

UConn wins seesaw battle vs. Florida in Jimmy V Classic, 77-73

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NEW YORK, NY— Lead changes, energetic back and forth play, and late fireworks decorated Tuesday night in Manhattan. It was a battle of the two most recent teams to win national championships— emphasis on the word battle.

Connecticut was able to outlast Florida at MSG with a four point victory. It was a game that changed hands several times, with each team assuming control at one point or another. By the second half, every bucket was vital. Every foul felt like it counted twice, and every shot missed felt like another chance wasted.

UConn's star big man Tarris Reed Jr. returned after missing the previous two games due to a lingering ankle injury. Reed returned in style, playing 24 minutes and scoring 12 points on 5-10 shooting. He had a reason to circle tonight on the calendar, as Florida's frontcourt is among the best in the country.

Thomas Haugh (18 pts, 2 reb), Reuben Chinyelu (8 pts, 11 reb, 4 blks), and Alex Condon (14 pts, 9 reb, 3 blks) combine to make the nation's most formidable big man trio. The three of them, who are on the court together more often than not, were sending shots back to where they came from all night. Haugh in particular is also turning into quite a stud, stepping out for three triples. He is looking like the most developed NBA prospect of this bunch.

Florida's guard play, however, has been less than stellar. Transfer Xaivian Lee has had a rough shooting start, but last night may have been his arrival party. Lee (19 pts, 5 ast) had a stellar game despite still not necessarily shooting well (5-14 FG, 1-7 3pt). He had timely assists and drives to the lane, using his shiftiness and outright speed to his advantage. UConn's bigger guards were able to handle him at times, but Lee was able to move around the court faster than almost anyone.

Solo Ball (19 pts, 6-14 FG, 3-8 3pt) led the Huskies in scoring, proving once again how he has developed a solid plan B when his three-point shooting is not on point. Alex Karaban was the ever lasting veteran presence, scoring 13 and hitting a few timely threes. Off the bench, Malachi Smith (5 pts, 9 ast) was a workhorse. He has been quite

the weapon, with Dan Hurley comparing him to a "3rd down running back" in the NFL— change of pace, change of look, and a different set of legs. Smith will be key this season for UConn to adjust their play from time to time. Eric Reibe (9 pts) has shown promise in Reed's absence, and he may be the 2 to Reed's 1 that Hurley is looking for.

The game was physical, and down the stretch, referees quite literally could not stop calling fouls. Both sides have some gripes, and both sides got some calls they maybe shouldn't have. It ended up being some sloppy UConn play at the end that kept Florida within range. A problem that returned from last season was prominent: inbounding the ball. UConn was forced to call timeout, and then quickly got the ball into Jayden Ross who turned it over with nine seconds left. Florida had a chance to inbound with plenty of time, down three points. They ran a set from the sideline of UConn's half, and were called for a five second violation. Turnover. UConn then hit a free throw to ice it after inbounding, giving them their 5th quad one win of the season.

Post game, Golden assured the media that his team was given the short end of that five second call, going so far as to claim they timed it themselves in the locker room after it was all over. Golden had a few other moments throughout the game, with many expletives directed towards officiating. Dan Hurley had a few moments himself too, giving the entire game a tense, March-like feel.

The refereeing will always be part of the story, but the basketball here should overtake it. This game was incredible from end to end. Amazing shotmaking, hard-nosed defense, and a great atmosphere at the world's most famous arena. UConn's rebounding nearly let them down, as well as their foul trouble. Florida couldn't handle UConn's offensive sets at times, but their dominant frontcourt did more than enough to keep them in it until the end.

The Huskies play Texas at home this Friday, closing out one of the more impressive non-conference slates in America. If this is what full strength UConn can do, then they absolutely belong in the country's top echelon of teams.

Do not let Florida's 5-4 record fool you; at any point, this Gator team can run away with a game. That frontcourt can dominate anyone, and if the guard play is to match, we may see them in the Final Four again.

For now, UConn got their revenge. However, the season is long, and both of these teams may find themselves squaring off for something more in March.