

# SPRINGFIELD NEWS-SUN

## Witt when it counts

### With an NCAA berth on the line, Tigers top Wooster

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By Lucas Sullivan, News-Sun Sports Writer

WOOSTER, OH—Revenge is not always sweet just because it is served. Sometimes it depends on how and when it is obtained.

Hence the phrase, "Revenge is a dish best served cold."

For Wittenberg it couldn't have served its revenge on Wooster at a better time than in the finals of the North Coast Athletic Conference tournament.

The Tigers beat the top-seeded Scots 71-69 Saturday in front of 3,317 fans in Timken Gym. And they did it with a stingy defense that held the Scots to their second lowest scoring output of the season and a cool 31 points below their season average.

The win also gives the Tigers (25-3) back-to-back NCAC titles for just the second time since joining the conference in 1988 and an automatic bid to the Division III NCAA tournament.

This was also Bill Brown's 300th win in 13 seasons as Wittenberg coach. The victory all but erases two tough losses to the Scots (25-3) earlier in the season.

"It's just still all a blur to me," said Brown, as he was getting ready to cut down the rest of net after the game. "Hopefully, it will sink in after I watch the tape, but right now it is all a blur."

Brown's head was spinning because after his Tigers took a 65-56 lead with 1:16 left, the Scots rallied back to within one point after sinking three 3-pointers in three possessions to make it 69-68 with 7 seconds left. Tigers senior post Dan Russ then hit two free throws to make it 71-68 and after a Wittenberg timeout, Pat Denbow purposely fouled Wooster's Kyle Witucky with 2.6 seconds left.

Witucky made the first free throw to make it 71-69 and purposely missed the second, with the ball going off a Tigers defender with .2 seconds left.

"It was unbelievable," Tigers starting post Phil Steffes said. "They just wouldn't stop coming and hitting those 3-pointers. But we weren't expecting anything other than that."

It seemed unbelievable because the Scots had almost erased a nine-point deficit and had a chance to at least tie the game.

But while Scots coach Steve Moore was asking that time be put back on the clock, Brown reminded the striped shirts that with the time remaining, all Wooster could do was tap it in. The referees then huddled, disagreed with Moore and made it aware to everyone that all Wooster could do was tap the ball in the basket with the time remaining.

That's when the rally ended.

"This has to be one of the best games in Division III history," Steffes said. "It was crazy. That was a long two minutes. If there is a better game in D-III I would be really surprised."

If Brown could be happier with the way his four starting seniors played in one of their biggest games in four years, that would be equally as surprising.

Steffes, a senior who is known for his defensive ability rather than his four points a game average, picked Wooster sophomore and Springfield native James Cooper's pocket with two minutes to go and **Kenny Brady's** jumper made it 63-56. On the Scots' next possession, it was Steffes who came down with a missed 3-pointer by Brandon

Johnson and then sank two free throws to make it 65-56 Wittenberg with 1:16 left.

"I'm just glad I got Cooper back," said Steffes, speaking of Cooper's 24 points he put up in the Scots' 86-77 win at the HPER Center on Feb. 4. "He's been killing me all season."

Brady, also a starting senior, then knocked down two free throws with 16 seconds left to make it 69-65 Wittenberg and, more importantly, a two-possession game.

Then Russ, who moved to ninth on Wittenberg's all-timer scoring list with 1,443 career points, hit the two clutch free throws with seven seconds left to give the Tigers a 71-68 lead and give him 20 points on the night, a performance only eclipsed by fellow senior post **Dane Borchers**.

Borchers' 22 points and 14 rebounds, his best double-double output of the season, earned him tournament MVP honors. Borchers, who has already decided to come back for a fifth season after a medical redshirt his freshman year, had 51 points and 30 rebounds in three NCAC tournament games this week.

"That MVP doesn't mean anything to me because it's not one person out here that does it all," Borchers said. "It's something I'll remember forever, though."

What the Tigers will remember was holding one of the nation's top offenses, which averages 100 points per game, to its second lowest output of the season. And they did so by cutting off Wooster's main life support, the 3-point shot.

"We took their biggest punch and came out with a win," said Russ, adding that his team was motivated by not losing three times to one team in a season. "Coach kind of called us out on that, saying it's tough as hell to beat a team three times in a row. We kind of took that to heart and we just didn't want one team to beat us three times this year. There was a lot of pride on the line tonight."

The Tigers held Wooster to seven threes on 18 attempts and allowed the Scots to shoot only 42 percent from the floor, 11 percent lower than their average. They also held Cooper, who finished with a team-high 20 points, to six points in the second half. The Scots were also out-rebounded 37-29 for the game.

"Our guys made a great comeback and they showed their guts and character," Moore said. "Throughout the game, we needed to be better offensively. We have to give Wittenberg credit for its excellent defense. They always play great defense."

Wooster will also surely get an invite to the NCAA tournament, but will find out for sure during Sunday's selection show at 10 p.m. Wittenberg is definitely in, but won't find out until Monday morning who they will play.