

ULM punches ticket to CBI finals with win over Vermont

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(Photo: The News-Star)

Vermont gave ULM more than just a CBI semifinal opponent, but a measuring stick as a program.



ULM forced nine second-half turnovers after switching to the zone. Tylor Ongwae and Majok Deng tied for the team lead in scoring with 22 points. Adam Hunsucker/The News-Star

Having made seven-straight postseason appearances — and 11 in the last 12 years — the Catamounts' routine destination in March is where ULM is trying to go.

Not only are the Warhawks there, they're off to the CBI finals.

ULM turned up the intensity and locked down Vermont in the second half in a 71-65 win in front of a sea of white in the stands at Fant-Ewing Coliseum.

The Warhawks (24-12) will face Loyola-Chicago in the CBI finals in a best two-out-of-three series. Game 1 will be in Chicago with the two games to follow at Fant-Ewing.

ULM head coach Keith Richard's adjustment to a 2-3 zone in the second half paid immediate dividends on the floor. The Warhawks forced nine turnovers after the break, including four in five Vermont possessions.

"That zone had some length to it with Tylor, Jamaal (Samuel) and Majok all across the back line. We came out in the second half and had trouble guarding them, they're a good offensive team," Richard said. "They were passing, shooting and driving on us and that made it tough to guard. I thought when we got out of man and into the zone it really turned the game for us.

"Both teams had their moments in this game and that's how it should be in a tournament semifinal."

Tylor Ongwae continued to turn the CBI into his own personal showcase, scoring 22 points — his third 20-point game in the tournament. Deng split the team lead 22 and 11 rebounds, his second-straight double-double.

Vermont shot 4-15 from the 3-point line and one free throw to ULM's 11 in the second half.

Trailing by seven, four-straight points off Catamount turnovers tied the game at 42. Deng gave ULM the lead with 15:26 to play by knocking down two free throws.

ULM shot 46 percent from the field in the second half.

"I didn't want to panic and act like we were doing something wrong (in the first half) —we weren't," Richard said. "We just needed to stay the course get the defense figured out a little bit and our offense kind of comes and goes. I thought we would be better in the second half and we were."

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The Warhawks led by 11 before the Catamounts (20-14) made it a four-point game with under three minutes to play.

Ongwae scored five down the stretch—including another of his timely 3's—and Deng iced the game at the free throw line with nine seconds to play.

Vermont's Kurl Steidl hit a 3 with nine seconds remaining to make it a six-point game.

Ethan O'Day led Vermont with 16 points and seven rebounds on 7-of-11 shooting. Steidl and Dre Willis joined him in double figures.

"It looked like Syracuse out there to us (against the zone)," Vermont head coach John Becker said. "We're a little undersized at some spots but I thought Dre (Willis) did a good job in the middle of the zone finding our shooters but we just missed some pretty clean looks.

"We're a young team with only one senior playing and I thought all year we battled and I'm excited about the future of the program. But it hurts right now."

Ongwae picked up where he left off at Mercer by burying his first two three shots of the game —including a 3— that gave ULM a 9-3 lead.

The Warhawks built a 20-6 lead by the 13:25-mark on 60 percent from the field shooting.

Vermont chiseled into ULM's lead and tied it at 32 with under three minutes until the break when Hector Harold knocked down a jumper.

Dre Willis converted an old-fashioned 3-point play that gave Vermont a 35-33 halftime lead.

Nick Coppola and Justin Roberson spent portions of the first half on the bench in foul trouble, limiting ULM's ability to drive to the basket. Roberson was called with his third foul in the final minutes of the half on a charge.

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