

Texas Rallies to Beat Georgia, 77-71

T.J. Ford matches career-high with 22 points for Longhorns

box score

NEW YORK (AP) -- Texas guard T.J. Ford crashed hard to the floor early in the game Friday night against Georgia. Madison Square Garden got quiet. Longhorns fans fell silent.

T.J. Ford led Texas with 22 points against Georgia in the AT&T Wireless Coaches vs. Cancer Classic.

After spending a couple of nervous minutes on the court and then three minutes on the bench, Ford returned to match his career high with 22 points to go with eight assists as Texas (No. 5 ESPN/USA Today; No. 4 Associated Press) overcame a 10-point second-half deficit to beat No. 16 Georgia 77-71 in the AT&T Wireless Coaches vs. Cancer Classic.

Ford, who became the first freshman to lead the nation in assists when he averaged 8.3 last season, doubled his 10.8 scoring average from 2001-02.

"The star of the game was T.J. Ford," Texas coach Rick Barnes said. "They had no answer for him."

"The Longhorns almost didn't have him. Just three minutes into the game, Georgia's Damien Wilkins turned to attempt a three-pointer as the shot clock expired, and the 5-foot-10 Ford came at him, flying over the 6-7 Wilkins and crashing to the floor.

"I didn't see it," Barnes said. "I told him, 'Just squeeze my hand if you're OK,' and he said, 'I'm OK. Let's play.'"

Ford said he was just trying to make a play.

"I'm not even sure where I fell," he said when asked what part of his body took the brunt of the crash. "I'm sure I'll be sore in the morning."

The Longhorns saved the Big 12 Conference from a rough two days in the Garden, at the expense of the Southeastern Conference.

Thursday night, Alabama beat Oklahoma 68-62 in the first matchup between the leagues. It didn't look very good for Texas when Georgia scored the first six points of the second half to take a 46-36 lead.

Brandon Mouton had seven points in Texas' 15-2 run that put the Longhorns ahead 51-48. Texas also got some good team defense and unexpected offense from Deginald Erskin, who had 10 of his 12 points in the second half. Erskin's personal six-point run gave the Longhorns a 68-58 lead with 6:40 to play.

"We got the lead with our transition game after doing a poor job with it in the second half," Barnes said.

Georgia, which was playing without two of its best inside players -- Chris Daniels was suspended for one game by the NCAA, Steve Thomas three games by the school -- got to 71-69 on a three-pointer by Ezra Williams with 55 seconds to go.

Ford then dribbled out most of the shot clock before driving through three Georgia players to score and make it 73-69 with 29 seconds left.

Rashad Wright made two free throws to get the Bulldogs back to two down, but Mouton went 4-for-4 from the line over the final 16 seconds to seal the victory.

"I was contributing on defense in the first half, but T.J. told me I had to get aggressive, and that's what I did," said Mouton, who finished with 13 points. Williams led Georgia with 20 points, while Wilkins, a transfer from North Carolina State playing his first game with the Bulldogs, had 16 and Wright 15. Jarvis Hayes, the SEC's leading scorer last season, finished with eight points -- 10 below his average last season.

"They exploited inside in the second half, but Chris Daniels and Steve Thomas are fine players," Georgia coach Jim Harrick said. "They went from 10 down to 10 up, and in that time we missed four easy shots. I thought that was the difference.

"It was a very intense game. Ford did a great job, especially at the end."