Braves stuffed in first NCAA appearance

The storybook run for the UNCP men's basketball team came to a close in the opening round of the NCAA Division II Southeast Regional Tournament on March 12, falling to Peach Belt Conference foe Augusta State for the fourth time in the 2010-2011 campaign.

The Braves, the eighth seed, were outrebounded 40-29 by the No. 1-seeded and host Jaguars, who also scored 22 second-chance points in the contest.

"We are disappointed, and we became more frustrated because we felt as if ASU was out-working us. ASU has a great team and great program. We have a lot of respect for them," Braves head coach Ben Miller said after the game.

In a noticeable difference over their PBC Championship matchup on March 6, the Braves had seven players score five points or more, a contrast from the one-sided scoring game a week earlier.

Sophomore Shahmel Brackett led the Braves with 14 points, including three three-point baskets, as well as five assists and five rebounds.

Sophomores K.J. Cooper and Ty Alston each contributed nine points and two rebounds, while sophomore George Blakeney also scored nine points and grabbed five rebounds.

Junior Nate Priest pulled down a team-high seven rebounds for the Braves while also chipping in five points.

In his final game donning the Black and Gold, senior Chris Hargrove scored six points, grabbed two rebounds and had one assist.

UNCP found themselves down 10-0 after the first 5:52 of the game before Priest put the Braves on the board.

From there, the Braves continued to chip at the Augusta State lead, cutting the margin to four at the 12:12 mark on Alston's jumper.

A run by Augusta State increased their lead to double digits, a long range three-point shot by junior Marcus Heath cut the margin to nine at halftime.

In the second half, UNCP pulled to within five on a layup by Blakeney and a three-pointer by Brackett.

Two free throws by Hargrove pulled UNCP to within five on a layup by Blakeney and a three-pointer by Brackett.

Two free throws by Hargrove pulled UNCP to within three at 43-40 at the 13:52 mark.

After Augusta State pushed its lead back out to nine points, UNCP again answered back, cutting the lead to four at 58-54 on a Brackett three-pointer with 6:24 left to play.

The Braves cut the lead to six at the 2:08 mark, only to see Augusta State again push the advantage to eight with 1:34 to go.

Jaguar free throws in the remaining moments made the final, 14-point margin mask what was a close game throughout.

"UNC Pembroke has a good team. A lot of credit goes to Pembroke. They hung in there and even battled back," Augusta State head coach Dip Metress said following the game.

Looking back

The 2010-2011 Braves team will head into the UNCP record books with the most wins in school history, finishing the season 18-12 overall, after being selected to finish 13th in the PBC preseason coaches' poll.

The Braves also made the PBC Tournament field for the first time since 2008 and, with their win over USC Aiken in the opening round March 1, were victorious in the tournament for the first time since 2006.

A final second win against Georgia Southwestern in the PBC Semifinals March 5 sent UNCP to its first PBC Championship appearance.

In the PBC Championship, UNCP fell short before being selected to their first NCAA Tournament appearance hours after the PBC final.

The Braves lose two seniors, Hargrove and Lamar Cross, but will have 12 players returning as juniors or seniors next fall.

"Chris (Hargrove) raised the bar for us this year. We have accomplished things this year that have never been done. We are going to celebrate this season because we made it this far," Miller said.

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