

Wildcats and their fans never forgot loss to Robert Morris

By Lauren Kirschman

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LEXINGTON, Ky. -- Kentucky's fans made it very clear as soon as Lucky Jones' name was announced: They didn't forget. Not the flagrant foul Jones committed against the Wildcats last season that caused him to be ejected, and certainly not the 59-57 loss at the Sewall Center.

No, the 20,000 fans that packed Rupp Arena definitely remembered. And they let the Colonials know it as soon as the players were announced, saving their most vocal boos for Jones. The fans of a program with eight national championship banners hanging in the rafters could have easily brushed aside the first round NIT loss. But they didn't.

They'd been waiting for this.

The Wildcats have almost completely different personnel now. For the first time in Kentucky basketball history, five freshmen started on Sunday night. There's plenty of new faces on Robert Morris' side, too. But none of that really seemed to matter. From the moment the game tipped off, the capacity crowd put everything it had into intimidating the Colonials -- a group used to playing in a gym of 3,000.

They wanted to make one thing very clear: Not this time.

And they were right. Kentucky cruised to a 87-49 win on Sunday night.

"They don't forget things," said Kentucky play-by-play announcer Tom Leach. "When somebody wrongs their team or their coach in their eyes -- and beating them was a way to wrong them -- then they don't forget."

Kentucky coach John Calipari and Robert Morris coach Andy Toole would certainly like to forget. Toole said after the game that he hopes now people can finally stop talking about last year's game.

“Obviously, the buildup to this was to me a little bit ridiculous,” Toole said. “Now that it’s over with and the second part has occurred and order has been restored maybe, we’ll be able to move on with our season and they’ll be able to move on with their season.”

Calipari never watched last season’s tape. He doesn’t plan to. The Moon Township native didn’t talk about Robert Morris for the past three days. It wasn’t a revenge game. But even though he wasn’t focused on last year, it doesn’t mean the fans weren’t. And he knows that.

“Now, our fans didn’t want to hear what I had to say. They’re like, ‘No, we want to smash these guys,’” Calipari said. “But again, what happened last year for (Robert Morris) and their program and their school, they shut down the school. The kids did not have school that day. The game ended, they gave them two weeks off.

“I grew up there, so I respect the program and the school and people associated with it. At the end of the day, they deserved to beat us. We deserved to end our season right there.”

That might’ve been the hardest part for Kentucky fans to take. Despite never anticipating the Wildcats would play in the NIT, the fans still expected to win it simply because it’s a championship. Leach admitted that some of the players were probably ready for last year’s forgetful season to come to an end.

But the Wildcats’ rabid fan base? There was a trophy involved. And they wanted it. If they couldn’t go back and get it, they wanted revenge instead.

“Oh, they definitely remembered,” Leach chuckled. “No doubt about that. This wasn’t the biggest game on the schedule because I think Kentucky basketball fans look at the season kind of like top golfers look at the year. It’s all about the majors. But this was big because they lost to Robert Morris, and that’s not supposed to happen to Kentucky, from the fan’s perspective.”

The fans weren’t the only ones in the building that remembered. Even with five freshmen starting, there are still players from last year’s team on the roster. And the freshmen could feel in the locker room how badly the upperclassmen wanted this win.

Aaron Harrison said the veterans talked about “smashing” them and holding the Colonials to 25 points. Dominique Hawkins, too, said he realized this game meant a little something more -- and

winning by 38 points did, too.

Fellow freshman Marcus Lee watched last season's loss. He remembers yelling at the television and pacing the room. He wanted to reach through the game and help. And since he experienced it like a fan, he seemed to feel a little more like one than his coach.

Leading up to Sunday's rematch, it was on his mind. He decided after last season's game ended he never wanted a loss like that to happen again.

Everybody's excitement level was raised in the locker room, he said. From the time the day started until tip-off, every player -- led by the veterans -- was looking to end this season's matchup with Robert Morris a little differently.

"I loved it because I was like, 'Oh, they are on my level right now,'" Lee said.

Looking back, Leach admits the loss probably wasn't that stunning. He compared it to a bowl game where one team expected to play in a BCS game and had to settle for a smaller option instead.

"But fans are like, well, if there's a title to win then we're going to win it," he said. "They expected to win the NIT title."