

Big Run Helps UCF Advance to CBI Quarters

ORLANDO, Fla. – With less than a minute to play Wednesday night in the College Basketball Invitational, UCF point guard A.J. Rompza flashed a big smile and waved his arms as the crowd inside UCF Arena roared with approval.

That snapshot moment near the end of UCF's 69-54 defeat of St. Bonaventure was proof positive that the Knights clearly aren't ready for this special season to come to an end just yet.

"You've got to enjoy moments like this because there's only so much time you get to play not only college basketball, but basketball period," said Rompza, who had 13 points and seven assists in 32 minutes off the bench. "We're starting to take advantage of this (postseason) opportunity. You never know when your time can end, so why not give it 100 percent and have fun? That's when we win when we're having fun."

UCF (20-11) not only notched its 20th victory of the season, but captured the school's first-ever postseason tournament victory at the Division I level. After dispatching St. Bonaventure (1615), the Knights move on to face Rhode Island on Monday at UCF Arena in second-round play of the 16-team CBI tourney.

Eliminated in the first round of the Conference USA tournament last week, UCF came back Wednesday with something to prove. The Knights feel they are still an elite team and want to use this postseason berth to keep the season alive and prove their legitimacy.

"This is not only about the now, but also the tomorrow playing in this tournament. We return a lot of guys off this basketball team and it was important for us to go out and play hard," UCF coach Donnie Jones said. "I told them before they went out, 'It's all about how you want to be remembered?' This has been a special team that has done a lot of good things and we still have time. You don't always have time left in a season and our guys have to value their time, make it count and try to make it go as long as it can go."

With the game tied at 44-all with 12:16 to play, UCF won because of a game-turning 121 spurt. The Knights got three big plays from senior center Tom Herzog during the run – a dunk over St. Bonaventure standout center Andrew Nicholson (20 points), a charge taken in the lane and a layup in traffic off a feed from Rompza. Herzog is finally back to full strength after having his two front teeth knocked out and suffering a concussion a month ago against UAB. He made all five of his shots and had 10 points, helping UCF hold a 37-10 advantage in bench scoring.

"I was just trying to get the big guys the ball because they do such a good job running the floor and I wanted to reward them," Rompza said. "When we have them playing like they did it changes the whole game. They were getting back on defense and blocking shots."

Sophomore guard Marcus Jordan scored 18 points, hit two 3-pointers and added four rebounds and two steals for the Knights. Isaiah Sykes scored nine points off the bench, four of them coming off a follow dunk and another dunk in which he got a behind-the-back pass from Jordan.

"We definitely want to keep this season going," Jordan said. "We've always had an attitude of expecting to win and now that we still have games to play we're looking to win them all." It wasn't so long ago that UCF was 140 to start the season and ranked in the national polls for a four-week period of time. For several stretches of Wednesday's game, Jones said he saw a lot of that same swagger, toughness and energy from his team. Now, he hopes it carries over to Monday when the Knights play again. "We looked like the team in December. I had a couple of people ask me, 'Who was that team tonight?'" Jones said

with a chuckle. "We looked like the one from December and I was really proud of the energy of our basketball team.

UCF led 34-30 at the half by executing well in the half court and shooting 53.8 percent in the first 20 minutes. And the Knights won the game late by staying active in a 2-3 zone that held St. Bonaventure to just 1 of 10 shooting from beyond the 3-point stripe in the second half.

Jones left Wednesday's game realizing that there's still plenty of fight left in this basketball team. And because of that a special season mixed with so many highs will continue into next week for the quarterfinals of CBI play.

"(Getting 20 wins) has always been a milestone for a lot of teams and they think, 'Hey, if you get 20, it's a good year.' We've had a good year," Jones said. "We wanted more (wins) because of the way we started and it took us awhile to get 20, but I'm proud of this basketball team. It's only the sixth time since 1984 that this program has had 20 wins. I hope it's not the last win; I hope we've got a couple more left in us for this tournament."