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Zags hold off the scrappy Portland Pilots, win 81-78

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(This game story came to us courtesy of long time Husky Digest contributor William Crane)

Portland, OR - Gonzaga (12-3, 1-0 WCC) held off a feisty University of Portland (9-6, 0-1 WCC) team and a raucous sell-out crowd to win their first WCC game of the year, 81-78.

While the Zags held a measure of control throughout the game, they could not sink the Pilots until the final seconds. It took an attempted buzz beater clanking off the rim to decide a close conference rivalry.

Gonzaga came into the game ranked #18 in the nation and off a thrilling overtime over Illinois last weekend. Despite grabbing the lead early, the Bulldogs never could put away the Pilots. Poor shooting, foul trouble and a scrappy Pilots team made them work hard for a win in their conference opener.

Matt Bouldin, led the Gonzaga effort with 20 points and 9 assists. Elias Harris also sunk in 18 points. Starting center, Robert Sacre, had a disappointing evening, scoring only four points and fouling out in the second half.

"I told the guys it was a good effort," said Portland Pilots Head Coach Eric Reveno. "When you're playing a good game against a good team it comes down to the little things."

By little things, Reveno may have meant fouling the wrong guy in the final minutes. Bouldin sunk 10-11 from the line.

"I would have liked to have foul the guy who would have missed it," said Reveno.

Gonzaga netted their fourth straight win after their blowout loss to Duke, and kept their season on track with their 13th straight victory over Portland.

Despite losing six out of their last ten games, the Pilots had every reason to be pleased with their performance.

"I liked the effort, and I swear I would have said it if we had won, but it's a long haul," said Reveno. "The West Conference is tough and we'll get ready for the next one."

The Pilots surprised many early in the season with their first AP ranking in five decades and their best start since 1996. But not Gonzaga. The Bulldogs knew the game would be a tough one as they have a target on their back during any WCC match-up. The Portland Pilots had a great November and upset then #16 Minnesota.

"The number of times we've come to compete I don't worry about this time coming to play ever," said Reveno.

The first half see-sawed between double digit leads by Gonzaga and Portland battling back to make the deficit more manageable. Despite having the opportunity to seal the Pilots fate, the Bulldogs continued to struggle silencing their opponents. Part of this was also due to the home team's lively atmosphere.

"We bounced back, fought, pieced it together and made it interesting," said Reveno.

The Bulldogs started the second half with a six point lead and soon stretched it to double digits. The Pilots came back and closed within two with just over ten minutes remaining. The Zags then held their largest lead of the night, 13, with just over five minutes remaining. However, the Pilots roared back, but despite coming close, the Bulldogs maintained their lead all the way to the end.

"At the end we were still in it for the win so it felt good," said Robin Smeulders, forward for the Portland Pilots. " [But] it's really hard to pull out a win, especially against a good team like Gonzaga."

Smeulders was the game's top scorer, netting 24 points and going 9-10 from the field.

One final shot by Stohl would have tied the game and sent it to overtime, but it was not to be.

"I was surprised when it bounced off the rim," said Stohl. "It hurt to lose by three knowing that I had the last shot and thought it was going in."

Stohl had another solid game going 6-9 for the three point mark, scoring 18 points. On Dec. 22nd, he set a school record ten three-pointers and became the first player in a decade to score 30 points without making a two-point shot or a free throw.

Next up for the Portland Pilots and Gonzaga are road games at San Diego and Saint Mary's.

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