

UConn takes care of Illinois at the Garden, 74-61

Written by Sean Murawski // SM Sports

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NEW YORK, NY— In a top ten battle at the world's most famous arena, Dan Hurley's Huskies defended "Storrs South," knocking off Brad Underwood's Fighting Illini on Black Friday, 74-61.

UConn's wire-to-wire victory was its first at full strength this season. Tarris Reed Jr. and Braylon Mullins had both been sidelined with ankle injuries, with Mullins yet to make an appearance all season prior to Friday's game. Reed Jr. started and Mullins played 10 minutes off the bench.

The game began a bit frisky, with players rushing, moving too fast, and committing turnovers and silly fouls. UConn assumed a bit more of a control midway through the first half, and they never relinquished it.

Solo Ball has been a story for the Huskies early this year for his less than stellar three-point shooting. Largely believed to be one of the best sharp shooters in the country, Ball began this season cold. However, he played confidently yesterday. Ball finished with 15 points, hit two threes, and grabbed five rebounds in 33 minutes. He has looked remarkably comfortable from mid range so far, especially since his three point shooting hasn't been at its full ceiling just yet.

Illinois' three-point story feels similar to Ball's. The Illini went 6-29 from beyond the arc, in addition to 19-60 from the field. They lost the rebound battle, as well. However, Kylan Boswell (25 pts,, 8-16 FG, 9 rebs) was far and away the best player on the court. His driving to the basket gave UConn fits down low, and had the three point shooting been more on point, he would have had a lot more assists to boot. He was one of the Illinois bright spots in a game where Andrej Stojakovic (3 pts, 1-7 FG) and David Mirkovic (8 pts, 3-10 FG) did not play up to their potential.

In the second half, Illinois cut it to a seven point game with under three minutes to go. The Huskies went a little cold in the second half, which felt like deja vu to their game against BYU a few weeks back. It ended up being UConn's depth that made the big difference in this game, keeping it much less stressful than that game in Boston.

Malachi Smith (14 pts, 3-6 FG, 3-3 3pt) was a huge asset off the bench. His energetic point guard has made a huge impact for UConn, giving them a slightly different look than their lineup that includes Silas Demary Jr. Demary Jr. (9 pts, 3-5 FG) also played well, but Smith's key contributions down the stretch kept the game at arm's length. He hit a wild three-point shot as the shot clock expired, and got fouled in the process, with just about two minutes to go in the game. It was controversial, as a shot clock malfunction had the clock reset when it perhaps should not have been. Smith then hoisted a three from distance, was fouled, and the shot inexplicably stood. A huge four point swing went UConn's way, despite confusion on all ends from the ruling standpoint.

Despite Illinois having a gripe regarding that play, they were undoubtedly second best the entire game. With cold shooting and a few of their dynamic scorers not showing up, it would have been very difficult for Illinois to win in any environment. It was not quite the dominance of their matchup two seasons ago in the Elite Eight, but UConn assumed control from tipoff to final buzzer.

If UConn's depth continues to be this useful, then they will continue to sit atop the sport's ranks. Michigan, Arizona, and Purdue all seem to be the best team in the country at any point, but UConn may have a case if they keep winning. Illinois' ceiling is high, and when they are on, their offense is as electric as anyone in the country. Both teams will be at the top of their conferences, and may well meet again when it matters more— in March.