rutgers point guard Mike Coburn had 13 points to help lead the Scarlet Knights over UMass in the semifinals of the Legends Classic in Atlantic City.

Only in a place like Atlantic City, could Rutgers be presented with the same opportunity and a chance to change its luck.

With its lead about to be swept out to sea like the tide outside of Boardwalk Hall, the Scarlet Knights had seen its once 19-point second half lead dwindle down to four as Mike Coburn was sent to the free-throw line. On Sunday against Vermont, the shots didn't fall and Rutgers lost.

On Friday night, they did, lifting the Scarlet Knights to a 83-75 win over Massachusetts and changing Rutgers' fortunes — in the only appropriate place — in the Legends Classic tournament for the better.

"We need every game," Rutgers center Hamady Ndiaye said. "After whatever happened Sunday, we had to bounce back and show what we really are about. What we've been training for this entire time."

After losing 77-71 to Vermont Sunday afternoon, Rutgers was suddenly faced with the same set of questions that swirled around the team last season. Could they hit the shots when it mattered most? Could they put away games with big leads? Could they beat teams they were supposed to beat?

An eight-point victory over UMass (2-3) won't exactly silence all of the questions Rutgers (3-1) needs answers to, but this team feels Friday night's win was a good starting point.

They finally broke out the up-tempo, aggressive offense that coach Fred Hill has been raving about since the end of last season, scoring 46 points in the first half. But there are still things that need tightening.

"I thought it was a good bounce-back win for us," Hill said. "But we did the same thing tonight that we did the other day. We lost our composure for about a five- or six-minute stretch and it went from 19 (point lead) to (four). But I think we were able to regain our composure and make big plays down the stretch to win the game."

The prize for Rutgers in Saturday's final of the Legends Classic? The winner of Friday's other semi-final game between Florida and No. 2 Michigan State.

But if the Scarlet Knights get a similar offensive performance from sophomore guard Mike Rosario as they did on Friday, anything may be possible. Rosario tied a season-high, scoring 22 points — 18 of them coming in the first half — connecting on nine of his 15 shots.

"I actually was in the zone," Rosario said. "Before every game I tell myself that I've got to be the first one out there and last one to leave the locker room (prior to the game). I made a lot of good plays for my teammates, took my time and when I had the open shot, I stuck it. I was in the zone and I just knew that it was going to be a big game for us and that I had to come up big for my teammates."

Still, Rosario's impressive offensive performance couldn't overshadow what's become an alarming trend for Rutgers: getting out-rebounded.

For the third game in a row, Rutgers lost the battle on the glass, getting out-rebounded by the Minutemen 39-32. The disparity was even worse in the offensive rebounding category, as Rutgers was beaten 17-7. Part of the reason was because starting center Greg Echenique fouled out with more than seven minutes still left to play.

With Hamady Ndiaye already slowed because of a hyper-extended left knee, the senior was limited with how aggressive he could play. But that didn't stop him from providing valuable minutes on the offensive end — scoring 14 points and helping keep UMass at bay in the final minutes.

"Coming off an injury and responding and giving us 23 really good minutes — and to be honest — I expect that," Hill said. "He's a senior, he's our leader, he's our co-captain. I expect those guys to step up and make big plays when it counts."

Slowly, but surely Rutgers is beginning to get those crucial minutes and baskets when it needs them most. As Coburn was stepping to the free-throw line in the final minute last night, he was thinking about one thing: how brutal practices were this week because of the Vermont loss. That was motivation enough.

"Obviously we want to win every game," Coburn said. "This was our next opponent and coming off a loss, that was in the back of our mind. But we wanted to come out and get a win [Friday] and we came out with a great victory."