

Men lose to Pitt

Gorillas hand 'Dogs 67-62 loss in regular season's last game

BY BLAKE TOPPMEYER
Assistant Sports Editor

The men's basketball team could have called it quits.

After the possibility of qualifying for the MIAA tournament was eliminated with a Feb. 28 loss to Emporia State University, the Bulldogs could have come out flat in the season finale Saturday at Pittsburg State University. But they didn't. Truman had the lead for 34 minutes of the game.

"It was still a basketball game on Saturday afternoon, and if you're a competitor, you want to beat the other team," head coach Jack Schrader said.

In the end, however, it was the same old story. The Bulldogs lost 67-62, which marked the 13th time this season Truman lost by 10 points or fewer. The loss gave the 'Dogs a 5-22 record overall and 4-14 in the MIAA.

Pittsburg State (18-9, 9-9) scored the first basket of the game but did not hold the lead again until Carlos Taylor made a shot with 3:11 remaining. Senior forward Nick Certa sank a 3-pointer to tie the game with less than a minute to play, but the Gorillas finished the game on a 5-0 run.

Down by two points with less than 30 seconds to play, Truman had the ball and a chance to tie the game. The play was designed for freshman forward Ethan Freeman to penetrate and try to draw help from Certa's defender. Freeman was then to pass to Certa for a shot. But the play never developed and resulted in a turnover.

"Basically, my guy didn't help off very much, didn't help off much

at all," Certa said. "... I didn't feel like I could get open in the corner so I started to wrap around [Freeman]. It was just miscommunication more than anything. He just threw it back in the corner. He actually ran the play as it was drawn up. I just felt like I had to [adjust] because of the defense they played."

Playing in the final game of his Bulldog career, Certa did his best to elevate his team to victory. He scored 25 points — one shy of tying a career-high — on 9 of 15 shooting, including 4 for 6 from behind the three-point arc.

Certa scored 24 points Feb. 28 against Emporia in his last game in Pershing Arena, and Saturday marked the sixth time this season the 6-foot-6 forward scored at least 20 points. He scored in double figures in all but five games this season.

"You're not going to find a better player and a better teammate than Nick Certa," freshman guard Stefan Garrison said. "He's just solid, always coming to play, and he's just an offensive threat. He does what needs to be done."

Garrison contributed 10 points off the bench for Truman. Garrison — a player who often finds success by slashing to the basket — scored eight points via layups.

"They play really, really tight, ... so that left penetrating a lot easier than the pass because the guy is guarding you so close," he said. "And then with our offense, once we got the ball on the wing, the baseline drive was pretty open. I just tried to take advantage of that."

Behind a stout first-half de-

fensive effort, the Bulldogs led 31-20 at halftime. Truman limited the Gorillas to a 25-percent shooting clip from the floor in the first 20 minutes. By comparison, the Bulldogs shot 50 percent in the first half.

"We were guarding the three-point line well and their big guy, [Corey] Abercromie, [who] is the main scorer for them," Certa said. "We were trying to limit him by playing good help defense."

Although the Bulldogs' offense remained steady in the second half, Pittsburg State found the answer to Truman's defense by scoring from the perimeter and the free-throw line. The Gorillas connected on five three-pointers in the second half and outscored the Bulldogs 12-5 from the foul line in the last 20 minutes.

"In the first half they were trying to pound it inside a lot," Garrison said.

"It seemed like toward the second half they would go inside, but [Abercromie] would kick it out a lot quicker, and it opened up their outside shooting a little bit. They were able to knock down some more shots."

Abercromie, the MIAA's player of the year, finished with 13 points and 11 rebounds. But Keith Windom had an even bigger hand in Pittsburg State's victory. Windom entered Saturday averaging fewer than eight points per game, but he scored 20 points, hit 7 of 11 field goal attempts and was perfect from the foul line against Truman.

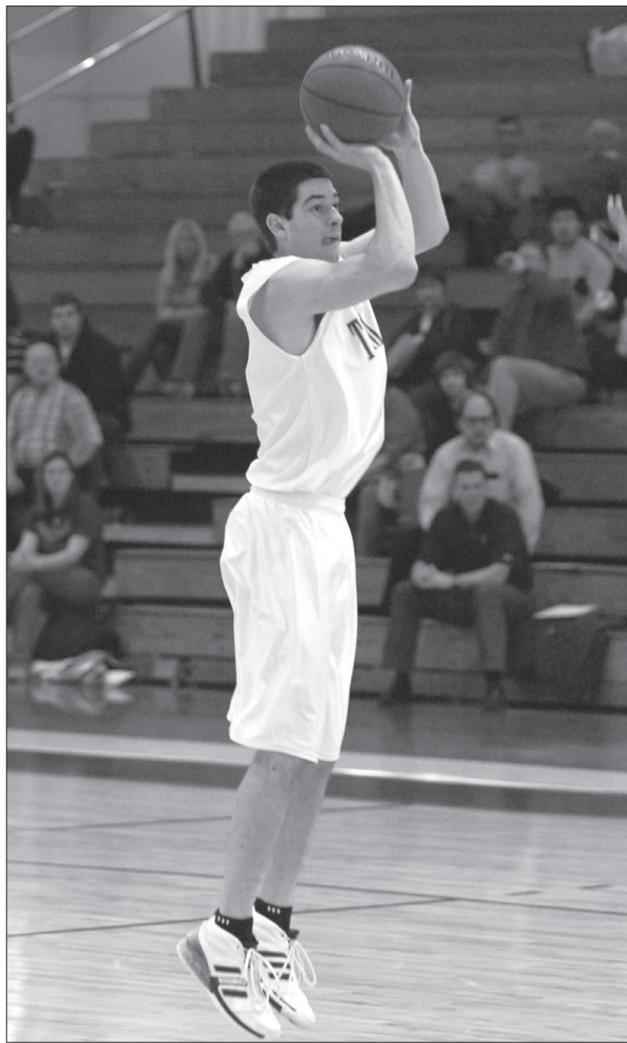
Junior guard Banks Estridge scored 11 points and compiled six assists in the Bulldogs' loss.

"You're not going to find a better player and a better teammate than Nick Certa."

Stefan Garrison
Freshman Guard



Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index
Freshman guard Stefan Garrison passes around two Fort Hays State defenders in a game earlier this season. Garrison scored 10 points in the Bulldogs' 67-62 loss Saturday to Pitt State.



Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index
Junior guard Banks Estridge shoots an open three pointer in a game against Fort Hays. Estridge will be one of four seniors on next year's squad.

Rebuilding season ends

Young team finishes year at 5-22, Certa concludes productive Bulldog career

BY BLAKE TOPPMEYER
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It was destined to be a rebuilding season.

After the men's basketball team graduated four players — three of whom scored more than 1,000 points in their careers — from the team that finished 16-13 in 2006-07, the Bulldogs had an inexperienced roster for this season. Only senior forward Nick Certa and junior guard Banks Estridge returned from last season's regular starting lineup.

Consequently, Truman stumbled to a 1-8 non-conference record before improving to 4-14 in conference play to finish the season 5-22. The five wins were the fewest a Bulldog team has compiled since 2001-02.

But the 'Dogs remained competitive in nearly every game by virtue of their defense, which surrendered more than 70 points in just six games. The men lost by an average of 10.5 points per game, but that number was skewed by losses of 23 and 33 points to the University of South Dakota.

"As young as we are, we really never got blown out by [many] teams," freshman guard Stefan Garrison said. "It was a big learning experience for us freshmen and underclassmen. Jumping from high school to college is a tremendous difference. It's unfortunate for the upperclassmen that this was more of a rebuilding year."

With six freshmen on the roster, the team took its lumps early against a slate of six different Div. II non-conference opponents that finished with a combined 105-57 regular season record.

But after the 'Dogs entered confer-

ence play, they improved and showed flashes of success in back-to-back MIAA wins in January and a 20-point home victory against nationally-ranked and regular season conference champion Southwest Baptist University.

"The freshmen started stepping up and realizing they had to play big roles in our scoring," Estridge said. "So they started playing with a lot more confidence, and I think that's what led to us playing a little better in conference play."

Although the season was marked with few wins, it was highlighted by the play of Certa, who finished his four-year Bulldog career as one of the top offensive players to don the purple and white under head coach Jack Schrader. Certa moved into the 1,000 point club Jan. 23 and finished with 1,083 career points, good for 18th in Truman history.

Certa finished his career in a crescendo, scoring 24 and 25 points respectively in his final two games. During those two games, he passed three players, including former teammate Grant Agbo, on Truman's all-time scoring list.

"It feels good to accomplish things like that, especially when your career comes to an end," Certa said. "And you hope you can look back and kind of feel proud about some things and feel happy with what your experience has been."

On Wednesday, Certa was selected as Honorable Mention All-MIAA after he led Truman in scoring for the second straight year. Certa's 14.6 points-per-game scoring average was the highest for a Bulldog since 2002-03.

Estridge emerged as the vocal leader of the team and paced the Bulldogs in minutes and assists. He also was second on the team in scoring.

Probably no player on the team exhibited as much improvement as junior Patrick Fandja. In his second season with Truman, the 6-foot-6 forward evolved from a role player who aver-

aged two points and two rebounds per game in 2006-07 into the team's top post player this season.

Fandja demonstrated his improvement in the Bulldogs' final home game when he scored a career-high 17 points. He finished the year averaging 7.2 rebounds per game, which was No. 1 for the Bulldogs and sixth in the MIAA. Schrader said the key to Fandja's development was getting comfortable with the 'Dogs' offense.

"It takes a year, sometimes a year and a half, for guys to figure out what it is we're doing," Schrader said. "Not that it's that complicated, but what we do is really based on teamwork, timing, positioning, and he's just gotten better."

Forward Ethan Freeman led the way for the freshmen. He finished second among MIAA freshmen in scoring and first in rebounds. The other Bulldog freshmen — especially guards Alex Henderson and Garrison and forward Mark Misiewicz — showed signs of their potential at some point in the season. Henderson led the team in three-point and free-throw percentage.

With a year of college ball behind them, Garrison said he thinks the group of current freshmen should contribute even more next season as sophomores.

"We won't be able to use the excuse that we're freshmen anymore," he said. "Now, next year we know what's expected of us, and we'll just have to come in and perform to [the level] we're expected to."

Schrader said he hopes the team builds on this year's experience and that the 12 players returning next season will continue to improve.

"I'm pretty satisfied with the way we played, and I'm satisfied with the fact that guys coming back maintained their hunger and determination," Schrader said. "If that carries over into the off-season, then it means they want to get better. And we have to get better."

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