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SJU can't stop 'Cats in semifinals

ROGER RUBIN

Friday, November 18, 2011

Undersized? Yes.

Undermanned? You bet.

Underestimated? No question about it.

St. John's is one of the thinnest and least experienced college basketball teams. They use only seven players and six are in their first season.

Inexperience didn't prove a problem as the Red Storm met No. 15 Arizona at the Garden Thursday night. Despite the lack of depth, St. John's was every bit the Wildcats' equal until the fouls began to take their toll. Point guard Nurideen Lindsey fouled out with 4:02 to play in a one-point game and St. John's wasn't able to recover from his loss, falling 81-72 in a semifinal of the 2K Sports Coaches vs. Cancer Classic.

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PHOTOS: ST. JOHN'S SELF-DESTRUCTS VS. ARIZONA

Lindsey had 18 points, D'Angelo Harrison 16 points, Moe Harkless 13 points and nine rebounds and Phil Greene added 12 points for the Johnnies, who suffered their first loss of the season.

Arizona (4-0) will meet Mississippi State Friday in the 7 p.m. championship game. The Johnnies (3-1) meet No. 19 Texas A&M in the 4:30 p.m. consolation game.

St. John's fell back 74-68 shortly after Lindsey fouled out and got within four points on a Harkless layup and the Storm got no closer.

Arizona grabbed the momentum early after halftime and took a 54-47 lead on an alley-oop from Josiah Turner to Nick Johnson that left the crowd gasping.

But St. John's answered with a 19-4 run that put it up 66-58 with 7:14 to play. The run started with seven straight points by Greene. Lindsey had four points including a steal and fastbreak layup that capped it. Arizona coach Sean Miller twice called timeouts trying to slow the Storm.

When Lindsey fouled out, things began to fray. He drew a fourth foul on a charge with 5:57 left and the Storm holding a 66-63 lead. Steve Lavin took him out until over four minutes were left and after a pair of Solomon Hill free throws put the 'Cats up 69-68.

Lindsey was called for a charge on the next play, fouling out.

Recommend

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Steve Lavin's Johnnies suffers their first loss of the season Thursday...

Six players in the Red Storm's seven man rotation were playing their first game at the Garden and for the most part they appeared undaunted in the first half. The Johnnies played a very even first half , trailing 44-41 at the intermission after leading for stretches.

St. John's had a pair of 9-0 runs before the break. The first ended with Greene hitting a three-pointer from the top of the arc and Lindsey driving for a nifty reverse layup on consecutive possession to tie the game 19-19 nine minutes into the game. The other started with Harrison making a pretty no-look pass to Harkless for a layup and a foul for a three-point play; it ended with Malik Stith making one of two free throws for a 32-26 Storm lead with 6:02 to the break.

But the Johnnies were plagued by some familiar problems and knew they might be facing some new ones.

Their defense against the three-pointer has been an issue and the Wildcats made nine of 17 in the first half. The Storm's lack of depth also means that wearing down against a team that substitutes a lot or getting into foul trouble could be a problem. In their first three games, neither was an issue but Arizona used 10 players for five or more minutes and three Johnnies – Harrison, Lindsey and Sir'Dominic Pointer – had three fouls at the break. AGGIES UPSET Mississippi State's presence at the Garden Friday night might offend some basketball purists. The Bulldogs were actually upset by Akron in their second game in the 2K Sports Coaches vs. Cancer Classic. Still they are in the semifinals because tournament organizers guaranteed it.

Anyone who was offended should be downright angry now. Mississippi State upended No. 19 Texas A&M, 69-60, and has crashed the championship game.

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