

Explosive Second Half Lifts Wildcats Past No. 14 VCU 77-53

box score

BROOKLYN, N.Y. -Villanova (4-0 overall) stood tall in the face of VCU's "Havoc" pressure on Monday night and that grit helped them roll past the No. 14 Rams 77-53 in the semifinals of the Progressive Legends Classic at the Barclays Center.

Brooklyn native JayVaughn Pinkston led a balanced attack with 15 points and seven rebounds while classmate Darrun Hilliard added 14 points, four rebounds and four assists. Sophomore Kris Jenkins (13 points) and Josh Hart (10 points, five rebounds joined them in double figures).

But this night was less about offense than it was a steely resolve. The Wildcats finished with 20 assists with only nine turnovers and one of their primary ball-handlers, junior Ryan Arcidiacono, put together a worksheet with nine assists and zero turnovers.

"It was a great game for us," stated Villanova head coach Jay Wright. "We've had a couple of games where we couldn't do much right and tonight we made our shots. (VCU) is a very good team.

"It was a privilege for us to get that test this early. The way they play just tests your concepts, your will, your stamina, your conditioning. When we saw (VCU) on our schedule we thought 'great, we're going to know where we are.' We all know this could have been 20 points the other way with the way they play.

"This was a great test for us. We are going to learn a lot from this. It's a really good win for us."

Wright pointed to the work of his forwards, among them Pinkston, junior Daniel Ochefu and (a team-high nine rebounds and two blocked shots) and Jenkins.

"We've been known as Guard U but we've got some pretty good forwards,' he stated. "Our forwards really handled the ball and our guards were smart in getting it to them."

Pinkston supplied 13 first half points for the Wildcats and helped them built a 32-30 lead despite the fact they continued their cold shooting from distance in the period, sinking just 1-of-8.

"Treveon Graham is a (heck) of a player," explained Wright. "JayVaughn guarded him early and didn't let him get it going. I think that gave our guys confidence. What he did defensively was really big."

The second half began with the Rams scoring six quick points to grab a 36-32 lead and Wright signaled for a timeout.

"We didn't come out aggressively," noted Wright. "That's one of the things we really admire about VCU. Whatever the situation, up or down, they are aggressive all of the time. We said that if we didn't play aggressively, they are going to take it from us. We came out at the start of the second half and we weren't aggressive."

Villanova responded with a 19-2 run that effectively decided the outcome. Arcidiacono made a key play in that sequence, diving for a loose ball that led to a run out and resulted in an old school three point play by Hart. The Wildcats would go on to outscore the Rams 45-23 in the period and wrapped up a date in the championship game on Tuesday night.

"I thought that was a really pivotal point in the game," stated Wright. "I thought that play really set the tone. Not only did Arch dive on the ball, he looked up and kicked it ahead to Darrun. In our program, the dive and the pass is much more important than the and one it became for Josh."

Indeed, the Wildcats' ability to make crisp passes against the constant pressure was a recurrent theme.

"This is a really good passing team and we were a really good passing team last year," stated Wright. "But you don't see this kind of pressure and you don't see it consistently throughout 40 minutes. We knew we were going to see what kind of a passing team we are. I thought we just did a great job passing the basketball and, if you can do it against them, you should be able to do it against most teams."

Villanova will face the winner of tonight's second game, either Michigan or Oregon, on Tuesday night at Barclays Center. Tipoff is approximately 10 p.m. (ESPN2).

