

No. 3 Virginia men's basketball team rallies past Michigan to remain unbeaten



Virginia head coach Tony Bennett watches against Michigan in the first half of Tuesday's game in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Paul Sancya, Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — This was a determined, keep-on-playing kind of comeback.

In front of a rowdy, packed crowd at the Crisler Center with chants of 'Go Blue' and the sounds of 'Hail to the Victors' echoing in the rafters, visiting Virginia didn't let the noise — or an 11-point halftime deficit — impact its

poise.

The No. 3 Cavaliers acted like one of the country's most-seasoned and skilled teams, who had been exposed to moments and environments of magnitude and hostility previously, and the result was a thrilling 70-68 win over host Michigan on Tuesday in the final installment of the ACC-Big Ten Challenge.



Virginia guard Reece Beekman (2) dunks on Michigan center Hunter Dickinson and Tarris Reed Jr. (32) in the first half of Tuesday's game in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Paul Sancya, Associated Press

"It got really, really loud a couple of times," Hoos sixth-year senior forward Ben Vander Plas said. "But having guys like me and [fifth-year guard] Kihei [Clark] who have played for like 10 years and can look back on times where this has happened and know what we've learned from those, we can lead the

younger guys and everyone follows along. The experience definitely helps."

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Senior forward Jayden Gardner's go-ahead bucket was one he wasn't nervous about taking either. It was a shot he's made repeatedly in his career, and he didn't miss it with the game on the line.

Junior guard Reece Beekman found Gardner open on the right elbow, and without hesitation, Gardner sank the jumper that provided the Cavaliers a 67-66 lead with 40 seconds to play.

"I was trusting my offense," Gardner said of the key basket. "I got a lot of good shots before that, but didn't fall. But with the time and situation, we needed a good shot and that was a good shot."

On the other end and seconds later, Beekman, perhaps the ACC's top defender, notched a steal that enabled UVa (6-0) to finish off the Wolverines (5-2).

"It was just instincts," Beekman said of the swipe that silenced the once ruckus maize-and-blue faithful. He stepped in front of a pass and was headed in the other direction before he was fouled.

He made a free throw and then Clark made two to get UVa to the score it won by.

Beekman — on a bum ankle throughout most of the second half that afterward said "is pretty painful" — finished with a team-best 18 points to go along with five assists. Gardner had 12 points, and Vander Plas chipped in with 10.

The Ohio transfer in his first season with the Cavaliers didn't let opportunity

to make his mark on the game slip out of his grasp either.

With 7:25 to go, Vander Plas' layup pushed the Hoos to their first lead since early in the first half. Another bucket from the 6-foot-8, 236-pounder on the next possession gave them a two-point edge again and finally his 3 with five minutes to play propelled UVa to a 65-60 advantage ahead of Michigan clawing back to even the score.

Wolverines forward Hunter Dickinson, who had a game-high 23 points, had a second-chance basket to knot the score at 65.

"It got pretty intense in here," Cavaliers coach Tony Bennett said, "but the experience of Kihei and Reece. [Forward] Kadin [Shedrick] has played a lot of game. Ben is experienced as a player. Jayden, Armaan [Franklin], too, and that stuff matters. There's no substitute for it.

"And you just can't lose your way," Bennett continued. "No matter how it looks, you just got to keep chipping away and that's what the guys did."

The 11-point halftime deficit UVa faced was the furthest it had fell behind this season.

The Hoos struggled to defend the 3-point line in the opening 20 minutes.

Michigan, which entered Tuesday with a 31% shooting rate from deep, drilled seven of its 13 3-point tries (54%) during the first half to erase the 9-2 advantage UVa built through its first five possessions and then ultimately separate from the Hoos.

The Wolverines' barrage of buckets from beyond the arc came from across their roster, too. Jett Howard knocked down three triples while Jaelin Llewellyn made a pair and Kobe Bufkin and Joey Baker each had one during the first half.

A few of those 3s were demoralizing answers, when the Cavaliers appeared to trim Michigan's lead.

One of Baker's 3-pointers in the first half immediately followed Beekman's to stretch the Wolverines' lead back to six points after Beekman's 3 had cut it to 25-22 with about seven minutes to go before the break. Howard sank one to push the margin to 38-31 with two minutes to go ahead of the half quickly after Beekman's layup narrowed the deficit to just four points.

That Howard 3 was the start of a 10-3 run from Michigan to close the first period, which ended with Kobe Bufkin's fast-break dunk that sent the Wolverines' crowd — still riding high since this past Saturday's football win over Ohio State — into a frenzy and forced the Hoos to search for answers.

"We were down 11, but came out and played pretty well to start the second half," Bennett said of the rallying victory that improved UVa's all-time record in the ACC-Big Ten Challenge to 14-8.

"We got it to a two or three possession game," he said. "We said now it's, 'Score. Stop. Score. Stop. Play,' and that's what we try to talk about and keep our composure to go get good shots. Our defense was there, and you could feel [the comeback] was there."

Said Gardner: "This is great, because this was our first true road experience this year ... and to win in an environment like this after the weekend that their fanbase just had, it speaks volumes about us. They came out hot in the first half, but we responded."

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Tenacity, work ethic help set Virginia defensive lineman Kam Butler apart



Virginia's Jonathan Horton, left, and Kam Butler, right, participate in a drill during practice at McCue Center on Tuesday.

MIKE KROPF, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Chuck Martin remembers the hesitation and some of the doubt he was met with.

He and his assistant coaches were scouring their Miami (Ohio) roster for a defensive lineman who could hold up in the three-technique when Martin, the RedHawks coach, suggested a then-undersized freshman for the job. The team had dealt with some injuries at the position and was in a bind.

"I was like, 'Put the Butler kid in. He's going to fight,'" Martin recalled. "And everyone was saying, 'He's only 210 pounds.'"

Martin didn't care. He believed Kam Butler could help.

"We knew he wasn't really equipped to play the three then," Martin, now in his ninth year at Miami, said, "but if we were going to lose, we wanted to lose with somebody who was going to fight his ass off, and he's going to fight his ass for you all the time."

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The decision was the start of an immensely successful stay in Oxford for Butler. He cracked the two-deep at defensive end during that fall of 2018 and contributed six tackles before blossoming into a three-time All-Mid-American Conference selection under Martin's watch.

Butler was part of Miami's MAC title-winning campaign as a sophomore, and last year, he led the RedHawks with 14 tackles for loss and racked up eight sacks to go along with three forced fumbles. Since then, he graduated from Miami and transferred to Virginia, where he'll complete his college career this fall.

And those with the Cavaliers have been impressed during training camp with Butler, now standing at 6-foot-3, 265 pounds, in the same fashion Martin always was.

"He's worked his way to the front of the line very quickly because he's got a motor," UVa coach Tony Elliott said.

Added defensive coordinator John Rudzinski: "Kam Butler is a great worker."

Butler is taking first-team reps with the Hoos, and the hope is he'll provide

UVa with the consistent excellence he played with at Miami.

Pushing for more since his youth

Kevin Butler, Kam's father, said there's no reason to believe his son will alter his approach or mentality toward the game just because he's in a new place.

The older Butler said Kam has stayed steady since his youth.

"Even going back to Pee Wee when he was young," Kevin said, "he was never the type of kid that we had to ask, 'Do you want to do something extra?' We'd go to the park and we'd run hills, we'd do agility drills and he never had to be dragged out of bed to do that stuff. He was always a self-starter and self-motivated, even from an early age."

Kevin said Kam gets his relentless effort from his mother, a former college volleyball player, and the passion for football from him. Kevin played at Thomas More College in Kentucky, currently an NAIA program, but an NCAA Division III team when he was there.

"When you combine the love of the game and the work ethic to be the best you could possibly be," Kevin continued, "with the way he studies film and how he works out, I think that's what always set him apart."

So much so, Kevin said, that when Kam began to get serious about trying to gain Division I scholarship opportunities, there was no more time for family vacations at the beach in the summer. Kam wanted to visit schools and attend recruiting camps instead.

As a star at Covington Catholic High School in Park Hills, Ky., Kam earned team MVP honors his junior season ahead of being named captain his senior year.

Coincidentally, Kam's first-ever visit as a high school prospect to an FBS school was to Virginia. Kevin said Kam made a spring trek to UVa shortly after former coach Bronco Mendenhall was hired. The younger Butler was never offered by the Cavaliers at that time, but was on the radar of nearly every program in the MAC.

"I was deciding between Miami, Ohio [University] and Western Kentucky," Butler said, "and I thought [Miami] was the best school in the MAC, best academically, best facilities and then we won the championship in 2019, so it all came to fruition and it worked out nicely."

He said upon arriving to Miami, he sensed his demeanor fit how the program operated, so his commitment to the sport only increased and he's carried that trait with him to UVa.

"I've been part of a lot of hard, high-effort teams," Butler said, "and so with competition, you've got to play hard if you want to play. That's been something — at Miami — we all played hard. So, to get on the field, you've got to play extra hard."

In his initial season with the RedHawks, he said his determination was the catalyst for him eventually figuring out how to rush the quarterback properly and disrupt the backfield effectively later in his career.

He registered four tackles for loss in a 2019 contest against Cincinnati and a career-best 2.5 sacks in a 2020 bout against Akron.

"That first year I only played three-tech, so I was in there to stop the run," Butler said, "but then I played third down as a rush tackle, so ever since my freshman year I knew I had something — either a high-motor, good hands, whatever it was. But ever since I got to Miami, they were pushing to get on the field on third down, make a move and do whatever I had to do to get to

the quarterback."

Butler said he absorbed the lessons Martin and his coaches taught, and learned the differences about playing on the interior of the front versus the edge.

"There's a lot less room on the inside," Butler said. "Outside you've got some freedom to go inside or outside, but once you're stuck on the inside, you've got to beat the guard."

Said Martin: "He's not a man of a ton of words. It's just not how he's wired, but I don't know how many times in his career here that in front of the whole team I used him as the example of the guy who empties the bucket on every down for every one of his teammates. I must've done it 50 times. ... So, it was the lead by example for him, and that's why I played him as a freshman."

Aspirations in the ACC and beyond

Butler's move to UVa, he said, was for a few reasons. He appreciates the academic component and feels he'll be set up for life post-football with a Master's degree from Virginia on top of the Bachelor's he earned from Miami. Secondly, he bonded with Elliott, Rudzinski and defensive ends coach Chris Slade and believes the three of them can guide him to elevate his game further and help him build on what he accomplished at Miami while playing against stiffer competition in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

About his career coming full circle to the place that he made his first-ever visit to as a high school prospect, Butler said: "When I visited in high school, I knew UVa was a school I'd love to go to one day and now I'm happy to be here."

Slade said he knows what Butler's goals are.

"Make no mistake about it, Kam is here to get to the league," Slade said. "He's locked in. He's focused."

Butler's dad, Kevin, said Slade and Rudzinski established a relationship with Kam even before Kam made his visit to UVa prior to committing to the Hoos. The two assistants, according to Kevin, trekked to see Kam at Miami and on their way to Ohio, they called Kevin to make sure the entire family was involved in the transferring process.

Kam said the Cavaliers reached out the day after he put his name into the transfer portal. His other offers were from Iowa, Kansas State, Ole Miss, Penn State and West Virginia.

"And once we got down on a visit," Kevin said, "it wasn't like the first time we were speaking. It was a lot more personable and it felt like they were going to develop him not just for football but life after football as well."

"Coach Elliott and his staff when I came here and met them," Kam said, "I felt like that they were good guys off the field as well as good coaches on the field."

He said he's already picking up tips from Slade, a former two-time All-American who set a UVa and an ACC record with 40 sacks while he played for the Cavaliers. Kam said those pointers should allow him to produce even against the bigger and faster opposing offensive linemen that he'll face in conference action.

"He knows a lot about the game," Butler said of Slade, "the tiny intricacies of the game and rushing the passers and stances and all that stuff, so I've been trying to soak up as much knowledge as I can from him and take my game to another level."

Butler said Slade has shown him different stances to use depending on the situation.

"I'll be in three-point, two-point [stances] and as far as third down, he doesn't really care as long as you're getting off the ball as fast as possible," Butler said, "so you have the opportunity to switch and then once we're on the inside, it's a run-heavy stance and some of those calls are more geared to stopping the run."

As for his former coach, Martin, he said he is bummed about not having Butler on his roster anymore, but will watch how his former player progresses from afar and be rooting for him.

Butler is due to make his UVa debut when the Cavaliers open their season on Sept. 3 against Richmond.

"We would be a better team with him, so there's that part of it," said Martin, whose RedHawks start at Kentucky on the same day.

"I'm not happy with his decision to leave," Martin said, "but I love him to death and have been through a lot with him. I appreciate everything he did for us every second of every single day, so I could never ever root against him in anything. He's a big part of everything we've done here for a long time."

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Virginia football team holds off Georgia Tech behind dominant defensive performance

ATLANTA — With his home city's bright skyline set as the backdrop for Thursday's tilt, Nick Jackson wasn't going to miss this opportunity — no matter how hobbled his knee might've been in the days leading up to Virginia's showdown with Georgia Tech at Bobby Dodd Stadium in downtown Atlanta.

"I would say I was good enough to play today," the Cavaliers' senior linebacker said with a grin afterward.

In front of friends and family, who gobbled up the 33 extra tickets Jackson said he was able to secure for the contest, he and the Cavaliers' defense put together an unrelenting, unyielding and dominating performance in their 16-9 win over the host Yellow Jackets, in which the Hoos only allowed Georgia Tech's offense to register a field goal.

Jackson logged a team-high eight tackles, two tackles for loss, two sacks and a fumble recovery, and his fourth-quarter sack with less than two minutes left ridded Georgia Tech of its last-chance comeback try, too.

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"He's all about the team," first-year UVa coach Tony Elliott said about Jackson. "There's not a selfish bone in his body and there was no way he wasn't going to play this game."

Virginia linebacker Nick Jackson on the Cavaliers' win at Georgia Tech

The victory snapped the Cavaliers' previous three-game losing streak and was UVa's first win on the road since Oct. 9 of last season. It also was the Hoos' first victory in Atlantic Coast Conference action since Oct. 23 of last fall.

And Jackson's unit — the one he leads so well from within the middle of — from the first quarter through the final buzzer was stingy, even when it appeared the Yellow Jackets (3-4, 2-2 ACC) were poised to capitalize early after the Cavaliers (3-4, 1-3 ACC) fumbled their initial offensive possession away.

But Georgia Tech quarterback Jeff Sims' pass into the end zone was tipped into the air by UVa cornerback Fentrell Cypress II and safety Coen King was there to intercept it. That takeaway kept the home team off the board and set the tone for the defense that has responded so well to tough situations throughout its first fall under coordinator John Rudzinski.

"Frankly, it's a life skill," Rudzinski said about the ability to get a stop on the heels of a sudden change. "And that's the great thing about these young men being part of this game. It's a game that teaches you to deal with adversity."

This season, the Cavaliers' defense has surrendered only 34 points after turnovers by their offense, which has amassed 18 this season and shows no signs of slowing its frustrating giveaway pace.

In the fourth quarter, Rudzinski's group needed to showcase that resolve again while protecting the seven-point advantage the Hoos would win by. UVa had a punt blocked and Georgia Tech recovered it at the 36-yard line, but the defense forced the Yellow Jackets to go three-and-out and sent them backward beyond field-goal range thanks to defensive end Chico Bennett Jr.'s third-down sack.

"We understood that we either let them score or we got to bow our necks," Bennett said.

UVa tallied eight sacks and 10 tackles for loss Thursday. The eight team sacks were tied for the second most in a single game in school history for the Hoos.

Two sacks and two tackles for loss belonged to Bennett, who began his career at Georgia Tech ahead of transferring to join the Cavaliers last year, making his return as fulfilling as the one for Jackson.

"Happy for [Bennett] to be back," Elliott said. "I told him before the game, 'Man, I know you're excited, but stay locked in and play a heck of a game.'"

Fellow defensive linemen Aaron Faumui, Paul Akere and Michael Diatta had a sack apiece, and that pressure impacted Yellow Jackets backup quarterback Zach Gibson. He was needed to step in for Sims, who suffered an injury early in the second quarter.

Rudzinski said the Cavaliers didn't change much in what they were doing defensively when Georgia Tech swapped signal-callers.

The only reason Georgia Tech managed to find the end zone was because in the opening quarter, Cavaliers quarterback Brennan Armstrong threw a pass that was tipped, picked off and returned for a 37-yard score by Yellow Jackets linebacker LaMiles Brooks.

Thankfully, for the smothering UVa defense, Armstrong and company managed to do enough well to separate.

He found first-half success through the air in chunks.

Armstrong connected with wide receiver Dontayvion Wicks in the second

quarter for a 44-yard touchdown that extended UVa's lead to 13-6.

Wicks secured the reception on a crossing route while sprinting full speed toward the Cavaliers' sideline only to halt as he evaded Georgia Tech's Clayton Powell-Lee, spin forward past Yellow Jackets corner Zamari Walton and tight-rope the boundary before dashing back inside and toward the navy-and-gold painted end zone.

The touchdown also gave Armstrong the UVa record for career touchdown passes.

He had a 1-yard rushing score to provide the Cavaliers their first lead in the opening quarter. That came after a 31-yard throw to wide receiver Lavel Davis Jr. to push the ball into Yellow Jackets' territory. Wide receiver Keytaon Thompson drew a pair of pass interference penalties on the drive to get the Hoos into the red zone.

Armstrong credited the defense and said he's thrilled Jackson and Bennett had triumphant homecomings.

"It was a big deal I was back home," Jackson said, "but at the end of the day, it was a bigger deal to play with my brothers ... I was going to push through anything."

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