

Belmont upsets Oregon in double overtime showdown



For two rounds of overtime, the University of Oregon answered every Belmont shot — until the last one.

For the second straight season, No. 12 Belmont pulled off a first-round upset in the NCAA Tournament, this time outlasting the No. 5 Ducks in Knoxville's Thompson-Boling Arena.

The Bruins' 73-70 win sends them on to the second round of March Madness, where they will face No. 4 University of Tennessee on the same court at 6 p.m. Monday.

"I don't think I could be more proud of the group than I am right now," Belmont head coach Bart Brooks said after Saturday's win. "They had every opportunity to fold; it got hard a lot, but they always had an answer."

The Bruins started the contest hot, jumping to an early 9-2 lead backed by two 3-pointers from sophomore Tuti Jones.

On defense, Belmont held its own in the opening quarter, forcing Oregon into bad shots; the Ducks made only four of their first 23 attempts.

After the first quarter, Belmont led 13-8.

In the second quarter of action, the Ducks began to storm back behind several baskets from forward Nyara Sabally, who had a height advantage over all Belmont's defenders. But the Bruins didn't back down from the challenge of guarding the Ducks' taller players, like the 6-foot-5 Sabally — who led Oregon in scoring with 31 points — as well as 6-foot-7 forward Sedona Prince.

"They were big, and we knew they would be coming in," Brooks said. "We're not scared of size. It's not a height contest, it's a basketball game."

With that mindset, the Bruins kept fighting back while the Oregon offense went on a 12-0 run.

The Bruins found their fire after sophomore Blair Schoenwald and senior Jamilyn Kinney each nailed 3-pointers, energizing the ever-present Belmont fans who made the trip to Knoxville by bus.

After junior Nikki Baird caught a rebound and made a layup as time expired, Belmont entered halftime on a high note but still trailed 26-28.

Coming out of the half, the Bruins showed grit, fighting for every point and shoring up their strong defensive skills.

Sophomore Destinee Wells and senior Conley Chinn pitched in quick baskets to get the team's comeback campaign rolling.

While Wells continued to run the show on offense, Chinn turned to the defensive end and stepped in front of one of Oregon's players to do what she does best — charge.

Although Belmont ramped up its energy, Sabally and Oregon guard Te-Hina Paopao kept the Ducks in front.

After three quarters, the Bruins still trailed 36-40.

Belmont came out sizzling in the fourth as Jones scored eight straight points for a 44-42 lead, the Bruins' first since their run in the third quarter.

"We knew that if we couldn't do anything, we could control our fight," said Jones, who led Belmont with 22 points by the end of the evening. "We just kept playing together and feeding off each other."



Kinney and Madison Bartley contributed to the momentum swing as the time began to wind down, both knocking down shots from behind the arc.

Still, the Ducks refused to fade. Clawing back to tie the score at 50-all, Oregon had a chance to take the lead with just over a minute remaining in regulation play.

Then Chinn stepped in for another charge, and the Bruins took full advantage.

Wells and Jones knocked down free throws to give Belmont a 53-50 lead as the final minute ticked away.

With 15 seconds left, Oregon had one last opportunity to tie the game.

Paopao connected on a corner three; the Bruins were unable to make a last-second shot to bring back their lead, so the game headed to overtime.

Oregon came out shooting to score the first six points, but Belmont wasn't fazed.

Baird, Wells and Jones scored after the surge from Oregon, but as the end of overtime approached, the Bruins still trailed.

That held true until Chinn banked a 3-pointer from the right wing to tie it at 63-all.

"We knew we needed a shot and I just let it fly," Chinn said. "The Lord is so good, he let it bank in."

After both teams each made a free throw, Belmont had a chance to pull ahead for the win with less than five seconds remaining.

Unsuccessful layup attempts by Bartley prompted another overtime period.

In the second set of five minutes, Belmont never wavered, even while running on fumes. The Ducks kept coming, but the Bruins held on tight like their season depended on it. It did.

Jones nailed a jumper then converted a steal seconds later, hyping up her teammates and the restless Belmont supporters who stayed on their feet the entire game.

After a layup from Sabally gave Oregon the lead, the Bruins scored five straight points to close out the game — pulling ahead on free throws from Wells.

Belmont secured the victory as a 3-point Hail Mary from Prince missed on the buzzer.

With the win, the Bruins pulled off yet another first-round upset at the dance, last time defeating No. 5 seed Gonzaga University 64-59 at the 2021 tournament.

But they're hungry for more.

"We didn't come here to just win one game, we came here to win more," Chinn said. "I have all the confidence in the world in our team in that second-round game. We remember what it felt like last year."

Now standing on 23-7 record, Belmont advances to the Round of 32 where they will face the Tennessee Lady Volunteers on their Knoxville home court Monday night.

"I hope this place is packed. It's a great atmosphere and it's going to be great for our players," Brooks said.



***This article was written by Landen Secrest. Photos by Jessica Mattsson
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