

SMU loses to Minnesota 65-63 in NIT title game

Written by Administrator
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NEW YORK (AP) — An exhilarating season for SMU ended a few points shy of a championship.

Austin Hollins hit a tiebreaking 3-pointer with 46.1 seconds left and Minnesota won the NIT, beating SMU 65-63 Thursday night to give the Pitino family its latest postseason tournament title.

Nic Moore had 17 points and Nick Russell added 15 for the Mustangs (27-10), who were trying to cap their turnaround season under Hall of Fame coach Larry Brown with a title at Madison Square Garden.

"At the end of the day, we determined the outcome of that game," Brown said. "We missed free throws, we turned the ball over, and I didn't see the press affecting our turnovers. We just made some plays that we, unfortunately, we didn't handle very well."

SMU (27-10) led by seven with 5:52 left after a 9-1 spurt capped by Markus Kennedy's dunk off a nice feed from Moore. Minnesota coach Richard Pitino called a timeout, though, and his players quickly responded. DeAndre Mathieu had a three-point play, a steal and an assist to key a 7-0 run that tied the score in just more than a minute.

"Got to give a lot of credit to Richard and his team," Brown said. "They were really well prepared. Got down seven and I thought he got their kids to dig in a little bit. We didn't handle prosperity very well. Had some terrible turnovers in the guts of the game, and I think it turned the game around."

With the Mustangs trailing 65-62, the Golden Gophers fouled Russell on purpose with 3.5 seconds to go. He missed the first free throw and made the second before Minnesota ran out the clock.

"That was the plan, to make the first and miss the second, but it was totally backwards," Russell

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said.

Hollins scored 19 points and Andre Hollins had 14 for the Gophers (25-13), who took home the trophy for the third time. They also won the National Invitation Tournament in 1993 and '98, though the second one was vacated because of an NCAA rules violation involving player eligibility.

"We made some big-time plays," Pitino said. "Austin made a big-time 3. We gutted it out. That is a very good team. They're a really good team. They deserve to be in the NCAA tournament."

With his famous father, Rick, the Hall of Fame coach at Louisville, sitting near his son's bench, Minnesota made up for a blowout loss to Stanford in the NIT final two years ago and finished with a flourish in its first season under the 31-year-old Pitino.

"I think it's one of the highlights of my life," Rick Pitino said on the court afterward. "He's a brilliant young man."

After dad was knocked out of the NAAs last week when the defending champion Cardinals were beaten by rival Kentucky in the Sweet 16, it was left to the younger Pitino to bring home a title in April.

That's exactly what he did, defeating a Hall of Fame coach old enough to be his grandfather.

"I admire what he's done. But I'm not real happy right now," Brown said.

Andre Hollins hit three of four free throws in the final 16.3 seconds to help keep Minnesota in front. Mathieu scored all 13 of his points in the second half for the Gophers.

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Austin Hollins was selected the tournament's Most Outstanding Player. Kennedy and Moore made the all-tournament team for the Mustangs.

The 73-year-old Brown has turned things around in two seasons at SMU, and his latest reclamation project was the favorite going into the NIT after being snubbed by the NCAA tournament.

Minnesota also shrugged off the disappointment of being left out of the 68-team field. Both schools received a No. 1 seed in the NIT and made the most of it, winning three home games apiece to advance to New York.

The championship game matched two coaches with boyhood roots in the Big Apple. Just like Brown, Pitino's father once coached the Knicks, leading them to a division title and two playoff appearances from 1987-89.

Brown flopped with the hometown team, going 23-59 as Knicks coach during the 2005-06 season. But that didn't seem to bother the New York crowd, which gave him a warm hand before the opening tip Thursday.

Brown is in his 39th season as a head coach, nine in college. He won an NCAA crown at Kansas in 1988 and an NBA title with the Detroit Pistons in 2004. He has guided a record eight NBA franchises to the playoffs.

Looking to tie the school record for wins set during the 1987-88 season, SMU was playing in only its third NIT and first national tournament final.

"I'm proud of my team," Brown said. "We picked ourselves up and we competed at the highest level against quality teams and gave ourselves a chance to win."