

Second-ranked Michigan St. stumbles on the Boardwalk, loses to Florida

By SUSAN LULGJURAJ, Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, November 28, 2009 |

Inside: See Staff Photographer Edward Lea's gallery of 57 photos from the Michigan State-Florida and Rutgers-UMass games at Boardwalk Hall

ATLANTIC CITY - The Florida Gators were outrebounded and shot atrociously badly from 3-point range. Yet in the biggest moment, when Florida needed nothing more than for someone to sink a 3, sophomore Erving Walker came through.

Walker took a step back and hit a 3-pointer from beyond NBA range for the go-ahead basket with 1 minute, 56 seconds left to help the Gators defeat No. 2 Michigan State 77-74 at the Legends Classic at Boardwalk Hall on Friday in front of 5,154.

"I knew the clock was winding down a little bit," said Walker, who finished with 12 points and seven assists. "I knew I had the space, so I took the shot. We just wanted to prove that we could be mentioned in the same breath as them."

Florida (5-0) will face Rutgers (3-1) in the championship game at 8 p.m. today. Michigan State (4-1) will meet Massachusetts (2-3) in the consolation game at 5:30 p.m. at Boardwalk Hall.

Rutgers beat UMass 83-75 in the first game Friday.

Florida shot just 5-for-24 (20.8 percent) from 3-point range, and Walker was 0-for-5 before his crucial basket. Some of the Gators' stars had a tough night. Walker was 2-for-10 from the floor. Kenny Boynton was 2-for-12 and Dan Werner 2-for-7.

"It's great to see Erving Walker have confidence even when he wasn't shooting well," Florida coach Billy Donovan said. "He only hit one 3-pointer and it was the most important. These guys have done a lot of growing and maturing."

Michigan State dominated the boards (42-24), but Florida's press was too much for the Spartans.

Michigan State committed 23 turnovers, which led to 28 Florida points.

"It's the first time we faced that kind of pressure," Michigan State coach Tom Izzo said. "I give two-thirds credit to them on the press. We have to take one-third at least by not handling the ball with the numbers of guards we've got."

Izzo missed his first opportunity to pass Hall of Famer Jud Heathcote as the school's all-time win leader. Heathcote sat behind the Spartans' bench, but Izzo was thinking instead about his team's lack of "respect for the ball."

"I didn't even think about (the school record) one time, maybe because Jud means so much to me," said Izzo, who was an assistant under Heathcote. "We've been compared to programs like Duke and North Carolina. My 340 wins look so minuscule. I'm breaking 340 wins. Big deal."

It was hard to think about what a win might bring when Izzo didn't feel his team deserved one.

He pointed to the turnovers and missed late free throws as reasons for the loss.

"These guys are getting better at understanding the press and the rotation a lot better," Donovan said. "Michigan State, they made some mental errors, but there were also times when the press was really, really effective."

Walker and Werner, a Christian Brothers Academy graduate, hit 5-of-6 free throws with less than two minutes left to keep Florida ahead. Michigan State was 10-for-14 from the foul line for the game, but the Spartans missed two free throws in key moments with seconds ticking off.

Donovan, whose Gators won back-to-back NCAA championships in 2006 and 2007, said the victory showed the maturation of his players over the last two seasons.

Perhaps over the last couple of seasons, they wouldn't have made those shots or had the confidence to risk a 3-pointer in a big spot when they hadn't hit one all day.

"I think I made a comment before the season started, I felt like there was something different about these guys in terms of their focus," said Donovan, whose team went to the postseason NIT rather than the NCAA tournament the last two seasons. "We talked about things they had to improve on in their commitment and focus. I thought that was something really missing from the last two years."

Michigan State's Kalin Lucas needed five points to reach 1,000 in his career. He finished with a game-high 20.

He energized the Michigan State fans looking for a reason to cheer. They got it on his put-back with 13:40 left and a 50-43 Spartans lead.

Florida put together a balanced defensive effort. Seven players accounted for the Gators' 12 steals.

"I told the players no matter what sport it is, you can't turn the ball over," Izzo said. "We didn't deserve to win that game. I'm shocked we were even in it."

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