

What a basketball game. I'm sure alot of people didn't make it up until 12:32 AM when the game ended. Certainly several others turned off the TV in disgust when the Buckeyes were getting their heads kicked in as the game approached halftime. Those of us that made it to the final horn were witnesses to one of the greatest comebacks in the history of the NCAA Tournament as the Buckeyes came back from a 20 point deficit to defeat Tennessee by a final score of 85-84. I relive the win on The Morning After.



What a basketball game.

I'm sure alot of people didn't make it up until 12:32 AM when the game ended. Certainly several others turned off the TV in disgust when the Buckeyes were getting their heads kicked in as the game approached halftime.

Those of us that made it to the final horn were witnesses to one of the greatest comebacks in the history of the NCAA Tournament as the Buckeyes came back from a 20 point deficit to defeat Tennessee by a final score of 85-84.

The Buckeyes were down 17 points at the half, which is the largest halftime margin that a team has erased to win a game in regulation in the history of the NCAA Tournament. The only larger halftime deficit by a winning team was recorded in Virginia Tech's 89-85 overtime victory against Western Kentucky in the opening round in 1980. Western Kentucky led by 18 points at the half.

The win came off the heels of a similarly unlikely victory, as Ohio State came back from nine points down with three minutes to go, forcing overtime and an eventual win against Xavier in the second round of the tournament. Last night, improbably, the situation was even more bleak, and the comeback even more unthinkable.

Things got ugly in a hurry for Thad Matta and his #1 seeded Buckeyes. Tennessee got off to about as quick of a start as humanly possible, draining five of their first six three point attempts, racing to an early 17-10 advantage. By the eleven minute mark of the first half, the Vols' lead had grown to 26-14, and Mike Conley Jr. and Greg Oden were both forced to the bench with

two fouls apiece. Oden re-entered the game with about six minutes left in the first half, and almost immediately picked up his third foul. Tennessee stayed incredibly hot, and increased the lead to 49-29 before a David Lighty three point play in the closing seconds of the first half made the halftime score 49-32.

Simply put, the first half left this fan absolutely shell shocked. It was a complete and utter mismatch. Tennessee blistered the nets for a 56% shooting percentage, and just about half of their makes were of the three point variety. Ohio State looked lethargic, uninterested, and uninspired. They were getting beat to loose balls. They weren't boxing out, allowing easy Tennessee second chances on their rare misses. They committed stupid foul after stupid foul. They were forcing bad shots. And their body language towards the end of the first half seemed to indicate that they had already conceded defeat to a Tennessee team that hit them with eight or nine haymakers before they threw their first punch.

That all changed in the second half.

The Buckeyes came out very focused and sharp, going on a 13-2 run to start the second half, cutting the lead down to a very manageable 51-45 deficit in just three and half minutes. They played great defense, forcing Tennessee into misses on seven of their first eight shots of the half. And they finally started creating easy buckets for themselves, getting to the foul line as well, chipping away at the lead with no time ticking off the clock. Ron Lewis caught fire, rattling off nine consecutive points, capped off by a breathtaking alley oop from Conley that cut the Volunteer lead to 59-57 with twelve minutes left in the contest. Lewis had another huge night, scoring 18 of his team high 25 points in the second half.

Then things started to get scary again for Ohio State, as Buckeye big men Othella Hunter and Greg Oden each picked up their fourth personal fouls on consecutive trips down court, forcing both to the bench with eleven minutes remaining. The foul call on Oden that forced him the pine was an awful one, as a Tennessee player ran right into a still-standing Oden and fell down, drawing the call from the officials. But the Buckeyes kept fighting, finally pulling even at 64-64 without their big men on two free throws from Conley. Conley was fantastic all evening, finishing with 17 points, 7 rebounds, 6 assists, and just one turnover.

From this point on, the game was an exhilarating display of back and forth, blow for blow heroics from both teams. The Buckeyes pulled ahead 72-68 when Jamar Butler hit his first basket of the game (after five misses). The Vols fought back with three more three balls of their own, taking back the lead at 77-74 with four minutes left, at which point Thad Matta brought Oden back in the game with four fouls. Matta played offense/defense with Oden and Hunter the rest of the way, hoping to keep Oden from picking up his fifth foul, and keeping him available until the end of the game, a strategy that would pay off for the Buckeye's third year head coach.

A huge David Lighty three pointer tied the game at 79-79 with 2:00 left. Lighty had a great game at both ends, logging 20 minutes, and playing great defense. His aforementioned three ball, and the three point play at the end of the first half were two of the biggest plays of the game for the Bucks.

After a timeout, a Mike Conley steal led to a Ron Lewis three which put the Bucks up three, a lead that wouldn't last long as the Vols' Chris Lofton came right back down court and buried a three of his own to tie the game at 82-82. Lofton had a big night, dropping 24 points on the Bucks, with several of those buckets coming at key spots with Jamar Butler's hand in his face. Oden then made a pair of free throws to give Ohio State an 84-82 lead. Tennessee's Wayne Chism then split a pair of free throws, cutting the OSU lead to 84-83 with just over a minute left. Ron Lewis then misfired on a three point try. At the other end, UT's Ramar Smith was fouled on a drive attempt. He also made one of two free throws to tie the game at 84-84 with 38 seconds left.

Conley held the ball as long as he could as the Buckeyes hoped to take as late a shot as possible. He made a great shimmie move, drove the lane, and was fouled by the Vols' JaJuan Smith with six seconds remaining.

Conley hit the first free throw. UT called timeout to apply the ice. Conley missed the second free throw. Tennessee freshman guard Ramar Smith rebounded it and moved upcourt quickly to try and get a game winning shot off. He was defended brilliantly as he raced down the court by Conley ... who forced him out of the key and into a really tough 10-12 foot runner. And his high school mate Oden, after a really rough night, had the last laugh as he swatted that final shot away, setting off a rampant celebration at midcourt.

Oden finished with just nine points, attempting just two shots from the floor all night, and grabbing only three rebounds. He played just 18 minutes due to the incessant foul trouble he found himself in throughout the entire game.

With two of the most improbable comebacks in recent NCAA Tournament history now booked in back to back games, one has to start wondering if this just might be a team of destiny. The Bucks will face the second seeded Memphis Tigers on Saturday afternoon, with a trip to the Final Four awaiting the winner. Memphis edged #3 seed Texas A&M 65-64 in the early game in San Antonio. The Tigers have won 25 straight games. The Buckeyes have won 20 straight.