

Bellarmino downs CMU for first win of the season

LAS VEGAS — After facing "murderer's row" to start the season, the Bellarmine Knights men's basketball team gutted its way to a 76-69 victory over Central Michigan in T-Mobile Arena on the final day of the Good Sam Empire Classic benefiting Wounded Warrior Project presented by Continental Tire to pick up its first win of the year.

The Knights had opened the season with five losses to teams whose combined records were 24-1 heading into Tuesday's action and included games against the nation's Nos. 1,2 and 3-ranked teams.

In today's contest, Bellarmine faced the added challenge of fighting of illness, which left the Knights short-handed. However, Bellarmine rose to the challenge through game efforts from up and down the lineup with Dylan Penn carrying the bulk of the scoring load, tossing in 27 to tie his career high for the second time in less than a week.

The Knights got off to a hot start, especially on the defensive end, where they got six straight defensive stops or two straight "kills" in Bellarmine "teamspeak." In fact, the Knights led 8-0 at the first media timeout.

Central Michigan stormed back to take a six-point lead, but Bellarmine answered with a 7-0 run to go up one at 20-19. The Knights also closed the half with momentum to take a 39-32 lead into the locker room.

Bellarmino came out of the break with a start that resembled the first half's, bolting out to 46-34 advantage and prompting Central Michigan to call a timeout at the 16:56 mark. The Chippewas again mounted a comeback, chipping the lead down to as few as two. The Knights never surrendered the lead, however, and got two defensive stops in the last minute of the game to hang on for the seven-point victory.

"The entire team could not be prouder," said Bellarmine Assistant Coach Doug Davenport, who substituted for his father, Head Coach Scott Davenport, in the postgame radio interview as the elder Davenport was one of the Bellarmine contingent battling illness. (Scott Davenport did not miss the game.)

"The collective attitude and the competitive spirit...A-plus," Doug Davenport said. "It's corny, but we really believe it takes everybody," he added, singling out performances by Zac Jennings and Sam DeVault as examples.

Jennings, who made his first appearance of the year, gave the Knights solid minutes and drew two offensive fouls. DeVault poured in a season-high 14 points and grabbed six rebounds, his most as a Knight.

Those contributions were valuable to offset the absence of Ethan Claycomb, who had started every game for Bellarmine the past two seasons. The Knights were also without Nick Thelen, another regular starter.

Other top performances for the Knights came from CJ Fleming with 16 points while tying his career-high with six boards. Juston Betz also claimed six rebounds for Bellarmine while also dishing out five assists to tie Penn for game-high honors.

Central Michigan (1-4) was paced by Harrison Henderson's 21 points and Ralph Bissainthe's 12 rebounds.