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So maybe this is a different Vanderbilt

By Andy Katz



EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. -- If this were last season, Vanderbilt would have lost at least one of the two games here at the IZOD Center. The Commodores would have folded in some unique way. It was just what that team did.

"We [lost] five double-digit leads in the second half last season, and that includes the Richmond game in the NCAA tournament," Vanderbilt coach Kevin Stallings said. "There is a little more pressure now when you're the one who is supposed to win. But we know how to finish now. This team is determined to finish games and not let games go like a year ago."

Vandy dealt with a furious rally from NC State in the semifinals of the Legends Classic on Saturday night before escaping with an 86-79 win. But Monday night's [64-62](#) win in the title game against upstart Oregon State was exactly the type of game the Dores lost in the past.

"Last year, we would have lost one of the two," VU senior [Jeffery Taylor](#) said. "We would give up the leads. We didn't finish."

This Vanderbilt team already has experienced quite the roller coaster in the first two weeks. The Commodores lost their primary post player in [Festus Ezeli](#) to the combination of a knee injury and a six-game NCAA suspension for a summer extra benefit.

After VU opened with a convincing win over Oregon at home, it pulled a no-show, smacked in the face by Cleveland State in Nashville, Tenn. The Commodores didn't guard. They didn't shoot well. They did not stop penetration and hardly did much when the ball got to the rim. The performance embarrassed the players and the staff.

Sure, Vandy snapped back to beat Bucknell, but as the Commodores had started the season as an SEC title contender along with Kentucky and Florida and a preseason No. 7 ranking, the expectation was they would be playing at a higher level.

Beating NC State in the semifinal and then Oregon State in the final was expected. But how it occurred is a good sign.

[John Jenkins](#) scored 28 points in the win over the Pack, which has the talent to be a top-four ACC squad. Vandy didn't take control of the game until the final two minutes, but the Dores were able to hold on for the win.

After an overtime win against Texas on Saturday, Oregon State came in with the most confidence it has had this early in the season during Craig Robinson's four years in Corvallis. [Jared Cunningham](#) followed up a 35-point performance against Hofstra earlier in the week with 37 in the win over the Longhorns.

So the plan was to shut down Cunningham. And Taylor did just that, limiting him to a mere nine points.

"I just wanted to contest his shots," Taylor said. "I'm usually the on-ball defender [against the opposing team's best player], and I felt I could do a good job and I did."

But the Beavers aren't all about Cunningham. Robinson has options now with [Eric Moreland](#), [Devon Collier](#) and [Joe Burton](#) all able to score in the post, slashing to the hoop or in traditional low-post moves -- a vulnerable spot for the Dores without Ezeli. And [Ahmad Starks](#) has the ability to knock down big shots from his position as an elusive point.

He did just that, racing down court and nailing a pull-up jumper with 33 seconds left to get the Beavers into a 62-all tie. OSU, and everyone else here, probably expected Jenkins to take the last shot. But senior guard [Brad Tinsley](#), who grew up in Oregon City, Ore., hit a step-back jumper with 4.5 seconds left for the win.

"I just think this helps our confidence," Tinsley said. "We had a tough little stretch there playing against Cleveland State. Honestly, I don't think we would have won these games [last season]. That was one of our weaknesses. We weren't executing in the final minutes."

Vanderbilt has always been able to score, and has plenty of options with Jenkins, Taylor, Tinsley, and the emergence of high-flying wing [Lance Goulbourne](#) and [Dai-Jon Parker](#). The inside scoring will come when Ezeli is healthy. But the defense materialized when the games mattered most Saturday and Monday.

Stallings didn't shy away from challenging this team prior to SEC play. Unlike Oregon State, the Commodores aren't done with the toughest part of their nonconference schedule. In fact, this is just the beginning. The Dores play A-10 favorite Xavier on Nov. 28, and have three dangerous true road games at Louisville (Dec. 2), at Davidson (Dec. 7) and at Marquette (Dec. 29).

Vandy also plays Missouri Valley contender Indiana State at home (Dec. 17) and pesky Miami-Ohio (Jan. 2), leaving the Dores with only three locks prior to SEC play (Monmouth, Longwood and Lafayette).

"I told our team that the opponents are nameless, faceless for us," Stallings said. "It doesn't matter if it said Oregon State, NC State or Bucknell or Cleveland State. They're all good. I just told them, know

who you're guarding, get in your stance and play some D. But this was good for us. We had to finish these games."
