

Bulldogs' winning streak ends with pair of conference losses

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UNC Asheville's men's basketball team lost two conference games last week, but hope to still win the Big South tournament, according to the players and coaches.

"We had seven straight wins in a row. We're starting to get consistent," men's basketball head coach **Eddie Biedenbach** said. "You can't play your best every night, but when you do play poorly you have got to figure out ways to win."

UNCA held a 19 point lead in the first half of their game against Gardner-Webb last Wednesday. The Bulldogs need to figure out ways to win in the second half, players said.

"I guess you could call it miscommunication," **D.J. Cunningham**, senior center for UNCA, said. "There were too many mistakes in the second half. It seemed like if we could mess it up, we messed it up."

After seven wins within the Big South conference, UNCA seized first place within the division. The Bulldogs have more conference games before the Big South tournament.

"This is an inexperienced team from the standpoint of closing games, and that has got to change," Biedenbach said.

But it has not changed yet, as UNCA's closest division challengers, Charleston Southern University, defeated the Bulldogs at Kimmel Arena on Saturday.

"We're just not there," Biedenbach said. "We were fighting for first place out there, but we weren't mentally or physically on the level of a first place team."

Statistically, the Bulldogs are not lagging far behind their rivals. In the game against Gardner-Webb, the teams were tied in the number of steals, field goals and free throws. Several other stats only varied by one or two successful completions. The clear difference lies in offensive rebounds.

"It was a great job on Gardner-Webb's part. They even got offensive rebounds on the free throws," Biedenbach said.

The Gardner-Webb game came down to the wire. The score was Gardner-Webb 67, UNCA 64, with one second left. **Trent Meyer** had a chance to take three free throws after a foul by Kevin Hartley, but he only made one.

"Here we had a nice lead and surrendered it. That's not how we play. I know it, you know it," Biedenbach said. "You can't blame the game on somebody missing a free throw, anybody can miss it, but getting beat up and down the court spells disaster."

Against Charleston Southern, UNCA's only distinctive defeat was in rebounds. The Bulldogs had more completed 3-point shots, a better free throw ratio, more blocks and more steals than CSU. However, once again, UNCA was not able to walk away with the win.

"I let my team and my coaching staff down last game. To put the Gardner-Webb game into overtime, I feel, would have won us the game," Meyer said. "So going into practice I had focus up a little bit more and came out this game. Our second top scorer went out on foul check, so I had to pick it up and be aggressive and I got some good looks."

Meyer's individual efforts in the CSU game were exemplary with a career high 27 points, four steals, seven 3-point shots, five assists and four rebounds. There is still more to winning basketball games than individual effort, Biedenbach said.

"Sustaining as a team, as a unit," Biedenbach said. "With one heartbeat as some might say, we were awful. Awful."

On the other hand, two losses in a row does not mean absolute defeat for UNCA.

Last season, the Bulldogs faced a similar situation. After losing two games in a row late in the season, UNCA went on to win the Big South Tournament title. Biedenbach hopes history can repeat itself.

"Hopefully we can do that," Biedenbach said. "Then we had six seniors and they were in great shape, toughness-wise. Late in the season, some of the freshmen are having a tough time. We've had several games when Will Weeks hasn't played up to his potential, same with Sam Hughes."

With four games left in the regular season, there is an opportunity for UNCA to grab their third Big South Tournament in a row.

"I'm proud of the guys at this point in the season, but we've got to get better. Not just practice, but carry it onto the court," Biedenbach said. "It's not a basketball knowledge thing, it's a tougher mental and physical thing."



Photo by Davis Farthing- Contributing Photographer
D.J. Cunningham goes up for a shot against Charleston Southern on Saturday.