

Bucknell Shocks Purdue, 70-65

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. - Bucknell's vaunted senior class deservedly grabbed many of the preseason headlines, but perhaps overlooked was that the Bison have a pretty good set of juniors too. Led by a game-high 18 points from Cameron Ayers and a sturdy performance from Ryan Hill at the point, Bucknell was strong down the stretch and defeated Purdue 70-65 before 13,090 fans at Mackey Arena on opening night in the 2K Sports Classic benefitting Wounded Warrior Project.

As for the seniors, Mike Muscala recorded his 25th career double-double with 14 points and 10 rebounds, Bryson Johnson added 14 points and Joe Willman logged nine points and seven rebounds and came up with the game-clinching rebound and free throws with 1.5 seconds left in the game.

The victory was Bucknell's first in 18 tries against an active Big Ten opponent. The Bison do have 24 all-time wins against Penn State, but all of them came before the Nittany Lions joined the Big Ten. Bucknell is also the first Patriot League team ever to beat the Boilermakers, and the Bison ended Purdue's 26-game home winning streak against non-conference opponents. Purdue had been 79-9 in home openers at Mackey Arena.

"This is a great win," said coach Dave Paulsen after the game. "I thought we showed a lot of toughness down the stretch. We did a much-better job keeping them off the offensive glass in the second half. Our core group of guys have played a lot of games now. Earlier in their careers they have been in similar situations against major-conference teams, but could not quite close out the game. We didn't get rattled tonight. I think that Arizona game last year in the NIT gave us a lot of confidence. That was our first breakthrough win."

Bucknell started three seniors and two juniors, and that experience showed down the stretch. The Bison outscored Purdue 16-8 in the final five minutes, even though Muscala had to spend a portion of that time on the bench after picking up his third and fourth fouls on consecutive possessions.

Freshman Dom Hoffman subbed in for Muscala, and his layup off a sweet tic-tac-toe passing combination ignited a game-changing 7-0 run. Willman's two free throws with 4:36 to play put the Bison ahead to stay at 58-57 with 4:36 left, and then Johnson answered an Anthony Johnson miss with a 3-pointer from the left wing to stretch the lead to four with 4:11 to play.

Johnson's fadeaway jumper from the elbow gave Bucknell a 63-58 lead, but D.J. Byrd came back with a 3-point play at the other end to pull the Boilermakers within two. Purdue thought it had a stop the other away, but Muscala grabbed an offensive rebound off a bad miss and jammed it home to make it 65-61. Those were Bucknell's only second-chance points of the second half.

Donnie Hale, who led Purdue with 15 points, hit a deep two at the other end, followed by a missed three by Bryson Johnson. Byrd missed a contested shot with 23 seconds left and Ayers rebounded, but he made 1 of 2 at the line to keep it a one-possession game. Purdue elected to go for a two, and Anthony Johnson converted a floater in the lane to make it 66-65 with 10.5 seconds remaining.

After a timeout, Bucknell executed the inbounds play just as it was drawn up, as Willman found Bryson Johnson, who was immediately fouled. Johnson hit both charity tosses to make it 68-65.

Bucknell survived a tense few seconds at the other end, as Hill and Bryson Johnson collided and went to the floor, leaving Byrd, Purdue's top sharpshooter, open from the right wing. But Byrd's 25-footer drew only iron, and Willman snagged the rebound and was fouled with 1.5 seconds left. He hit both free throws, making Bucknell 20-for-25 on the night, and that put the game out of reach.

Neither team shot well from long distance. The Bison were 2-for-10 from the arc, while Purdue was 2-for-16. Bucknell shot 42.1 percent for the game, compared to 45.9 percent for the Boilermakers. After struggling on the glass early in the game, the Bison finished with a 36-33 rebounding edge. Purdue had 10 offensive boards, but only four in the second half. The Boilermakers were just 7-for-15 from the foul line.

Down 33-27 at intermission, Bucknell came out of the locker room on a 9-2 run. Willman twice hit jumpers that pulled the Bison within two, and then Ayers hit a pull-up jumper while getting fouled from behind. The free throw put Bucknell up 36-35, its first lead since it was 6-4 just three minutes into the game. Ayers would convert two more 3-point plays in the half, both of which broke ties.

Steven Kaspar, who played very well of the bench backing up Hill, hit a free throw with 6:27 left that tied the game at 54. But Purdue scored three straight points as Muscala picked up his third foul at the offensive end and his fourth seconds later on a bump at the defensive end. But the Bison had plenty left in the last five minutes.

Despite going 1-for-7 from 3-point range the Bison stayed within arm's reach in the first half. They had a couple of early leads after a Muscala baseline jumper and a nifty reverse layup by Hill. Purdue took the lead for the first time at 7-6 on a 3-point play by Sandi Marcius at the 16:49 mark and led for the rest of the half.

The Boilermakers' largest lead of the opening half was seven points, but Bucknell pulled within two with a late 7-2 run. Ayers had a jumper and a baseline driving layup, and Willman made it a 29-27 game with a tip-in. Ronnie Johnson followed with a floater from the left wing, and after a Bucknell miss, the Bison came back with a terrific final defensive possession. But it went for naught when Hale banked in a contested jumper from the top of the key as the shot clock expired with 0:05 left in the half.

Hill played 28 minutes at the point and had six points on 3-for-4 shooting, along with three rebounds, three assists and only two turnovers. Kaspar added three points, two rebounds and only one turnover in 12 minutes. Hoffman made his collegiate debut and scored four points in 10 minutes. Another senior, Brian Fitzpatrick added a bucket on a nice drive to the basket in the first half, and junior Ben Brackney gave the Bison some good minutes off the bench as well.