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Valparaiso pulls off win against Akron

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VALPARAISO — This game had moral victory written all over it. A valiant effort against a quality club in the face of adversity. Another near miss.

After all, there were so many reasons for Valparaiso to lose this game. The 0-of-14 performance from the 3-point line. The 14 missed free throws. The 17 turnovers. The 10-point first-half deficit. The roster featuring just eight scholarship players.

Yet it was the Crusaders who were left celebrating an improbable and highly entertaining 62-59 victory at midcourt while Akron's Zips skulked off slowly, trying to figure out exactly how they let this one get away.

"I never dreamed we could survive a game going 0-for-14 from the 3-point line and having 11 assists to 17 turnovers," said VU coach Bryce Drew, who used the word "unbelievable" three times in his first four sentences after the game. "But one thing I told these guys just now, you can't judge a team's heart on a statsheet."

With power forward Richie Edwards a surprise scratch for the entire three-games-in-three-days Coaches vs. Cancer 2K Sports Classic — joining the four other ineligible Crusaders while a last-minute paperwork "glitch" gets cleared up with the NCAA (he'll be back at Ohio State next Friday) — Valparaiso managed to score all 19 of its baskets in the paint against the taller, more physical, more experienced Zips, who reached the NCAA Tournament last season and are expected to contend for another berth this year.

The Crusaders pounded it into Kevin Van Wijk (21 points, 10 rebounds) and Ryan Broekhoff (13 points, 11 rebounds). They drove the lane with Matt Kenney (11 points, nine rebounds, five assists) and Jay Harris (14 points). And they kept Akron's big men quiet — 7-footer Zeke Marshall, a future NBA pick according to Drew, didn't even take a shot before fouling out of the game late in the second half.

"Our players know there's more to the game than 3-point shooting," Drew said.

Kenney was the main catalyst on both ends of the court. He almost singlehandedly sparked a 21-2 run that turned a 31-21 deficit with four minutes to go in the first half into a 42-33 lead four minutes into the second half.

“I just felt like we needed to wake up the team a little bit,” Kenney said. “We just seemed lackadaisical. So I went out there and tried to do my part.”

He started the run with a driving basket, then assisted on a Van Wijk bucket. On the ensuing possession, a Will Bogan turnover led to a three-on-one break for Akron. But the one was Kenney, and he brought the boisterous blue-clad crowd of 3,876 (in honor of prostate cancer awareness) to its feet with a stunning block of a Chauncey Gilliam layup attempt.

“I just kind of guessed,” Kenney said. “I saw there were two guys coming, so I kind of baited him into taking it up. He probably didn’t think I could jump, didn’t think white guys could jump. So I baited him in, he went in and I saw it.”

VU trailed just 33-32 at the half, and had all the momentum coming out of the break. Broekhoff (who had a quiet first half) scored three quick buckets (even taking a flying knee to the face from Marshall in that span) and Kenney capped the 21-2 burst with another inside basket to make it 42-33.

“He’s a very, very competitive person,” Drew said of Kenney. “And he’s great for our team because he’s very emotional and he can get us on those runs. There were a couple points in the game when he jumped over two guys to get a rebound and still beat everybody down the floor and got a layup.”

Akron immediately responded with an 8-0 run to get within 42-41, and the lead changed hands eight times in the dizzying five-minute stretch that followed. And as VU kept clanking free throws (24-of-38 in the game as Akron was whistled for a whopping 31 team fouls; the Zips were 3-of-7 from the line), Akron pushed its lead to 59-54 on a fifth-chance basket by Demetrius Treadwell (13 points) with 4:20 to go.

But Van Wijk got a basket, and Kenney and Harris each hit a big pair of free throws to give VU a 60-59 lead with 1:42 to go. Akron had two chances to take the lead, but came up empty each time. A Quincy Diggs (13 points) 3-pointer was long with less than 10 seconds to go, and Kenney (who else?) leaped up and reached above the trees for the rebound to seal the win.

“There’s only 32 regular-season games, so every game is special,” Drew said. “But with Akron coming in, with all the light blue going on, with a lot of our students staying (on Thanksgiving break), I think our players were very, very excited for this game. And any time you can beat a quality team like that, it speaks a lot for our team.”

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