

Rodriguez, Sanders Lead Rams Past Saint Louis in Game 1 of CBI Championship Series

RICHMOND, Va. – The end of the popular card game “Uno” is near when a player yells “Uno” with one card left in their hand.

VCU Head Coach Shaka Smart’s team may have been overheard yelling that phrase on Monday night after his Rams ran past the Billikens of Saint Louis (23-12) University in a 68-56 victory in game one of the CBI Championship Series.

The Black & Gold (26-9) will need to win just one of the next two games in Saint Louis to be crowned the 2010 CBI Champions.

“When our guys have the desire and want to play the kind of defense we played tonight, it’s tough to beat us,” Smart said. “Offensively, we had our struggles, but when we have guys creating plays off the defensive end like we did tonight, it allows us to put some runs together like we were able to do tonight.”

Leading the way for the Black & Gold was the two-headed monster consisted of juniors Joey Rodriguez and Larry Sanders. The duo combined for 42 points, 15 rebounds, seven assists, four steals and four blocks.

“That whole team is very talented, especially Sanders and Rodriguez,” Billikens Head Coach Rick Majerus said. “They cause a lot problems on both ends of the court and you saw that in both halves when they took turns taking the game over.”

It was a tight, defensive-minded game early, but back-to-back three-pointers by freshman Troy Daniels and Rodriguez gave VCU a six-point lead at 21-15 with just under six minutes left in the first stanza.

Saint Louis would cut it to two on a three-pointer by Kyle Cassity with 4:04 to play, but junior Brandon Rozzell sparked a 134 run to close out the first half and send the Rams into the locker rooms with a 36-25 advantage.

The Billikens would come out of the locker rooms aggressive forcing a couple early turnovers and a jumper by Kwamain Mitchell got SLU within three at 41-38.

Enter Mr. Rodriguez. The third-year standout scored VCU’s next 14 points and quickly pushed the lead back into double-digits at 55-42 with 12:11 left in the contest.

The Black & Gold advantage would stay in double-digits the rest of the way, reaching 20 at one point in the second half. Rodriguez and Sanders were the story though.

Rodriguez finished with a game-high 22 points, 15 of which came in the second half, six assists, three rebounds and four three-pointers. Sanders tallied his 14th double-double of the season with 20 points, 12 rebounds, four blocks and three steals.

The Rams defense was key forcing 16 Billiken turnovers, 12 of which resulted from VCU steals, three each by Sanders and freshman Darius Theus (Portsmouth, Va.).

Willie Reed led Saint Louis with 11 points and six rebounds, while Mitchell and Cody Ellis finished with 10 points apiece.