

NCAA TOURNAMENT: SYRACUSE 87, GONZAGA 65

Bouldin's run over

NOTEBOOK

Guard finishes GU career with loss to Syracuse

By Jim Meehan and Vince Grippi
Staff writers

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Matt Bouldin just wouldn't let it enter his mind.

"I was just doing all that I could to make it not my last game," he said Sunday after Gonzaga's 87-65 season-ending loss to Syracuse. "I wasn't thinking about it being over. Yeah, I didn't go into that half thinking, 'Hey, this could be my last half.'"

"Positive thoughts." Bouldin's four-year Gonzaga career was filled with a lot of positives, even if his final game wasn't.

He finishes in the school's career top 10 in points (1,683, sixth), assists (444, fifth) and steals (170, tied for third with Jeremy Pargo).

"He's a quintessential Gonzaga guard," coach Mark Few said. "Now that it's over, he goes right alongside (John) Stockton and (Dan) Dickau and (Blake) Stepp as one of the all-time greats."

"It's unfortunate he didn't get to end his career on maybe one of his best games."

Bouldin had his troubles shooting against the Orange, missing 10 of his 13 shots and all six he took from beyond the arc. With eight points, he failed to hit double figures for the sixth time this season.

"Absolutely not the way you want to send out a guy like Matt, a friend, a teammate," junior Steven Gray said. "You wish you could send him out in a better fashion, one fitting with the type of career he had here."

"You can't let this one loss reflect on the career he's had."

In his eighth NCAA tournament game, the 6-foot-5 Bouldin grabbed three rebounds, putting him sixth all time among Zags in NCAA games with 38.

In his four years, the native of Highlands Ranch, Colo., has been part of teams that won 103 games and four West Coast Conference titles.

"The fact he was able to lead us to 27 wins," Few said, "(when) we've never been so inexperienced and so new. Matt was basically the guy that had to pull it all together."

Asked to summarize Bouldin's career, Few demurred.

"I don't think I can sum it up in one sentence," he said. "I would have to write a thesis on him."

Orange golden

Gonzaga has run into several top-shelf teams this season. Michigan State, which has advanced to the Sweet 16, was ranked No. 2 when it rallied to beat the Zags in East Lansing. Duke, another Sweet 16 qualifier, was No. 7 when it administered a 76-41 rout over the Zags. Wisconsin, bounced by Cornell on Sunday, was in the top 25 most of the year. The Badgers lost to GU in Maui.

But the consensus of Gonzaga players: Syracuse is the best team they faced this season.

"If they continue to play like that, I'm pretty sure they'll make the Final Four and probably win the whole tournament," Gonzaga freshman forward Elias Harris said. "Duke is stronger inside, but Syracuse's guards do a heck of a



Matt Bouldin found little room to maneuver during his final game for Gonzaga.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON chrisa@spokesman.com



Gonzaga's Elias Harris is hit from both sides by Syracuse players as he fights for an offensive rebound.

job." Guard Andy Rautins, who scored 24 points and had four assists, is an NBA player "no doubt in my mind," Few said. "He's quick, much quicker live (than on video). You can have a hand up and it doesn't matter. It hits his hands, it's going up." Keep in mind the Orange played without injured starting post Arinze Onuaku, who averages 10.5 points and 5.1 rebounds. "I do think they're better (than Duke)," Bouldin said.

One-two punch

Harris and center Robert Sacre combined for 16 of Gonzaga's 20 free-throw attempts, 41 of the

Bulldogs' 65 points and 16 of the team's 27 rebounds. Both found room to operate on the interior against Syracuse's 2-3 zone defense.

"You go inside-out against a zone like that and you can be successful," Sacre said. "I thought we stuck to it pretty good. Their 3s killed us, but you have to credit them, hitting shots with hands in their face. Conversely, the shots weren't falling for us, but that's part of the game."

They were falling for GU's inside duo (16 of 24 field goals).

"Against their zone, the second row (back three) was the row where you can attack, mostly because they have a lot of gaps there," Harris said. "That worked

out well for us in the first half, but we just lost our concept toward the end of the first half and about the first 10 minutes of the second half. You can't have those rollercoaster trips, the ups and downs."

Harris' 24 points were the most he scored since pouring in 31 against Saint Mary's on Jan. 14. It was his first 20-point game in 13 contests, dating to a 21-point effort against San Francisco. Sacre's 17 points were his highest in 19 games.

Low on reserves

Gonzaga's bench, shut out in Friday's 67-60 win over Florida State, was a bit more productive against the Orange. Reserves had seven points, led by freshman Kelly Olynyk's four points and four boards. G.J. Vilarino added three points.

With GU struggling to score from the perimeter, Few tried several options (Bol Kong and Grant Gibbs) but couldn't find a hot hand.

"We never could quite get Bol as aggressive as he was at the start of the year," Few said. "We tried to encourage him to play with confidence and hunt his shot but he just couldn't do it."

The Zags' bench was depleted by the loss of wing Manny Arop to a broken foot in the semifinals of the WCC tournament.

"That was a real setback," Olynyk said. "He was great for us, great down the stretch and he was hitting shots and attacking the glass. Syracuse beat us on the glass (38-27) so that really hurt us."

0-5

Gonzaga all-time record against No. 1 seeds in NCAA tournament

54.7

Syracuse's shooting percentage, best by a GU opponent this year

8

Matt Bouldin's point total, only the sixth time this season he didn't get to double figures

15-4

Syracuse's run to end the first half

44

Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim's NCAA tourney wins, seventh all time

12

Syracuse's 3-pointers, a school record in 84 NCAA tournament games

They said it



"This next year could be a huge year for the Zags. If they all buy in and really come together as a team, they could make a much deeper run than any other team before."

Matt Bouldin, Gonzaga guard



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Box score

Syracuse 87, Gonzaga 65

| GU, 27-7 | Min | M-A | M-A | O-T | A | PF | PTS |
|---------------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Harris | 31 | 8-12 | 8-13 | 4-8 | 0 | 1 | 24 |
| Sacre | 34 | 8-12 | 1-3 | 4-8 | 0 | 3 | 17 |
| Goodson | 20 | 0-5 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Bouldin | 40 | 3-13 | 2-2 | 1-3 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| Gray | 37 | 3-11 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 8 | 4 | 9 |
| Vilarino | 13 | 1-1 | 1-2 | 0-3 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Gibbs | 1 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Olynyk | 15 | 2-4 | 0-0 | 2-4 | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Kong | 9 | 0-2 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Totals | 200 | 25-60 | 12-20 | 11-27 | 14 | 18 | 65 |

Percentages: FG .417, FT .600, 3-Point Goals: 3-21, 14.3 (Harris 0-1, Goodson 0-2, Bouldin 0-6, Gray 3-9, Olynyk 0-1, Kong 0-2) Team Rebounds: 0, Blocked Shots: 3 (Sacre 2, Bouldin), Turnovers: 11 (Harris 4, Sacre 3, Bouldin, Gray 2, Vilarino), Steals: 8 (Sacre 4, Bouldin, Gray, Vilarino 2), Technical Fouls: None.

GRIPPI

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ball like that, we're pretty tough to beat," Boeheim said of the Orange's 54.7 percent shooting, even better than their 51.7 nation-leading season mark.

"If they play harder than you, we've got no shot," Few said. "And they played harder than us."

But he also saw that as an aberration in a season he called one his most enjoyable.

"They have been just a joy to coach all year," Few said of his 11th Gonzaga team. "Very easy, not one problem in any way, shape or form. They played hard, they're fun to travel with, they get along extremely well. I mean it's really been a fun, fun year."

But not a fun day. The outside shots wouldn't fall – GU's three starting guards, Matt Bouldin, Steven Gray and Demetri Goodson, were 6 of 29 combined.

The defense wasn't intense or physical – the Orange dominated on the glass 38-27 and

were just one miss away from hitting half of their 25 3-pointers.

And the Zags had no answer for Johnson, the 6-foot-7 transfer from Iowa State. His final line: 31 points, 14 rebounds, zero turnovers in 40 minutes. And yes, he didn't sit even when Syracuse led by 32.

"We just didn't quite have the same mentality we had the other night. We were blasting guys pretty good against Florida State," Few said.

Still, he wouldn't cast stones. "I don't know why you would identify a six-month journey with one game," he said.

When it came time to talk of next year's expedition, Bouldin took the wheel. The Zags' lone starting senior, Bouldin, struggled in his last game, hitting just 3 of 11 shots, 0 of 6 from long range. But he didn't struggle when asked what the future held for a locker room that should lose only him, lightly used 7-5 center Will Foster and walk-on Chris Pontarolo-Maag.

"They'll go into next season being ranked pretty high," Bouldin said. "This next year

could be a huge year for the Zags. If they all buy in and really come together as a team, they could make a much deeper run than any other team before."

If that puts added pressure on next year's group, well, most of them will have been through it before.

"If anything I think they got burdened a little bit by, here you go into Maui and win it and everybody ranks them eighth or ninth," Few said of this season's team. "My son A.J. just has a huge problem with that. If you're ranked high, how can you lose? I try to explain to him those are just rankings. Those aren't any exact science."

"I think that affects a lot of people, quite frankly. From my vantage point, which is as good a vantage point as any since I'm with them every day, from where they came from to where they ended up and what they accomplished, this is probably as good a year as I've ever had at Gonzaga."

With that, Few shook hands and stepped inside the locker room. After some rest, another trip beckoned.