UNH Men’s Basketball: Wildcats Defy Odds in Lowell and Shift Gears to Bryant

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Lowell, Mass. – Pregame: The University of New Hampshire (UNH) Wildcats (13-8, 5-3) took the court 15 minutes earlier than the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Lowell River Hawks (15-6, 6-2). The Wildcats did not smile, they did not fool around, all that was seen was a focused nature. The River Hawks danced, took shots that would not be taken during the game, and looked overall lackadaisical.

First Half: The game’s first ten and a half minutes held a fast-paced playing style that led to ten lead changes. Shots were being traded by UNH senior forward Clarence Daniels and UMass’s Ayinde Hikim. After more shots continued to fall for each team, fans were left on the edge of their seats waiting for one to break away. That is when something that the Wildcat offense hasn’t seen too much this year occurred. Graduate Student Forward Jaxson Baker drove to the basket multiple times and was either fouled or was able to put points on the board.

Being six foot eight, Baker was not completely prepared to take on the center role this year for the ’Cats. Sophomore forward Ridvan Tutic suffered a torn ACL in a practice before the start of the season leaving Baker with his huge shoes to fill. His uphill battle has included guarding one of the best centers in the NCAA (7’2” Donovan Clingan) and consistently being the smaller forward down in the paint. In this game, however, Baker did not shy away from being aggressive down low against the two larger bodies of Max Brooks and Cam Morris III as he was able to put up a career-high 28 points. Baker’s efforts (among others) sparked a seven-point lead going into halftime.

Halftime: The Wildcats arrived back to the court from their locker rooms before the River Hawks. Despite trailing by seven, UMass came out to the court laughing and dancing. Hikim was wearing a cape and almost forgot to take it off before the start of the second half. The whole Lowell team once again just seemed lackadaisical for the situation at hand and that would not go on to age well for the River Hawks.

Second Half: Two words; All Wildcats. UNH began the second half up by seven, and the deficit never got less than that. In fact, it never got close. The ’Cats were able to extend their lead to 21 points with four and a half minutes remaining in the game. Even when Lowell made their efforts to scrap back into the game by going on a seven-point run, one of the favorites for America East player of the year, Clarence Daniels would go on to score nine straight.

It was all fireworks for UNH and the bench almost couldn’t keep it together. Coaches had to calm both the players and themselves down once it became a reality that they were going to win this game. The Wildcats came into the game as ten-point underdogs so it was safe to say that no one was expecting this result. The final score of the game was 89-73. Daniels finished with 34 points, Baker with the above-stated 28 points, and Robinson with 11 points.
Why is this win larger than the game: The Wildcats winning this game stretches much further than the score. This win dates back to February 25th of last year when UNH traveled to the Tsongas Center and got clobbered by the River Hawks by a final score of 92-55. Then flash forward a few weeks when Lowell crushed the ‘Cats dreams of making the America East finals for the first time in college history with a score of 75-64. Finally taking a look back at this past January 6th when the River Hawks came into Lundholm Gymnasium on the first game of conference play and beat the Wildcats 82-75 in a game that UNH thought they beat themselves.

But even more than a “revenge game”, this win means a ton toward conference standings. Currently, this is what the conference standings look like.

Pretty much everything that could have gone right for UNH went right. As shown above, the Wildcats are up two wins over UAlbany (who defeated UNH a week ago). This was due to the ‘Cats win over the Riverhawks and UMBC’s win over the Great Danes. In the America East, the top four seeds gain a home playoff bid so this gives the Wildcats some chance if they end up losing a game or two as the season moves along.

On top of that, Maine was able to upset Bryant that same night which set both their and UMass Lowell’s record to 6-2 (one game above UNH). This Thursday the ‘Cats travel down to Bryant with an opportunity to hold the same record barring a win. That ultimately would not only give UNH more confidence by defeating back-to-back strong opponents but also give them a lot of extra wiggle room to secure an America East home playoff bid.

Thursday’s matchup tips off at 7 p.m. in the Chase Athletic Center and can be watched on ESPN+ or listened to on WUNH 91.3 FM.