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JCM 325

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Second-half struggles sink Alabama in 79-73 loss to Tennessee

TUSCALOOSA, AL. – The Tennessee Volunteers used a second-half defensive surge to silence Coleman Coliseum on Saturday night, giving Alabama a 79-73 loss. The Volunteers managed to erase a halftime deficit and snap the Crimson Tide’s momentum in a physical in conference matchup.

After trailing by three at the break, Tennessee opened the second half with a fight that flipped the game in minutes. The Volunteers forced Alabama into disrupted ball screens and completely controlled the glass, turning a close game into another frustrating home loss for the Crimson Tide.

“Obviously not the outcome we were looking for,” Alabama coach Nate Oats said. “Got to give Tennessee a ton of credit. They came ready to go. Defensively, we weren’t as good as I thought we needed to be in the first half, and we’ve had a major issue with second-half starts.”

Alabama led 36-33 at half but failed to carry on that momentum through the final 20 minutes. Tennessee quickly picked up the pace, took control and outscored the Crimson Tide early in the second half. The Volunteers were able to build a six-point lead that would continue throughout the rest of the game.

Oats said the Crimson Tide missed an opportunity to create separation before the half.

“A three-point lead, I felt, should’ve been a lot bigger,” he said. “We took care of a few things on the defensive end in the first half and then all of a sudden it disappeared immediately in the second half. They went from down three to up six pretty quickly.”

Tennessee’s defensive game plan revolved around limited Alabama’s transition opportunities and taking the ball out of primary scorers’ hands. The Volunteers attacked ball screens and forced Alabama to make decisions in the half court, something what would disrupt the Crimson Tide’s offensive rhythm.

Sophomore guard Labaron Philon Jr. said Tennessee’s approach made it difficult for Alabama to find clean looks from beyond the arc.

“They were just blowing up screens, really trying to place me on ball screens, trying to get it out of my hands and make me make the right decision every time,” Philon said. “They did a good job at that, but you’ve got to go get back in the gym, keep working and next game up.”

Alabama struggled to generate offense without getting stops, something Oats emphasized afterward. The Crimson Tide barely found success in transition, an area that has been a staple of their identity under Oats.

“Tennessee is a really good defensive team, and we did not do a good job attacking them,” Oats said. “In large parts, it was us not being able to get enough stops and get out in transition. We did not nearly have any transition buckets, which is not how we’re supposed to play.”

The Volunteers’ physicality also proved to make a difference. Oats pointed to rebounding, effort and toughness as areas where Tennessee excelled, specifically in the second half.

“They are one of the toughest teams in the league,” Oats said. “As far as physicality, effort and rebounding, they are one of the tougher teams.”

That toughness showed as Tennessee capitalized on second-chance opportunities and forced Alabama into contested shots late in the shot clock. The Volunteers also were able to benefit from a season-high performance by Nate Ament.

“Too many guys get their season high on us,” Oats said. “Nate Ament comes out and scores his season high on us. We know he’s a talented player, but we did not really have anybody step up and do a good job stopping him.”

The loss marked Alabama’s second back-to-back loss at Coleman Coliseum, which is uncommon for a program that turned its home floor into one of the SEC’s most difficult environments. Oats shouted out the crowd for its energy but said the team failed to match it on the court.

“We had a great crowd. I thought they were unbelievable,” Oats said. “Thank them for coming out and giving us exactly what we needed, but we did not give them a good enough show.”

Despite the setback, Alabama has little time to dwell on the loss. The Crimson Tide face a quick turnaround with Missouri visiting on Tuesday, another test in the rugged SEC schedule.