

UCF Runs Past URI, Advances to CBI Semis

ORLANDO, Fla. – UCF's went into Monday night as one of just 42 teams out of 340 across the nation still alive in a tournament of some sort, fueling its motivation against a veteran Rhode Island squad. And when the night and an impressive second half were complete, the Knights emerged as part of the Final Four of the College Basketball Invitational tournament.

UCF made sure the most special season in school history would continue by playing a second half Monday that was one of its most complete stretches of the season. The Knights battered Rhode Island on both ends of the floor and won 66-54 to reach the semifinal round of the CBI.

UCF head coach Donnie Jones hopes there's something special in the works here for his 21-11 Knights. Just last season, Virginia Commonwealth won the CBI and has since become the darlings of this season's NCAA Tournament by winning three games. Now, Jones hopes UCF is building a similar foundation for future success.

"We're playing for the opportunity and we're trying to teach a mentality and change the culture here," Jones said. "VCU was sitting here last year just like us. They had a chance to win out and then bring their team back the next year. We want to be able to keep this thing alive and have a chance to win it. That's why we're playing. Our guys have done a good job at practice. We've had seven practices and two games since the season was supposedly over. That's huge for our team because we'll bring back our whole starting lineup plus six or seven new guys."

UCF is still alive after outscoring Rhode Island 39-24 in the second half to wipe out a three-point halftime deficit. A Knights team that shot 30 percent in the first half and missed 13 of 15 3-point tries hit 17 of 25 tries (68 percent) after intermission. "We want to keep it going as long as we can because we're having fun right now," said junior guard A.J. Rompza, who celebrated his birthday with seven points, five rebounds and three assists. "We're jelling, we're having fun and just playing basketball and that's what is making us win."

UCF got 16 points and nine rebounds from sophomore forward Keith Clanton. Senior forward A.J. Tyler scored 11 points, made two 3-pointers and stretched out the Rhode Island defense so the Knights could go to work on the low block. Senior Tom Herzog, who is playing meaningful minutes in the postseason for the first time in his college career, scored 10 points by making five of seven shots.

"I feel like we're just playing with energy and that is back to how we were playing in December when we went on a 14-game winning streak," Clanton said. "We're just playing a lot better."

Remarkably, UCF pushed its record to 15-0 this season in nonconference games. The Knights won 13 nonconference games in a row to start the season and has since won twice in the CBI.

UCF got to this game by beating St. Bonaventure 69-54 in first-round play of the CBI. It was the Knights' first postseason tournament win since moving to the Division I level in 1984 and the 20th victory of this season. That's something the Knights have accomplished just five times previously on the DI level.

Rhode Island made it to the semifinals of the NIT last season and came in with the most successful senior class in school history, but on this night the Knights looked like the hungrier team.

UCF trailed 30-27 at the break after falling behind by as many as seven points in the first 20 minutes. The Knights were lucky to be that close after making just 30 percent of their field goal attempts and just two of 15 3-point tries.

UCF scrapped for 14 offensive boards in the first half, giving them 14 more shot attempts than the Rams. Marcus Jordan struggled to find his range early on, missing eight of nine shots and all five of his 3point tries. He overcame a poor shooting night with four assists to set up his teammates.

The Knights actually led 17-16 mid-way through the first half and had a chance to broaden the lead, but freshman forward Isaiah Sykes missed a runout reverse dunk attempt.

"I knew it was a 40-minute game," Jones said of his halftime speech to his team. "We just had to calm down, run offense and focus on going inside. We did a good job going inside-out. Marcus was one of nine in the first half and just had to calm down and run offense. He took two shots in the second half, but really impacted our team."

Sykes gave the Knights a nice lift off the bench in the first half, scoring four points, grabbing three rebounds and handing out two assists. And he was tough defensively. He locked down Rhode Island's Delroy James, who scored the game's first nine points, but finished the first half with just 10 points. James finished with 18 points, but did little damage to hurt the Knights with Sykes checking him.

"He did a terrific job and he was all over the place," Jones said of Sykes, who finished with six points, four rebounds and four steals. "He's the guy who sometimes doesn't show up on the stat sheet, but he disrupts. He does those things that help our team have great toughness and keeps us in games."