

Late Game Heroics Lift Men's Basketball to 72-70 Win in CBI Opener

MACON, Ga. – Mercer and Stony Brook battled through 23 lead changes in Tuesday night's College Basketball Invitational opener, but in the end junior Ike Nwamu rose above the rest with 10 points in the final 2:02, including the game-winning jumper with two ticks on the clock to lift the Bears to a 72-70 win at Hawkins Arena.

Mercer jumped to 19-15 on the season and advanced to the CBI quarterfinal round, to be held at Hawkins Arena on March 23. The Bears are slated to face Louisiana Monroe in a 7 p.m. tipoff.

Nwamu finished with a game-high 25 points, 19 of which came in the second half. He was joined in double figures by senior T.J. Hallice and junior Jestin Lewis, who netted 13 and 12, respectively.

The Bears were clinging to a 62-61 lead with 2:02 to play when junior Jibri Bryan found Nwamu for an open jumper that began his torrid finish. He hit 3's on the next two trips down, but each time Stony Brook responded with scores on their own end.

Stony Brook junior Carson Puriefey drove for a layup and was fouled with 23 seconds to go that knotted the game for the 13th time at 70-70. Puriefey missed the ensuing free throw, setting the stage for Nwamu's game winner.

Nwamu had already stoked Mercer's crowd into a frenzy and was now isolated on a single defender at the top the key. He drove right, bodied up his defender and unleashed a contested shot that hit glass and iron before falling through.

With the win, Mercer head coach Bob Hoffman improved to 8-2 in non-conference postseason tournaments. The win also placed Mercer among seven men's basketball programs to win at least one game in the NCAA, NIT, CBI and CIT tournaments.

The Bears shot a red-hot 64.3 percent (18-of-28) from the floor in the second half, including 4-of-8 from 3-point range. Stony Brook came into the game ranked fifth nationally in rebounding margin (+8.5), but the Seawolves managed just a slim 43-41 edge on the glass.

Hallice paced Mercer with eight rebounds while Lewis collected a season-high seven caroms. Nine of Mercer's 11 active players grabbed at least one board in the winning effort.

Nwamu also dished six assists in 31 minutes of work. He hit just one of his first 10 shots, but finished strong by making seven of his final nine attempts.

Sophomore Matt Panaggio provided a spark at the start, nailing two 3's in the first 8:40 of action to help the Bears keep pace with the visitors. Panaggio's six points were a season-high and came along with two rebounds, an assist and a steal.

Freshman Jordan Strawberry played 17 minutes off the bench, dishing five assists with only a single turnover. As a team, the Bears notched 18 assists on 27 made baskets.

