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April 4, 2022

Fighting Illini's March Madness Mishap

The University of Illinois's men's basketball team, the Fighting Illini, made an impressive comeback over the last two seasons under coach Brad Underwood. After years without participating in an NCAA tournament they made a strong comeback in 2021, winning the Big Ten tournament championship and securing themselves a No. 1 seed in March Madness. Illini fans were hopeful for the team, but were left disappointed after an upset during the round of 32 when they lost to Loyola University Chicago.

Flash forward to the 2021-2022 season, the Fighting Illini performed excellently during their regular season and joined the NCAA tournament with a No. 4 seed placement. After such an immensely successful season for the Illini and such a devastating loss in the tournament the year prior, many fans were optimistic that the team would make it further in the tournament.

Rose Proctor is currently a junior at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and has been a longtime fan of the Fighting Illini. She had this to say about her anticipation for the tournament. "I actually grew up watching these games with my father, who went to the University of Illinois, and getting to watch this past season as a current student had me beyond excited for the possibility of us winning the tournament."

In the first round the Fighting Illini faced off against the No. 13 seed Chattanooga Mocs. The game was an absolute nailbiter as the Chattanooga underdogs appeared to be setting the tournament up for a first round upset. The Mocs were in the lead up until the last 45 seconds of the game. The game was coming down to the wire as the Fighting Illini barely started to pull ahead when Kofi Cockburn set the score of 52 to 51.

The last few points of the game came down to a set of free throws for each team. The Chattanooga Moc's Malachi Smith appeared to have won the game until the Illinois guard Alfonso Plummer made a pair of free throws that set the score to 54-53. With 12 seconds left in the game, the Mocs found themselves desperate for one of their players to score another basket, but the Illinois Men's Basketball team ended up winning by the skin of their teeth.

Katie Diviak, a current junior at the University of Illinois and sports fanatic had this to say about the game. “By the end of the game I was literally sitting on the edge of my seat. The suspense just kept building and building and I was over the moon to see the team pull out the win.”

After this close call, many were anxious for the next round as the Illini were set to face off against the University of Houston Cougars. Stakes were high as this was the same round the Illini lost in last year’s tournament; seeing as they were up against a No. 5 seed team, many were nervous about whether or not Illinois could perform better than they did the previous year. The Houston Cougars made it all the way to the final four last year and the team's skill showed throughout the entirety of the game.

In the first half Houston was dominating the Fighting Illini with a double digit lead. Illinois however quickly bounced back and tied the game early in the second half. To the dismay of many Illini fans, The Cougars ended up pulling ahead again and secured themselves a 68-53 victory. Houston had an impressively aggressive offense with Taze Moore contributing 21 points while Jamal Shead and Kyler Edwards contributed 18 and 15 points. On top of that they had an almost ironclad defense; The cougars managed 17 turnovers and snagged 15 offensive rebounds. The Fighting Illini weren’t able to shake their defense, but Kofi Cockburn did manage to score 19 points which is significantly more than any of his teammates.

After such a magnificent season the Fighting Illini were devastated to have a loss in the same round as they did the year prior. Amanda Baenke who is currently a junior at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign said “I was so disappointed to see them lose. I was really hoping that this was the year that we would go all the way and now my March Madness bracket is completely ruined.”

Despite the loss, the Fighting Illini had a tremendous year and have grown so much over the past few seasons. Many fans are hopeful that they perform even better next year.

Sources

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Interviewees

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