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Billikens' season ends with second loss to VCU Rams

Shorthanded team finally runs out of gas, is swept in CBI finals

By Jim Rodenbush

Wednesday, March 31, 2010



Box score

Playing in the 36th game in what turned out to be the second-longest season in school history, Saint Louis University finally tired out Wednesday night.

Brandon Rozzell had a career-high 27 points off the bench and Jamie Skeen scored seven of his 16 points during the final five minutes to lead Virginia Commonwealth to a 71-65 victory over the Billikens at Chaifetz Arena and a sweep of the College Basketball Invitational championship series.

Joey Rodriguez, who was named the MVP of the CBI tournament, added 13 points for VCU (27-9), which used a 7-0 run late in the game to beat Saint Louis for the second time in the three days. The Rams won, 68-56, Monday night in Richmond, Va., in the first game of the best-of-three series.

Willie Reed had 16 points and freshman Cory Remekun added a career-high 13 points and seven rebounds for Saint Louis (23-13). With the loss, the Billikens fell one game short of matching the 1988-89 NIT runner-ups, who went 27-10 and hold the school record for most games played in a season.

"VCU won. They deserved to win. They beat us," Saint Louis coach Rick Majerus said. "It was a great tournament. The tournament was well-run. Everything about the tournament was great. It was a great experience for us. It was an honor and privilege to play in it."

Saint Louis, which finished 18-4 at home, led 33-24 at halftime. But in the second half, the Billikens were outscored 47-32 and shot 38 percent from the field.

"Mental fatigue, physical fatigue, those guys were fatigued out, obviously," Majerus said.

The Billikens still had a nine-point lead, 40-31, following Reed's 3-point play with 15:57 left. VCU then chipped away at the deficit over the next nine minutes. The Rams twice tied the score before taking their first lead of the second half when Rodriguez's 3-pointer made it 56-55 with 6:58 remaining.

The score was tied 61-61 with 3:04 left when VCU started its decisive run. Consecutive lay-ups from Skeen gave the Rams a four-point lead. Rodriguez added a free throw, and two free throws from Rozzell made it 68-61. Remekun finally scored for Saint Louis with 12 seconds left.

"We were just trying to get home," Skeen said. "Win and we would go home. I like St. Louis a lot, but I was ready to go home."

Rozzell's previous career-high was 20 points against the College of Charleston on March 22. His effort helped to makeup for an off-night from leading scorer Larry Sanders, who had four fouls and was limited to three points and four rebounds.

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Wednesday's game marked the latest calendar date Saint Louis has ever played and, midway through the first half, it looked like the Billikens were in position to extend their season into April.

VCU had only two baskets over the final 11 minutes of the first half, and the Billikens went on a 17-4 run to take a nine-point lead at the intermission.

The biggest momentum swing happened with just over seven minutes left, when one possession brought the Billikens five points.

On the possession, Sanders was whistled for his second foul plus a technical on Remekun's lay-up. Christian Salecich made both technical free throws and Remekun followed with a free throw of his own for a 23-20 lead with 7:18 left.

Saint Louis' Kyle Cassity was held scoreless in 33 minutes. The sophomore guard stayed in the game after suffering an undisclosed injury in the first half.

"Cassity was just a dying dog," Majerus said. "I applaud the kid. I kept telling our coaches, 'Just let him sit out. Take him to the locker room, whatever you got to do, he's done.' He kept wanting to play."

Freshman walk-on Darrin Young, a Kirkwood graduate, had a career-high five points in 11 minutes for the Billikens.

"Darrin did as good as he could do," Majerus said. "He was excellent. It's a shame we couldn't win the game for him."

Notes: The last time the Billikens played the same team in back-to-back games was in March 2009. That month, La Salle beat Saint Louis in the regular-season finale. Four days later, the Billikens beat the Explorers in the Atlantic 10 tournament.

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