

UConn opens Hurley era with 80-70 win over Morehead State

By Pat Eaton

STORRS, Conn. (AP) — UConn coach Dan Hurley is happy with the energy level of his Huskies, now he'd like to see them develop a killer instinct.

Hurley had a successful coaching debut at his new school Thursday as UConn broke open a close game, then held off a pesky Morehead State team for an 80-70 win.

Josh Carlton scored 17 points and pulled down eight rebounds. Jalen Adams scored 16 points and Alterique Gilbert added 15 for the Huskies, who led by just four points at halftime.

Lamontray Harris had 16 points and Malek Green 14 for Morehead State (1-1).

UConn never trailed. The Huskies led by as many as 13 in the first half and 16 in the second, but had to weather several Morehead State runs.

"We were playing with fire," Hurley said. "We had a chance to kind of bury them a couple times and we let it hang around and be a 10 point game."

The Eagles, who didn't start a player taller than 6-foot-4, had no answer for the 6-10 Carlton. The sophomore beat his previous career high in scoring by two points and also had two of the Huskies eight blocked shots.

"There's been a lot of hype around our guards, well deserved," Carlton said. "But I just wanted to come around and let 'em know we're a complete team. We've got threats at every position."

For the sellout crowd (the first at Gampel Pavilion since March, 2016), this was a night to welcome a new leader after a disappointing 14-18 season that ended with the firing of coach Kevin Ollie amid allegations of NCAA violations.

The student section held up letters that spelled out "Hello Hurley" and cheered loudly as the coach made his way to the bench before the game.

The 45-year-old, who led Rhode Island to NCAA Tournament appearances in each of his last two seasons, remained on his feet the entire game, gesturing and yelling for the Huskies to push the ball or urging the crowd to stand up and cheer. He ran over to slap Carlton on the rear end after the big man dove into the stands for a loose ball in the second half.

The heightened energy level was on display from the opening tip when Adams dove to the floor to force a tie-up and a turnover as his coach applauded his approval.

"You just see how excited he is when we score the ball or when we get a stop, it just makes you want to play that much harder for him," Adams said.

BIG PICTURE

UConn: Hurley's new run-and-press style of play resulted in the Huskies forcing 17 turnovers and outscoring a much smaller Morehead State team 46-22 in the paint and 21-8 on the fast break. Last season, Hurley's Rhode Island team forced 536 turnovers, which ranked 13th nationally. But the Huskies also turned the ball over 13 times.

Morehead State: The Eagles shot 40 percent after making 53 percent of their shots in their season opening win against Kentucky Christian. They were outrebounded just 41-36 after pulling down 48 boards on Tuesday.

"Literally through the final horn we were chasing down offensive rebounds," said coach Preston Spradlin. "With 20 seconds to go, Lamontray Harris is diving for loose balls and you're down eight or 10 at that point. That's the things as a coach you take away and you're very proud of."

INJURY

UConn forward Isaiah Whaley went down in the first half with a sprained ankle. He tried to return a few minutes later, but was limping noticeably and was quickly subbed out again.

COMEBACK

Gilbert was impressive in coming back from shoulder injuries that limited him to just nine games in his first two seasons. In addition to his 15 points, he dished out four assists and had four rebounds while leading the break and playing more than 30 minutes.

"Just to have the opportunity to be back out there, I felt blessed," he said.

UP NEXT

UConn: The Huskies continue the preliminary rounds of the 2K Empire Classic by hosting UMKC on Sunday.

Morehead State: The Eagles visit Syracuse on Saturday, also as part of the 2K tournament.