



PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Championship Bound! Bears Top VMI in Semifinals

Neftali Alvarez contributed 23 points in the win.

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – Neftali Alvarez scored 23 points to propel the Mercer men's basketball squad to its first-ever Southern Conference championship game via a 73-59 win over the VMI Keydets.

Earlier Sunday, the Mercer women clinched the SoCon title with a win over Wofford. Should the men hoist the championship trophy on Monday night, it will mark the first time since 2016 that two programs from the same school won the tournament title.

The Bears will battle UNCG, the top seed, at 7 p.m. on Monday night. Coverage of the game is set for ESPN (TV) and Westwood One (national radio). As always, Rick Cameron will have the call on the Mercer Sports Network - 100.9 The Creek and SportsMic.

In addition to Alvarez's 23 points on 9-of-19 shooting, the Bears received impressive showings from Felipe Haase (15 points and 11 rebounds) and Leon Ayers III (14 points). Haase's double-double was his second in the past six games. He shot 50 percent from the floor and made three three-pointers. Ayers III was over 50 percent for the third time in as many games, going 5-of-9 (55.6 percent). As a team, the Bears connected on 42.6 percent (29-of-68) of their tries and made 11-of-31 three-pointers. (35.5 percent).

VMI's Myles Lewis poured in a game-best 24 points on 10-of-16 shooting, while also corralling 14 boards for a double-double. Mercer held the Keydets' leading scorer, Greg Parham, to 12 points on 5-of-14 shooting. VMI made 40.7 percent (24-of-59) of its shots but shot a season-low 25 percent (4-of-25) from three-point territory.

Mercer (18-10 overall) controlled the contest, allowing VMI to only lead after scoring the first bucket. James Glisson III tied the game, and Alvarez hit one of his three three-pointers on the night to give Mercer a 5-2 advantage 3:23 into the game, which it never relinquished.

A five-point lead at the 12:20 mark of the first half quickly became 10 points, 17-7, when Alvarez drove in the lane for a layup and Haase nailed a three-pointer following the under-12 media break. VMI, which entered the tournament as the No. 6 seed, trimmed four points off the Bears' lead before the Orange & Black went on another run. Once again, Alvarez drove between defenders for a layup before another Mercer three-pointer, this time courtesy of Ayers III.

The old saying that basketball is a game of runs proved true after Mercer opened up an 11-point cushion. Although Middle Georgia's Team had a chance to break the game open, a 10-2 run by the Keydets made it a one-possession semifinal, 24-21, with 4:21 until the half. VMI scored the first seven points off the run, but Ross Cummings stopped Mercer's drought with a jumper. Following Cummings' bucket VMI's Kamryn Curfman contributed a three-pointer to make it a three-point game.



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After a media timeout and a combined five possessions of scoreless basketball, the Keydets' Lewis pulled the designated home team within a point, 24-23 with 2:28 remaining in the opening half. The Bears' offense caught fire at the right time as Greg Gary's squad found the bottom of the net on each of its last three possessions of the first period while limiting VMI to a mere three points. All of the Orange & Black's last three trips down the floor resulted with made three-pointers from a different Bear. To nobody's surprise, Alvarez continued his impressive display from the floor before Haase and Kamar Robertson buried treys, and stifling defense by the visitors forced Greg Parham to miss on VMI's final possession. At the half, Mercer held a 33-26 advantage.

VMI (13-12 overall) kept the Bears' lead in single digits for the first three-plus minutes of the final half, but Alvarez started a Mercer 6-1 run that lasted 78 seconds to extend the lead to 14, 48-34, with 14:21 to play. The squads traded baskets until seconds prior the 10-minute mark when Alvarez shifted between defenders and absorbed contact for a chance at an old-fashioned three-point play. The Cantano, P.R., native missed the free throw try, and VMI scored five consecutive points to force before none other than Alvarez knocked down a three-pointer. The spurt by Keydets made it a 10-point contest, 54-44.

The Bears led by 13 with 8:14 to play, but the lead was under 10 points only 90 seconds later, and Mercer called a timeout to regroup. The timeout worked wonders as Mercer answered with five straight points to re-take a 14-point lead. VMI was unable to respond, never pulling within more than 12 points, and the seventh-seeded Bears took their largest advantage of the night, 69-52, off Jeff Gary's three-pointer with 2:20 to play. Haase and Ayers III contributed Mercer's last four points of the game, giving Mercer a 73-59 win and its first-ever Southern Conference championship berth.

Coach Greg Gary Quotables

[Full Audio](#)

ON ALVAREZ'S SCORING

"He did a great job running the offense. He is good in space. VMI's does different things spacing wise. We tried to make [Jake] Stephens guard because he's so good on the offensive end. We want to make him guard just to wear him out. It helped a bit. Neftali is so good at getting downhill, and when there's space he's good.

ON LIMITING GREG PARHAM

"We did a better job switching up top. They try to run a few running screens. We let [Myles] Lewis get lose, but Parham is [typically] the guy [that you have to watch]."

ON THE DEFENSIVE EFFORT

"I thought we did a good job knocking them out of rhythm and getting them out of their comfort zone."

ON TAKING CARE OF THE BALL

"[Only five turnovers] is tremendous. We have done a nice job taking care of the ball the last three games. Tomorrow is going to be huge. [UNCG] forces turnovers. We have to take care of the basketball. Every possession is going to count."

ON THREE STRAIGHT WINS AND A CHAMPIONSHIP BERTH

"It's great. It is our expectation [to play for championships]. For us to be able to do it this year with being up and down as everybody has and being flexible and having to sacrifice a lot [is great]. I am happy for our guys to be in this situation."

NOTABLES



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- The Bears are in the Southern Conference Championship for the first time as league members.
- Mercer is now 1-1 all-time in SoCon semifinal matchups.
- The Bears have never met UNCG in SoCon tournament play.
- A seven seed has never won the Southern Conference championship since seeds were kept in the record books (beginning with the 1990 championship).
- With Mercer's women's winning the title on Sunday afternoon, the University is seeking to become the first school since Chattanooga in 2016 to claim both the men's and women's titles.
- Mercer improved to 2-0 against VMI in 2020-21.
- Greg Gary is a perfect 4-0 in his career against the Keydets.
- Mercer is 18-0 when leading with five minutes remaining.
- The Bears took a season-high 68 field goal attempts. Alvarez attempted 19 shots, a career-high and made nine.
- The Mercer reserves outscored VMI's bench, 20-3. In three tournament games, the Bears' bench holds a 67-37 advantage over its opponent in points.
- The Bears' 11 three-pointers marked the 12th time they have made at least 10 treys. Mercer has made 11 three-pointers on four occasions over the course of the 2020-21 campaign.
- The Orange & Black committed a season-low five turnovers.
- Mercer tied its fourth-best showing with 46 rebounds.
- Alvarez produced his fourth 20-point outing of the season. He finished the night one basket away from a career-high.
- The redshirt sophomore point guard surpassed 700 career points.
- Haase recorded a double-double for the fourth time this season and second time in the last six games.
- The Osorno, Chile native is shooting 56 percent in three tournament contests.
- Ayers III has been in double figures in all three tournament games. He is averaging 15.7 points per game in the tournament.
- Gary set a career-high with nine rebounds.
- Glisson III collected a season-best eight boards and was one away from tying his career-best.
- Mercer picked up its 10th win in games decided by 10 or more points.
- The Orange & Black are 3-0 on Sundays.
- The Bears moved to 6-1 when scoring between 70 and 79 points.
- Mercer has won 15 games when outshooting its opponent.
- When winning the battle on the glass, the Orange & Black now sit 10-3 overall.
- Mercer has won nine games in both its home and away uniforms.
- Tomorrow, the Bears are seeking their fourth win on a Monday in four tries.
- The Bears limited the Keydets to four three-pointers, their lowest total of the season.
- VMI's 16.0 percent mark from downtown was its worst of the 2020-21 campaign.

UP NEXT

Championship Monday coverage will begin at 6:30 p.m. with Rick Cameron providing a 30-minute pregame show on the Mercer Sports Network (100.9 The Creek, SportsMic). The No. 7 Bears and No. 1 UNCG Spartans will tip at 7 p.m. on ESPN and Westwood One Radio.