

First half struggles lead to UCF Knights fifth straight home loss to Tulsa Golden Hurricane

The UCF Knights put themselves in a hole early with a poor shooting first half and could not dig themselves out for their fifth straight home loss Sunday.

By **Timothy Briggs** - February 21, 2016

The UCF Knights struggled early, but fought back in the second half to turn what could have been a laugher into a respectable effort in a 75-67 loss to the Tulsa Golden Hurricane.

UCF was off to a promising start in conference play with two wins each over the East Carolina Pirates and USF Bulls, but the heavy lifting began when UCF played Tulsa on Jan. 24 in Oklahoma. The Knights lost that contest 75-60 and since then, have plummeted in the American Conference standings to 5-9 in conference and 11-14 overall.

With a fifth straight home loss and an eighth loss in their last nine games, the Knights are limping toward the season's finish line.

The first half was abysmal from the Knights as they shot just 26 percent and were 1 for 12 from the 3-point line. In the second, they improved dramatically to the tune of 50 percent from the field and from deep, while converting all five of their free throws in the latter period.

Matt Williams has been productive of late and the Knights' most consistent scoring option as he pitched in 16 points to lead the cause on Sunday.

Adonys Henriquez was able to get the Knights back into the game in the second half with a trio of triples in the span of one minute. After missing four games earlier this month with an MCL sprain, he said he feels like he is getting back in the swing of things.

"When you sit out for a few games it gives you a different perspective on the game," Henriquez said. "I definitely feel like I'm getting back into it."

Henriquez's three 3-pointers were the only scoring he contributed with nine points. Other leaders were Chance McSpadden with 12 points and A.J. Davis with nine.

Head coach Donnie Jones was trying to do anything he could to light a spark in the first half, which included giving extended minutes to freshman forward Chad Brown, who looked active on the glass, but did not convert any of his field goal attempts, going scoreless.

After UCF's latest loss to Memphis on the road, Jones called out his veterans like Justin McBride, and the inclusion of Brown early was a sign that Jones wasn't going to tolerate more inactivity from the seasoned big. McBride responded tonight with a nice afternoon, going 3-of-4 from the field with nine points and five rebounds.

The Knights played better than in previous contests and some stats can reflect that, as UCF outrebounded Tulsa 40-35 with 13 offensive boards. But UCF's inability to get necessary stops in the second half prevented the team from going on any extended run, nullifying any chance at a much-needed conference victory.

"We competed much better in the second half," Jones said. "Shot 50% from the field and we made our free throws tonight so there were definitely some positives."

In general, the bigs for UCF were underwhelming on the afternoon, with Tacko Fall in particular really struggling. He had four fouls in just six minutes of action and finished with four points and two rebounds.

UCF has four more games left in the regular season and will continue to plug along, but the team currently still seems to be left without an identity, which is a facet in every sport that any team needs.

UCF does not have enough competent shooters or versatile big men to play a transition game, so the team is limited to a stagnant half-court approach. At many times that leaves the guards willing to recklessly penetrate and turn the ball over, which the Knights did four separate times on offensive fouls in the first half, with 12 turnovers for the Knights in the game.

The second half was an improvement in effort and execution as UCF outscored Tulsa 45-39, but with little margin for error, the Knights need to play a complete game to have a chance against anyone that has more surface level talent than they do.

Timothy Briggs