

SMU advances to NIT title game

Written by Administrator
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NEW YORK (AP) — Larry Brown already is the only head coach to win both an NCAA and NBA championship. Now he has a chance to add the NIT to his extensive resume — in his old backyard, no less.

Markus Kennedy scored 21 points, including the clinching three-point play, and SMU rallied from 13 down in the second half to beat Clemson 65-59 Tuesday night, sending its Hall of Fame coach into the NIT title game at Madison Square Garden.

"I love this place," Brown said. "I wanted our guys to experience what I grew up looking forward to."

Nic Moore added 13 points and Nick Russell scored 10 for the Mustangs (27-9), who will play Minnesota for the crown Thursday night. The Gophers advanced with a 67-64 overtime win over Florida State.

The 73-year-old Brown, who was born in Brooklyn and grew up in nearby Long Beach, is old enough to remember when the NIT was the premier college basketball tournament around. The former New York Knicks coach has directed quite a turnaround in two seasons at SMU, snubbed by the NCAA tourney on Selection Sunday.

"We had a disappointment two weeks ago," Brown said. "But it was a phenomenal opportunity for our program and for our kids to play in this environment."

By all accounts, the Mustangs were one of the final schools left out of the 68-team field. But they were given a No. 1 seed in the NIT and have taken full advantage of it with four straight wins — three on their home court.

The latest one came with Knicks coach Mike Woodson and some of his players, including Kenyon Martin and Tim Hardaway Jr., sitting close to the court.

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"This is a quality, quality championship," Brown said. "We haven't had a lot of nice things happen at SMU for a long, long time, so if we were fortunate enough to win a championship like this, and I was part of it, it would be pretty neat."

Rod Hall had 18 points and five assists for third-seeded Clemson (23-13), still looking for its first NIT crown after three trips to the semifinals. High-flying forward K.J. McDaniels, the team's leading scorer at 17.2 points per game, was held to 11 on 4-of-11 shooting.

"I felt like at times I tried to force a few things, and I should have read the defense a lot better," McDaniels said. "Credit to SMU, they picked up their intensity on us."

Landry Nnoko and Damarcus Harrison each scored 10 for the Tigers, who won 10 more games than last season. But without injured forward Jaron Blossomgame, Clemson was outrebounded 35-25.

"Didn't get off to great start in the second half, and unfortunately we saw the second side of our team a little bit this year. We struggle offensively at times, and we just didn't shoot the ball very well in the second half," coach Brad Brownell said. "Certainly, I'm sure, some of the credit for that goes to SMU, and some of it is just us missing shots."

Harrison had all his points on perfect shooting in the first half, when Clemson shot 56 percent — including 6 of 9 from 3-point range. But he went 0 for 5 and Hall was 1 of 6 as the Mustangs buckled down after halftime, harassing the Tigers into 6-for-25 shooting (24 percent).

"We did what we usually do — just crank it up a little more," SMU guard Sterling Brown said.

Meanwhile, the Mustangs went 13 for 22 (59 percent) in the second half after shooting 37 percent in the first 20 minutes.

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Kennedy shot 8 for 13 overall and finished with nine rebounds, four fouls and three steals in 24 minutes. The transfer from Villanova was the only SMU player who had played in Madison Square Garden before.

"To hold them to 21 after the way they dominated us in the first half was really exciting," Brown said. "Best half we played all year."

Two days after Connecticut advanced to the NCAA Final Four on the same court, Madison Square Garden hosted another set of tournament games between college teams thinking championship.

SMU trailed 41-28 early in the second half but erased the deficit with a 17-4 spurt as chants of "SMU! SMU!" rang out in the Garden. Russell's 3-pointer tied it at 45 with 10:30 left, and a jumper 5 minutes later by Moore tied it again at 53.

Kennedy made a steal at midcourt and was fouled driving to the basket. He hit two free throws with 5:09 remaining to give SMU its first lead, 55-53.

Hall made two free throws to pull Clemson to 60-59 with 8.2 seconds to go. That's when Kennedy got free behind the press and took in a home run pass from Moore for a layup. Kennedy was fouled on the play and hit the free throw to make it 63-59 with 7.2 seconds left.

Moore added two foul shots for the final margin.

"I don't know if they will let me in the Garden tomorrow night," Brown said, acknowledging he's not happy with the job he did as Knicks coach when the team went 23-59 during the 2005-06 season. "I've got a night off, I don't know. I'll either go see Les Mis or the Knicks."