

No. 5 Pitt comes back to defeat Rhode Island, 83-75

PITTSBURGH (AP) - Brad Wanamaker scored 24 points, Ashton Gibbs had 22, and No. 5 Pittsburgh survived an upset scare in the nation's first Division I game of the season, rallying from eight points down to beat Rhode Island 83-75.

Pitt ended a sluggish first half in the 2K Sports Classic opener by scoring nine consecutive points over the final 1:21 after Rhode Island went ahead 36-28. The Panthers then wore down Rhode Island with their size, defense and the experienced play of the backcourt of Gibbs and Wanamaker to offset the Rams' 14 3-pointers.

Delroy James scored 17 of his 20 points in the second half for Rhode Island, which trailed 76-74 with 1:41 to play before Pitt finished it off by making seven of eight free throws.

Pitt won its 14th consecutive season opener, eight under coach Jamie Dixon, and its 48th straight at home against a non-conference opponent. Gilbert Brown added 10 points and Talib Zanna had nine points and 11 rebounds in his first college game.

Akeem Richmond scored 16 points and Nikola Malesevic had 13 for Rhode Island, which lost despite making 14 of 31 from 3-point range to Pitt's 3 of 16. The Rams, outrebounded 45-32, lost their 23rd straight to a ranked opponent and still hasn't beaten a Top 5 team in 12 years.

Pitt knew Rhode Island wouldn't be the usual rollover opponent that many ranked teams play in their opener, and the Rams - 26-10 last season while reaching the NIT semifinals - weren't while leading most of the first half.

The Rams' biggest lead came on Will Martell's basket 90 seconds before halftime but, right about then, Pitt began showing why it hasn't won fewer than 25 games each of the last five seasons.

The Panthers, with all but one starter back from last season's 25-9 team, needed only 1:21 to score the final nine points of the half, started by Wanamaker's basket.

Gibbs converted a three-point play ahead of Wanamaker's layup. Lamar Patterson's first career basket, a dunk off Wanamaker's feed, gave the Panthers a 37-36 halftime lead, their first since they led 13-11.

Pitt never led by as many as three points until Gibbs' steal and drive with 15:08 remaining made it 48-45. The teams traded leads nine times early in the second half, but Rhode Island never led after James made two free throws after being intentionally fouled, then hit a 3-pointer off the out-of-bounds play to make it 50-48 with 14:30 to play.

Travon Woodall's free throw gave Pitt the lead for good at 54-53. The Panthers then opened leads of as many as eight before two late 3-pointers by James made it close.

Dixon likes playing early season exempt tournaments because they give his team extra games during a time they normally would be practicing. But they can create matchups that the coaches of highly ranked teams generally prefer to avoid early in a season; in 2003, Pitt had to rally late to avoid losing to Georgetown, Ky., of the NAIA in an exempt tournament.

Pitt was guaranteed of playing in the tournament's semifinals Nov. 18 in New York even before playing Rhode Island. The Panthers play Illinois-Chicago their second home game of the event Wednesday.