

Pack mentality nets State win

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PUBLISHED IN: NC STATE

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. -- It's not just that N.C. State beat a talented Texas team in the TicketCity Legends Classic on Monday, it's the way the Wolfpack won that pleased new coach Mark Gottfried.

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An improved defensive effort, Scott Wood's clutch shooting, the aggressive play that led to 44 free-throw attempts and C.J. Leslie's aggressive play, all contributed to the Wolfpack's 77-74 comeback win over an elite program.

Gottfried, who is off to a 4-1 start in his first season at N.C. State, didn't single out any of those factors, but he highlighted many, including another big 3-pointer from transfer Alex Johnson and the leadership of senior C.J. Williams.

"I don't think it was just one guy, it was a collective group (effort)," Gottfried said. "It was a nice win for our program, certainly something we can build on."

In finishing 15-16 a season ago, N.C. State came up short in all of the key factors that led to Monday's comeback over the Longhorns, who led by as many as 18 points in the second half.

The Longhorns (2-2) aren't ranked in the top 25, but they have a talented freshmen class, one of the top guards in the Big 12 in J'Covan Brown and a bedrock of success under coach Rick Barnes with 13 -straight NCAA tournament appearances.

Beating elite programs such as Texas has been a challenge for the Wolfpack recently. Last season, N.C. State lost all four of its major, nonconference matchups to Georgetown, Wisconsin, Syracuse and Arizona. In the last five seasons, N.C. State went a combined 7-13 against teams from the other five major conferences.,Only two of those wins came against teams that were coming off NCAA tournament appearances, as Texas is.

All four of State's wins this season are over teams that were in the NCAA tournament last spring.

"It shows that we can beat big teams," sophomore guard Lorenzo Brown said.

And with the ACC expected to be down as a league this season, N.C. State needs all the quality wins it can muster.

State looked like it was on its way to another disappointing defeat outside the ACC when Texas guard Julien Lewis hit consecutive 3-pointers to give the Longhorns a 65-47 lead with 11:42 left in the game.

Texas shot better than 62 percent and hit 8 of its first 11 shots in the second half to build an 18-point lead.

Gottfried called a timeout and told his team to tighten up, especially on J'Covan Brown, who had controlled the game and scored 17 points to that point.

State's defense picked up, and then it caught a break when Brown fouled Leslie with 8:25 remaining. Brown then contested the call, which led to a technical, his fifth foul, and his disqualification.

Texas led 65-52 at that point. Brown, as Gottfried put it, had "sliced us up like a side of fries," but the Longhorns were getting production from freshman forward Jonathan Holmes (16 points) and wing Sheldon McClellan (16 points).

With a renewed intensity on defense, and without Brown, Texas would make only two of 16 field goals and score just nine more points.

Johnson, who made a big 3-pointer at the end of the Princeton win last Wednesday, followed up two 3-pointers by Wood with one of his own at the 7:30 mark to pull State within 4 points at 66-62.

It was part of a 28-2 run by State, which got to the free-throw line 44 times by feeding Leslie and taking the ball to the basket, instead of settling for outside shots.

Leslie accounted for 16 of the free throws, and hit nine, and has been active and engaged since returning from a three-game suspension for accepting improper benefits.

Leslie, who is averaging 18.5 points in his first two games following three-game suspension, said he learned a lot watching the Wolfpack play without him.

"I learned what our team can do and what I can do to help our team," Leslie said.

It's still the first month of the season, but N.C. State is also learning how to win.

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