

Dakota Wesleyan's Late Run Enough to Defeat USF Women's Basketball

SIOUX CITY, Iowa – The fans at the Tyson Events Center were treated to a second-round matchup between two programs that have surged to the forefront of NAIA DII women's basketball over the last four seasons. Both Dakota Wesleyan University and University of St. Francis were making their fourth consecutive appearance at the NAIA National Tournament.

In the end, the defending NAIA National Champions were just a little too much for the Saints on Friday afternoon. Dakota Wesleyan closed the game on a 15-3 run, overcoming a resilient USF squad to claim a 63-49 victory in second-round action at the NAIA DII Women's Basketball National Championship.

The final score was not indicative of how competitive the contest was for 37 minutes. The teams were separated by just single digits until Sarah Carr scored two of her 17 second-half points with 2:32 remaining. After Carr's basket, the Tigers' added the next five points and eventually closed out the win.

"We wanted to show tonight that we could play with them and I think we did, we just didn't finish it," said head coach Steve Brooks, whose team suffered a 74-51 loss to DWU on December 21. "At the end, we didn't make shots and they made shots. We also gave them a few critical offensive rebounds that were momentum builders. The momentum shifted and we were never able to get it back."

The Saints (24-9) only led twice during the matchup but withstood a plethora of DWU (30-5) runs, keeping the decidedly pro-Tiger crowd contained until the final minutes. Dakota Wesleyan led by six in the opening stanza, five in the second period and seven in the third quarter before the Saints clawed their way back within one possession each time.

Facing its largest deficit of the game, 48-40 with eight minutes remaining, St. Francis seniors **Nichole Davidson (South Elgin, Ill./St. Charles North)** and **Ivana Markovic (Wheaton, Ill./Glenbard South)** combined to score the next six points. When the Saints needed them most, USF's senior leaders provided a spark that is indicative of their impact on the program.

"Both Ivana and Nichole really bought into the culture we are trying to build, a mindset of pursuing excellence both on and off the court," Brooks said. "Part of being a senior is progressing in the program as a leader and I think both Ivana and Nichole have done that. They have a real love of their teammates and help them be the best they can be. They do what you hope seniors would do."

But it was Dakota Wesleyan's juniors Carr and Kynedi Cheeseman who propelled the Tigers on their 15-3 run. The two combined for 32 of the team's 38 second-half points. All 17 of Carr's came in the second half, while Cheeseman finished with a game-high 28.

“For 33 minutes, we were pretty good at responding to their physicality and the way they play,” Brooks said. “We did a good job of taking certain players out of their offense. We held Carr scoreless in the first half, but she got away from us in the second half. That proved to be the difference in the game.”

Kaitlin Aylward (Elmwood Park, Ill./Trinity) paced the Saints with 12 points while Davidson added 10. **Andriana Acosta (Crest Hill, Ill./Joliet Catholic)** remained among the tournament leaders in rebounding, grabbing 10 to go along with eight points.

Taking a step back to reflect on the season, Brooks was impressed with the way his team overcame various challenges throughout the season, including close losses and injuries.

“I’m really proud of them,” Brooks said. “We had to overcome a lot throughout the year, and I felt the kids really responded to what needed to be done. I am grateful for how they responded throughout the year. We were in just about every game.”

The Saints finished the season with a record of 24-9 and are now 46-19 in their two seasons under Brooks’ leadership.

“I think the kids have a better understanding of what we are trying to build, a culture based on effort and team” Brooks said. “That’s what we want to be about, the name on the front of the jersey. Hopefully we can continue the momentum we have been building.”