



FAIRFIELD, Conn. – A determined Mercer men's basketball team punched its ticket to the CollegeInsider.com Tournament championship game with a 64-59 victory over Fairfield on Saturday night at Alumni Hall. The victory advanced Mercer to the CIT final, where the Bears await the winner of tomorrow's matchup between Oakland and Utah State.

Mercer moved to 26-11 on the season while Fairfield saw its season end at 22-14. Either Oakland or Utah State is set to host the CIT championship, with date and time to be determined.

Sophomore Bud Thomas led the team in scoring for the first time since February 6, tallying 13 points on four-of-six shooting from the field. Thomas also notched five steals, four rebounds, two assists and a block in the winning effort.

Junior Travis Smith chipped in 12 points and four rebounds, while sophomore Monty Brown scored 10 of his own.

Due to the NCAA Regional Ice Hockey Championship, Fairfield was forced to host Saturday night's semifinal at its on-campus facility - a vintage 2,400 seat gymnasium with acoustic properties that magnified its patron population.

After sputtering at the outset, Mercer built a 17-7 lead by the second media timeout, effectively taking the air out of the Fairfield-friendly contingent. From there, Mercer's lead ballooned to as many as 13 before the Stags closed the period on an 8-2 run to trim its deficit to five (30-25) at intermission.

In the second half, Fairfield awoke its lethargic crowd with a spurt that brought the Stags within one (35-34) with 17:05 to go. Thomas did his best to quell the surge, fighting through a foul to can a trey on Mercer's next possession. The subsequent free throw returned Mercer's buffer to five.

The Stags' initial charge foreshadowed the second half, as Fairfield closed within one three times but Mercer responded with key plays each time.

All told, Mercer finished with advantages in shooting percentage (45.1%-37.7%), three-point shooting percentage (50%-18.8%), rebounds (35-31), and assists (16-10).