

Campus Confidential

George Mason loses in CBI final

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George Mason got almost everything it wanted from the College Basketball Invitational. The Patriots played the maximum six games, extended their season into April, and discovered some long-awaited chemistry and will.

What they didn't get was a title. Friday's 80-77 loss to Santa Clara before 2,440 at Patriot Center was a disappointing final chapter to a season that ended on an upswing and with hope for a promising future. Next year when George Mason joins the Atlantic-10, it will be with an experienced group that has a better sense of itself. The only regret is that it took 38 games to find it.

"No question, there were a lot of encouraging signs," George Mason coach Paul Hewitt said. "It's a starting point. It's certainly not who we are."

Friday's defeat was George Mason (22-16) playing hard, but not always well. The Patriots out-rebounded Santa Clara 46-30, but committed 16 turnovers, blowing a 10-point first half lead. Afterward, Hewitt was upset that the Patriots left tournament MVP Kevin Foster (24 points, four assists) alone for the game's decisive 3-pointer with 69 seconds left. The shot gave the Broncos the lead for good.

"That's the one guy we can't allow to get a clean look. We did exactly what we're not supposed to do," Hewitt said. "'It's always amazing to me how the last game is a microcosm of the whole season.'"

Santa Clara (26-12), which has the distinction — however dubious — of being the only team to capture both the CollegeInsider.com Tournament (2011) and CBI, also was propelled by senior forward Mark Trasolini (20 points, six rebounds) and junior guard Evan Roquemore (19 points, six assists). The title came a year after Santa Clara closed with 18 straight losses, going winless in the lowly West Coast Conference.

"Since April 2nd [of last year] we worked and haven't taken any breaks," said Foster, who finished tied for fourth all-time in NCAA history in career 3-pointers (431).

George Mason came out ready and intense, attacking the basket and rolling to an 8-0 lead. With junior Sherrod Wright (24 points, 10 rebounds) notching his second straight double-double, the Patriots still had a 21-11 lead midway through the first half before Foster hit two 3-pointers as the Broncos forged a 26-all tie.

Early in the second half, Santa Clara rallied behind Trasolini, who scored 16 of his points in the first 13 minutes of the second half. With his output on Friday, the 6-9 senior passed NBA great Steve Nash for fifth place on the school's all-time scoring list, finishing with 1,699 points. It was a special achievement for Trasolini, a Vancouver native, just like Nash.

"Mark Trasolini can go back to Vancouver and say he scored more points at Santa Clara did," Broncos coach Kerry Keating said.

A 15-footer by Trasolini gave Santa Clara its biggest lead, 57-50 before Mason battled back with help from sophomore Erik Copes (seven points, 11 rebounds), junior Jonathan Arledge (16 points, seven rebounds) and Vertrail Vaughns (nine points).

But in the final six minutes, Santa Clara reserve John McArthur hit two baseline jumpers and later Foster delivered the most important shot of the game. In the final 20 seconds, Roquemore hit four straight free throws.

At the buzzer, George Mason freshman Patrick Holloway had a clean look at a 24-foot, 3-point try from the wing, but it clanged off the rim, triggering a celebration by the Broncos who cut down the net at their end of the court.

"I'm really appreciative of him allowing us to do what we just did," Keating said, speaking of George Mason athletic director Tom O'Connor, formerly the athletic director at Santa Clara (1986-92). "To allow us to cut the net down. I'm not crazy about that fact. I'm appreciative."

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