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JANUARY 14TH 2012 BY UNKNOWN

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By Andrew Cato, ShowMe Times Sports Editor

So far this season, when the ‘Cats have been in a close game that came down to fourth quarter free throws, they’ve lost.

That wasn’t the case Friday night in front of a capacity crowd in the Bearcat Event Center; the ‘Cats knocked down nine of 11 from the free-throw line to take a 68-61 victory over the Bernie Mules on Homecoming night.


“It’s ironic that we iced it away at the free throw line, when we’ve iced many in the other direction this season,” a relieved Rob Nichols said after the game. “The kids have learned from it, and we’ve spent extra time shooting free throws; it becomes a mental thing. They step up and make a few and we’ll start going the other direction.”

“Any time you play a quality team like Bernie and get a win, you have to feel good about it,” he added. “You have to play well to beat them, and tonight we played just well enough to do it.”

Neither team could establish any momentum in the first half; every time the ‘Cats went on a scoring run, the Mules quickly followed suit, but it was the Bearcats that took a 28-25 lead into the locker room at halftime.

“It was a game of runs; Bernie had their runs, and we had ours,” Nichols said. “It didn’t look good at times, but the kids buckled down and found more energy and got it done.” The ‘Cats trailed by as many as seven points in the second half; a 22 point effort from the Mules in the third quarter, aided by a pair of threes from Jake Wagner, saw Bernie to a 47-43 advantage heading into the fourth quarter.

The Mules picked up the Bearcats’ usual woes from the charity stripe in the contest, shooting a paltry nine of 22 from the line. Head coach Brad Botsch noted it as a key factor in the loss.

“We had  our chances. We went up six or seven a time or two, and had opportunities to extend the lead from the free throw line,” Botsch said. “Dexter did a good job of hanging in there, and we never could get the real momentum we needed to cushion the lead. When you let good teams hang around on their home floor, you are asking for trouble, and they stepped up and outplayed us in the fourth quarter.”

Cody Neldon and Jake Lee, who paced the ‘Cats with 14 and 19 respective points, combined for 17 of the Bearcats’ 25 fourth quarter points in the team’s best offensive frame of the contest to propel the ‘Cats to a 68-61 victory over their SCAA rival.

“Cody battled foul trouble all night, and looked frustrated at times, but he does a good job of breaking defenses down and getting us easy baskets with an assist,” Nichols said. “That’s what he gives us. Jake Lee didn’t get the ball a lot in the first half, but we really made an effort to get it in to him during the second half, and I think he did a good job of finishing.”

The Bearcats turned the ball over 17 times in the contest, and seemed to struggle with Bernie’s press from time to time throughout the game. In the second half, however, the ‘Cats were able to use Bernie’s press to their advantage, and picked up several quick buckets in transition.

“We turned it over quite a bit against their press, but we also found some layups against it at key points to stop some of their runs,” Nichols commented. “It seems like when we’d get a rebound we’d turn it over after a defensive stops, and that takes the wind out of your sails. Again, it didn’t look good at times, but I’m proud of the kids for coming out, buckling down, and getting a win.”

“We really felt that we could press them and wear them down because they don’t play that many kids, but they made some good adjustments and got some easy buckets on us,” Botsch noted. “We struggled from the free throw line and it really was tough to overcome the missed opportunities.”

The Bearcats will be in action again on Tuesday, when they hit the road to face the Puxico Indians. Tipoff is scheduled for 6:00 p.m.

Editor’s Note: The ‘Cats are now a perfect 4-0 in SCAA play, while the Mules fall to 2-2 with the loss. Bernie’s other conference loss came against the Advance Hornets. Both teams will eagerly anticipate their seeds in the Stoddard County Tournament, which will be determined on Saturday morning.

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