

Valpo Closes Legends Classic With Win Over Arkansas-Fort Smith

[box score](#)

STATESBORO, Ga. – Cory Johnson (Duluth, Minn./Duluth East [Iowa State]) posted a game-high 26 points on 12-of-16 shooting and Valparaiso led for the game's last 30 minutes en route to an 86-74 victory over Arkansas-Fort Smith Sunday afternoon in Statesboro, Ga. to close out play at the Legends Classic.

"The biggest thing for us was finishing 2-1 on this trip," said Crusader head coach Homer Drew. "It was a good tournament for us, allowing us to play a number of people and giving our underclassmen chances to learn on the court."

The Lions got out to a quick 8-1 lead just 3:35 into the game, but Valpo responded immediately with an 11-2 spurt over the next three minutes to take its first lead at 12-10 with 13:37 left in the opening half. Later in the stanza, with the score tied at 19-19, Michael Rogers (Kingston, Jamaica/Redemption [N.Y.] Christian) got loose for back-to-back layups to give Valpo the lead for good and spurring an 11-0 Crusader spurt, which also included five points by Brandon McPherson (Indianapolis, Ind./Lawrence North), to put Valpo ahead 30-19 with 7:41 left in the half.

Arkansas-Fort Smith answered back with ten straight points of its own to cut the lead back down to one point with 5:37 left in the first half, but the Crusader defense kept the Lions from re-gaining the advantage. The lead remained in the low to mid single digits for the remainder of the opening period, and McPherson eventually gave the Crusaders a 43-38 halftime advantage with a last-second driving layup.

The Lions kept within striking distance early in the second half, trailing by just six after a 3-pointer with 17:11 to play, but a big 11-0 run by Valpo gave the Crusaders some breathing room. Johnson kicked off the spurt with two straight layups, followed by a Brandon Wood (Kokomo, Ind./Kokomo [Highland C.C./Southern Illinois]) layup.

Three possessions later, Matt Kenney (Mooresville, Ind./Mooresville) found Howard Little (Chicago, Ill./Stoneridge [Calif.] School) for an open 3-pointer to make the advantage 15 points. Little then lobbed one to Wood on the fast break following a steal to cap the run and push the Crusader lead to 62-45 with 11:55 to play. Valpo never let the Lions close the deficit under double digits the rest of the way as the Crusaders closed out a 2-1 stint in Statesboro.

Johnson was one of four Crusaders to finish in double figures in the scoring column. McPherson knocked down four 3-pointers on his way to 18 points off the bench, while Wood scored all 12 of his points in the second half and Little added ten points off the bench. Johnson also pulled down a game-high nine rebounds, with Wood adding seven caroms, while Kenney led all players with seven assists as the Crusaders posted 24 helpers on 35 field goals.

"Matt had a great game for us today, with his seven assists and no turnovers really helping us get a double-digit lead and hold it," said Drew. "Cory really moved well around the basket, and his teammates did a great job of finding him in position for easy baskets. 24 assists is a great result from the way we moved the ball today to get a lot of good, open looks."

Aaron McHenry led Arkansas-Fort Smith (1-6) with 23 points, while Josh Simmons chipped in 15 points as four Lions finished in double figures as well. The Lions connected on a 50.0% (11-of-22) clip from behind the arc, but registered just seven assists while being forced into 14 turnovers by the Crusaders.

"We must still improve both rebounding and on defense," said Drew. "But we are looking forward to the challenge that lies ahead of us, with a pair of ranked teams coming up next on our schedule."

Valparaiso (3-4) begins Horizon League play the next time it hits the court, playing at #12/10 Butler this Saturday, Dec. 5 at 6 p.m. CST, a change from the original start time. As always, all the action can be heard live on the Valpo Sports Radio Network (WAKE [1500 AM, Valparaiso] and WEFM [95.9 FM, Michigan City]) and online at www.valpoathletics.com. Live video will be available through the Horizon League Network, with a link available on the Crusaders' website, which will also have a link for live stats.

