

Robert Morris win all comes down to heart

By Lauren Kirschman

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MOON TWP. -- The atmosphere bordered on disbelief, filled with cautious but undeniable optimism.

Maybe, just maybe, this would be Robert Morris' night.

The fans believed it seven minutes into the second half when Robert Morris built a nine-point lead and Kentucky coach and Moon Township native John Calipari called a timeout. They believed it when guard Velton Jones lifted his arms on his way off the floor, sending an already overzealous crowd into even more a frenzy.

They believed it with 10 minutes left in the game, when the capacity crowd came to its feet to cheer their Colonials into a timeout with a double-digit lead.

They even believed it after it seemed to be slipping away, when forward Lucky Jones left the floor charged with a flagrant foul and Kentucky tied the game.

They believed that in a 3,000-seat arena on a Tuesday night, Robert Morris -- a team that suffered the heartbreak of losing an NCAA Tournament automatic bid just weeks ago -- could defeat the defending national champions.

The students, packed in and hoarse and exhausted from hours of standing and cheering and anticipating, never took a break in the second half. They stood through timeouts, pausing only to bend over, hands on their knees, catching their breath. The students, who lined up two and a half hours before tip-off with red shirts and painted faces, tried not to talk about the possibility. But the question came up anyway: What if?

That would be so much better than the NCAA Tournament, they said. So much better.

And in the end, it was. It was a game, and a win, that Robert Morris fans waited a lifetime for, but never could've imagined. With nine seconds left, Mike McFadden grabbed an offensive rebound in a tie game and was fouled on his way back up. Before he stepped to the line, Velton Jones

asked what was in his heart.

It all comes down to heart.

McFadden took a deep breath, then calmly knocked down possibly the biggest foul shots in Robert Morris history. And when Kentucky missed a 3-pointer at the other end, the students tore onto the court with all of the energy they had left.

In Dayton, the NCAA Tournament had started. But on Tuesday night, with a 59-57 win over Kentucky, Robert Morris had the spotlight.

Two and a half hours before tipoff, Colonials fans were still trying to believe that the game was happening at all. The line to get inside extended down the Sewall Center stairs and up the sidewalk at the Moon campus. Students stood in the freezing weather in T-shirts or sometimes just in paint, cheering for news cameras and holding up signs for pictures. The doors opened two hours before game time and the students poured inside.

The bleachers weren't necessary. They never sat down. One and a half hours before tip, they were already cheering. Chants of "Let's go, Bobby Mo!" accompanied the Colonials' early shoot-around. A group of students at center court worked on painting "Beat Kentucky" across their chests for the ESPN cameras. They never tired. The noise didn't stop.

Sixteen minutes before tip, the announcer asked the fans in the stands and on the sidelines to pack together so as many people as possible could fit.

A few minutes later, all the seats were filled. The sidelines, too. And when the game finally started, the Colonials didn't dare disappoint the fans that packed the bleachers and stood five rows deep with children in their arms and on their shoulders.

For the fans, it was so much more than just a game. For a while, it was for the players, too. But after the first sight of the overflowing crowd, the Colonials managed to ground themselves. They were engaged in the locker room and during warmups. They adjusted to the atmosphere. They just played.

Robert Morris scored the game's first five points, prompting a timeout from Kentucky in less than three minutes. The Wildcats turned the ball over four times within the first five minutes. A

Kentucky team used to playing in front of more than 20,000 fans looked rattled.

A few minutes later, the Colonials had a 10-0 lead before Kentucky finally scored. The offensive surge made the crowd delirious, but it had the opposite effect on the Robert Morris players. They settled down. Jones said the Colonials wanted to show no fear in a game that looked so mismatched on paper, but didn't play out that way on the Sewall Center floor.

Stunned Kentucky fans watched in silence as the NEC regular season champions out-toughed their McDonald's All-Americans and future first round picks.

For Jones, it was game that erased the memory of another time Robert Morris fans started to believe, but weren't rewarded. The 2010 NCAA Tournament. A three-point loss to Villanova. An upset that almost was.

"We were so close in that game," Jones said. "To be able to actually win this game it takes all that way."