

The Appalachian State women's basketball team is just one win shy of its first Southern Conference championship in 12 years.

The Mountaineers (25-5), who also set a school record for single-season victories, advanced into Monday's title game by knocking off the No.4 seed, Elon, 72-48 in the semifinals Sunday afternoon at McKenzie Arena in Chattanooga. The Mountaineers will play Samford (24-7), the No.2 seed, in the finals Monday at 4 pm. The Bulldogs reached the finals by knocking off last year's defending champion, Chattanooga, 68-66 in overtime in Sunday's second semifinal game. Emily London led Samford with 21 points, seven rebounds and five assists.

ASU, the No.1 overall seed, finally came to life in the second half. The Phoenix (19-12) gave ASU all it could handle in the opening 20 minutes. They led by as many as six points, and ASU trailed until Courtney Freeman's layup gave the Mountaineers an 18-17 lead with 8:27 to play in the first half. After falling behind on Elon's next possession, the Mountaineers jumped on top for good on a bucket by Freeman at 20-19 with 7:27 to go.

"We stood around a lot in the first half," said ASU coach Darcy Vincent. "We weren't chasing down loose balls. Our people were waiting for their teammates to make a play. We finally got more aggressive in the second half and pulled away."

Ashlen Dewart really came to life in the second half, following a dormant performance in the first 20 minutes. She was 1-7 from the field and was 1-4 from the foul line for three points in the first half. But she began asserting herself in the final stanza. With her team leading 29-27 at the break, Dewart scored eight points in a 10-2 run that gave ASU a 39-29 lead.

"We had a real size advantage inside, and we just didn't take advantage of it in the first half," Dewart said. "But in the second half, we started establishing our inside game, and that played to our favor."

From there, the Apps put together a 15-0 run, building a 54-35 advantage with 10:27 to go and the Phoenix never recovered.

"We're a much better team when we play aggressively," Vincent said. "Even though it's primarily a sophomore group, they're living for the moment. They know what's at stake, and they're not nervous about the situation."

Dewart finished with 19 points, 16 of those in the second half. Courtney Freeman, who carried ASU in the first half with ten points, finished with 17. Kelsey Sharkey, who came in averaging around three points and four rebounds a game, finished with 12 points and career highs with 16 rebounds and seven assists.

The Mountaineers also held Elon to 27% shooting in the second half, and the Phoenix's talented guard, sophomore Ali Ford, struggled mightily. She was 3-10 from the floor and finished with eight points. Kelsey Evans backboned Elon with 13 points and 14 rebounds.

"I thought we did a great job in the first half playing defense and rebounding the ball," said Elon coach Karen Barefoot. "But in the second half, we had some defensive breakdowns and they

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Written by Mike Kelly
Sunday, 06 March 2011 16:45

just took advantage of things. ASU is an excellent offensive team. But I was proud of the effort, despite the loss."

The Phoenix never got any closer than 15 points, and the lead grew to 21 with a minute to play on a bucket by Dewart.

"We may be sophomores, but we've been through the big-game experience before," Sharkey said. "Being here last year as freshmen really got us ready for this. We know what's at stake (a berth in the NCAA tournament), but we just have to ready to go (Monday) in the finals."

ASU hasn't won the SoCon championship since 1999, when Beth Schoolfield led ASU, a No.6 at the time, to the title.

"What you saw tonight were two very young teams," Vincent said. "And we both had our struggles. Both teams were extremely tight, But in the second half, I thought we began playing more of our game and we took them out of their game. Our offense dictated the pace of the game in the second half.

"I know we lead the league in rebounding, but they did a great job of hitting the boards in the first half. And our offense looked like an absolute mess. But in the second half, we moved the ball around and got a lot of good looks at the basket."

The Phoenix had 24 rebounds in the first half, but ASU, which held Elon to just 21 points in the final 20 minutes, wound up outrebounding the Phoenix 47-44.

"I'm not going to calm them down," Vincent said. "We play our best when we're aggressive. Hopefully, we can continue that aggression (Monday). It's great for our program to be back there."

And ASU, which is 21-2 when leading at halftime this season, has never lost a SoCon title game. Our coverage of Monday's championship game begins at 3:30 pm on AM 1450, WATA.

ASU 72, ELON 48

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