

Robert Morris leaves heartbreak behind with championship

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BROOKLYN, N.Y. -- There was a clear moment when Lucky Jones sensed the game was over. With just seconds remaining on the clock and Robert Morris leading by three points, St. Francis Brooklyn fouled to send Jones to the free throw line.

Immediately, he broke into a grin, raising his arms at the small -- but vocal -- Robert Morris crowd crammed into the second-level seats. Just seconds before, the game had been put into doubt when Elijah Minnie fouled Tyreek Jewell on a 3-point shot.

But Jewell didn't make any of those attempts, and the Terriers committed a lane violation on the final one. Then came the foul. And then, the moment. Jones' relief was palpable. So was his joy. He'd waited so long for this.

Coach Andy Toole would tease him afterward, about how he went to the line and missed those two foul shots, about how Lowell Ulmer's last-minute, potentially game-tying heave grazed dangerously off the rim.

But it didn't go in, not even after it bounced back up and nearly dropped through a second time. It wasn't going to happen. Not on this night. This night belonged to Robert Morris. To Jones. To Toole, who will make his first NCAA Tournament appearance as a head coach.

So, instead, the ball dropped harmlessly to the floor, sealing Robert Morris' 66-63 win in the NEC tournament championship. As the St. Francis Brooklyn fans fell silent for the first time all night, bringing a second of stillness to an arena that spent two hours energized and pulsating, the Colonials tackled each other into the corner. Their celebration was audible even in the upper deck.

“Unreal,” said Jones, who sat in the news conference with the long-awaited trophy in front of him, his son on his lap and the net around his neck. “We worked so hard. Ups and downs, we’ve been through so much. Andy and I, we’ve been doing this a long time together. It’s been a struggle to get over this hump, but we finally did it.”

This was Robert Morris’ third NEC final in four years. The other two ended in heartbreak, but this time, it was their turn to celebrate. The Colonials walked into the gym and faced down the packed-in crowd of 1,013. They weren’t intimidated. Instead, they played inspired.

Jones started talking about this tournament during the summer, and probably even before that. He told the Robert Morris newcomers about how it felt to lose, about the ache of coming up just short. This one, though, will linger a little longer.

This one, the Colonials don’t want to forget.

“It’s great,” Toole said, “and it’s really great for them. That’s what it’s about. When we sit down in August and talk about what our team goals are, we never had a team that doesn’t say it wants to go to the NCAA Tournament.

“It breaks your heart as a coach sometimes to have teams that have been so close and not be able to get over the hump. That’s why we push and we push and we push all the time, to be able to perform and play in this kind of atmosphere, on this kind of stage.”

It was the culmination of an up-and-down NEC season for Robert Morris, and it ended with the highest of highs. Once again, the Colonials had to overcome suspensions and injuries and players leaving the team. But it didn’t matter that they had a depleted roster on Tuesday night. It didn’t matter at all.

It seemed right that Jones, the senior, had that net around his neck. Not just because of the near misses, or the losses he can now put behind him. But because this season’s turnaround started with him, at least that’s what Toole pointed to.

When Jones returned after his suspension in the Colonials’ road win on Feb. 21 over Bryant, that’s when it all seemed to change for good. Something clicked. Ever since then, it’s been six-straight wins, including the biggest one on Tuesday night.

“It’s really been a matter of guys playing within themselves,” Toole said. “Guys following our formula.”

Turns out, the formula works.