

Top-seeded Davidson wins 12th SoCon title

Written by Phil Perry

Tuesday, 12 March 2013 06:28

Davidson cruised to its 12th Southern Conference Men's Basketball Championship title, 74-55, over College of Charleston on Monday night in ExploreAsheville.com Arena at U.S. Cellular Center. The win

moves the Wildcats to 26-7 on the season, while CofC falls to 24-10. It was a wire-to-wire win in front of a raucous crowd as Davidson's students came en masse as the team's sixth man. Tournament Most Outstanding Player De'Mon Brooks led the way with 24 points and eight rebounds. J.P. Kuhlman added 14 for the winners. Andrew Lawrence paced the Cougars with 19 points on the evening. Adjehi Baru added 11. CofC was limited to 29.8 percent shooting from the field (17-for-57) including a mere 1-for-10 (10%) from 3-point range.

"This was the De'Mon of last year that we saw consistently. It has now become consistently part of the latter stage of this year," said Davidson coach Bob McKillop. "Sometimes when you have five scorers in the game as we do, it's a difficult task to find your comfort level and find your rhythm. He struggled to find it. After winning player of the year in the conference that he co-shared with Jake Cohen, all of a sudden there are expectations."

It marked season lows for field goal percentage, 3-pointers made and 3-point percentage Charleston made an early run in the second half after falling behind 12, 38-26, on a Kuhlman trey to open the scoring. Baru hit two free throws, Lawrence a jumper in the lane and Baru again in the paint to get within six, 38-32, with 18:07 to play. That's as close as it would get as Davidson methodically put the Cougars away.

The score drifted into double digits and back to eight over the course of the next 11 minutes. Brooks sent it into double figures for good with a layup, 61-50, at 7:47. That started a run of nine unanswered points and 13-2 overall to get to a 20-point cushion, 72-52, on a layup by a streaking Jake Cohen on a nice feed from Nik Cochran with just under three minutes to play. Jake Belford's layup with 1:40 remaining posted the largest lead of 21, 74-53. Trent Wiedeman made a couple of free throws in the last minute-and-a-half for the final tally of 74-55. Cohen had 12 points, five boards and three blocks on the night, while Cochran added 10 points and four assists. The Wildcats shot 54.9 percent (28-for-51) from the field, but just 25.0 percent (4-for-16) from beyond the arc.

"Well, I got to give Davidson credit, they've beat us 3 times and beat us pretty convincingly. I thought we had a real good chance, first half," said Charleston coach Doug Wojcik. "We didn't really rebound the ball offensively last night, but we did a great job tonight early and we just didn't convert those offensive rebounds and made things tougher for ourselves and kind of dug ourselves a hole. But for the most part, great weekend for us, the kids fought valiantly. "

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They did shoot 68.6 percent (24-for-35) inside the arc. That led to a 42-24 edge in points in the paint. Davidson got off to a great start, scoring the game's first seven points. Lawrence's 3-pointer at 14:44 made it a 10-8 game. The Wildcats went on a 12-2 spurt to jump out by 12, 24-12, for the largest lead of the first half, on a layup by Brooks. CofC battled back with a 14-7 stretch to get within five, 31-26, on a Lawrence free throw. Chris Czerapowicz and Kuhlman ended the first half with scores as Kuhlman drove to the basket for a layup with a second to spare and a 35-26 lead.

The Wildcats hold the SoCon record with 12 tournament titles over Chattanooga and West Virginia with 10 apiece. It is the seventh of the Bob McKillop era and fifth in the last eight seasons, which is the most impressive run of conference crowns since the Mocs' four in five years from 1993-97. Since 2002, only Davidson (six), UTC (two) and Wofford (two) have won the league's tourney.

"It feels incredibly special to be able to do this twice," said senior forward Jake Cohen of the Wildcats. "I'm so proud of my teammates for being able to give me an opportunity to do it again. To be able to do this twice and to do it with some of my best friends in the world is something really special. I just feel really lucky."

The all-tourney first team included Brooks, Cohen, Baru, Lawrence and Trey Sumler (Western Carolina). Kuhlman, Cochran, Lucas Troutman (Elon), Derrell Armstrong (UNCG) and Nathan Healy (Appalachian State) comprised the second team. Davidson now awaits news of its NCAA tournament site. Selection Sunday is March 17 airing at 6 p.m. on CBS. The Cougars also wait for news of their postseason landing spot.

Photo Courtesy: De'Mon Brooks, SoCon Athletics