

Second Half Surge Lifts Pride To Win Over Cleveland State

box score

Kingston, R.I. - Sophomore forward Stephen Nwaukoni scored a career-high 12 points and senior guard Dwan McMillan netted 10 of his season-high 12 points in the second half to lift Hofstra to a 63-53 win over previously unbeaten Cleveland State on Saturday afternoon at the Thomas M. Ryan Center.

Four players scored in double figures for Hofstra to help the Pride (3-3) snap a two-game losing streak and move back to .500. Cleveland State, which entered with five straight wins (including a victory against No. 7 Vanderbilt), fell to 5-1 overall in the TicketCity Legends Classic sub-regional round matchup.

Senior forward Nathaniel Lester (Brooklyn, N.Y.) scored 10 points and added five rebounds to finish in double figures for the fifth time in six games this season. Junior guard Stevie Mejia (Hyde Park, MA.) contributed 10 points as Hofstra posted just its second neutral-site victory in the last two seasons.

Nwaukoni (Queens, N.Y.) grabbed nine rebounds as a reserve in helping the Pride build a 32-14 advantage in bench points. Playing in his just his second Division I game, junior forward Bryant Crowder (Harlem, N.Y.) continued to give the Pride more versatility in the post, scoring eight points and hauling in seven rebounds. Hofstra out-rebounded Cleveland State, 38-19, to the win first-ever meeting between the schools.

McMillan (Brooklyn, N.Y.) recorded five assists, marking the second time this season he reached that benchmark. He also set a season-high in points and finished 8-of-11 from the free throw line to help Hofstra win for the first time in the Legends Classic after previous losses to Oregon State and Rhode Island.

Hofstra turned a five-point deficit into a three-possession lead in the second half, going on a 20-4 run to take a 57-46 lead with 6:22 remaining. The Pride defense clamped down on Cleveland State during that stretch, forcing the Vikings to miss 9-of-11 shots in the nearly seven-minute span. Crowder punctuated the run with an emphatic two-handed slam, marking his fourth dunk in two days to give Hofstra an 11-point edge.

The Pride did not let-down against a Vikings squad that came down from 11 points to beat Boston University on Friday. McMillan's ball-handling skills in the backcourt also led to Cleveland State leading-scorer D'Aundary Brown picking his fifth foul with 3:18 left and Hofstra already in the double bonus.

McMillan sank both free throws after weakening his opponent's comeback hopes, putting the Pride up 59-50 with 3:18 on the clock. Hofstra then iced the game after a defensive stop led to a fast break and the subsequent possession.

Following a rebound, Crowder broke free along the left sideline, grabbed the outlet passes and went up for a transition dunk. But Aaron Price was called for an intentional foul after he undercut Crowder in mid-air. Crowder had to come out of the game and was attended to on the bench. Lester hit one of two free throws and the Pride was able to kill more than a 1:30 on the clock after two offensive rebounds.

Cleveland State, which is coming off a 27-9 season and a NIT appearance, was limited to 40.4 percent shooting from the field. Hofstra head coach Mo Cassara employed a mixture of a 2-3 zone defense and man-to-man coverage. The multiple looks held the Vikings to 40.4 percent shooting from the field and just 4-of-19 (21.1 percent) on three-pointers.

D'Aundary, who came in averaging more than 15 points a game, was held to 12. Sebastian Douglas was the only other Vikings player to reach double figures, scoring 10 points.

Cleveland State built an early second-half lead, thanks in part to Brown's athletic up-and-under move that culminated with a left-handed basket and 42-37 lead. Yet Hofstra bounced back, boosted by McMillan, who dribbled around two defenders near the three-point line and drew Anton Grady's fourth foul while hitting a lay-up for a three-point play.

The Pride got a defensive stop and Nwaukoni hit a layup on the low-left block the next trip down, capping a 7-0 run to give Hofstra a 44-42 lead and prompting a Cleveland State timeout.

Jeremy Montgomery's layup tied the score at 44, though Hofstra took the lead on senior guard Mike Moore's layup. Moore (New Haven, Conn.) entered averaging more than 20 points. He finished with five against Cleveland State, though his close-range shot gave Hofstra a lead it would not relinquish as the Pride ended the game on a 19-9 in the final 11 minutes.

For the second straight game, an opponent utilized a full-court press against the Pride. Just like the previous day against Rhode Island, Hofstra struggled to pass out of double-teams near its own baseline, turning the ball over nine times in the opening half. But Hofstra stayed even with the Vikings by drawing 13 fouls and hitting 10-of-13 free throws.

Only Montgomery's three-pointer on the last possession of the half prevented the Pride from taking a lead into the locker room, as the guard drained a left-wing shot to tie it at 29 at the break.

Nwaukoni doubled his previous season-high in points in the opening half, scoring eight off the bench, including a three-point play. The second-year forward's previous high was a four-point effort at Oregon State in the team's Legends Classic opener two weeks ago. His previous career high was a 10-point output versus Wagner on Nov. 26, 2010.

Hofstra will next be in action on Sunday when they face defending America East-conference champion Boston University from the Ryan Center at noon. Against the Terriers, the Pride holds an 11-10 lead. But the schools have not met in more than 10 years with Hofstra winning the previous engagement, 77-56, at home in the 2000-01 season.