



Rutgers falls to Florida, 73-58, in Legends Classic championship

By Brendan Prunty/The Star-Ledger

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Tim Larsen/Associated Press

Rutgers freshman Austin Johnson goes up for a shot during Saturday night's loss to Florida in the finals of the Legends Classic in Atlantic City.

For the first 20 minutes Saturday night, Rutgers was riding the lucky streak.

The Scarlet Knights were hanging tough with Florida in the championship game of the Legends Classic tournament, trailing by only five points at the half and in the process, they had Boardwalk Hall buzzing about a possible upset. But against a team like Florida, Rutgers quickly learned that you need to have more than one good half.

"Tonight, I thought we played well enough in the first half to be tied or ahead," Rutgers coach Fred Hill said. "In the second half — that's a good team — and we just didn't manufacture enough points."

Rutgers' biggest problem though was that it couldn't manufacture two halves, as the Scarlet Knights fell to the Gators, 73-58.

Trailing by five points at halftime to a Florida (6-0) team that had upset the No. 2 team in the country — Michigan State — the previous night, Rutgers (3-2) knew that it needed more than energy to win. So in the locker room at halftime, senior center and co-captain Hamady Ndiaye stressed that point.

That to walk out of Atlantic City with a trophy, it would take more than want. Especially when Florida's freshman guard, Kenny Boynton was able to shoot the ball as well as he did, leading all scorers with 19 points.

Behind Boynton, the Gators quickly jumped on Rutgers in the second half and out-scored them 39-29.

"It's always two halves," Ndiaye said afterward. "Energy is (a big part), yes — you have to bring the energy, the attitude everything and stay positive the entire game — but we are still pretty young and we've still got a lot of learning to do. We're going to keep going and keep moving (forward) with it."

For the second straight night the team's leading scorer, sophomore guard Mike Rosario, started off hot. Rosario scored 11 points in the first half, including the final seven before halftime as Rutgers tried to claw even with Florida. He was stifled by the Gators' pressure defense at first, but once he got his touch there was little Florida could do.

So before the second half, Gators coach Billy Donovan made stopping Rosario a priority. It worked: the Scarlet Knights' sharpshooter had only three points in the second half, to finish with 14.

"I thought that, even though we played a lot of zone, that we did a pretty good job of tracking Rosario in the second half," Donovan said. "He had 11 in the first half and only three points in the second half. I thought we did a pretty good job on him."

After watching Florida clamp down on him, Rosario began to become flustered by the Gators' defensive effort on him. During one point in the second half, the guard went up for a layup in the lane and after two defenders converged on him, he forced up a wayward shot.

It hit the bottom of the backboard and fell to the ground. As the play broke the other way, Rosario knelt on the ground and pounded his fist on the floor in frustration.

"Just basically going out there in the second half and tried to do other things besides shoot the ball," Rosario said when asked about why he struggled in the second half. "As you can see, I had six rebounds. As coach tells me all the time, to get in there and try and grab some rebounds. I try to be an all-around player besides shoot the ball — getting my teammates involved, I tried to do that too — just be an all-around player."

With Rosario struggling and sophomore center Greg Echenique having a second-straight down night (zero points and only two rebounds), Rutgers fell behind quickly in the second half.

But for Rutgers, it was still a chance to measure itself against stiff competition before the meat of its schedule approaches towards the end of next month.

"It was a good test," Hill said. "It tells us where we have to go. We've got work to do and we're going to continue to get better. This was a great test this weekend. We did some good things and we now see some things that we have get better at."

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