

ARKANSAS TECH UNIVERSITY

ATHLETICS

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WONDER BOYS BASKETBALL FIGHTS OFF HARDING FOR FIRST ROAD CONFERENCE WIN AND A POSSIBLE NUMBER ONE RANKING

SEARCY, Arkansas – The No. 2 ranked Arkansas Tech Wonder Boys survived in a tough atmosphere here Saturday night to pick up a hard-fought 82-71 victory over Harding in Gulf South Conference action in front nearly 2,200 fans inside Rhodes Fieldhouse.

With the win and No. 1 ranked Augusta State's 81-75 loss earlier in the day on Saturday at 11th-ranked Valdosta State, the Wonder Boys are poised to ascend to the top of this coming week's NABC/Division II Coaches' Top 25 Poll when it is released this coming Tuesday.

"It's a great chance for us to get some recognition nationally," Wonder Boys Head Coach **Mark Downey** said. "But the most important ranking is at the end of the season. We just need to continue to focus on getting better and not worrying about the polls."

Tech improves to 16-0 and 3-0 in the GSC West Division standings, while Harding falls to 8-7 overall and 1-2 in the GSC.

Saturday's game didn't start out smoothly for the Wonder Boys as Harding jumped in front 6-1 and led by as much as 21-16 following a three-pointer by Stephen Blake with 12:12 left in the period. Blake's trey completed an 8-2 run by the Bisons after Tech has taken a 14-13 lead following a three-pointer by junior guard **Jeremy Dunbar** (Niceville, Fla.).

In the first 10 minutes of the game, there were three ties and three lead changes and no team led by more than five points. The Wonder Boys got things going late in the first half as they used a 10-2 run to push out to a 42-34 lead following a lay-up in transition by junior guard **Laithe Massey** (Heber Springs, Ark.) with 1:51 left before halftime. Harding, though, scored the final four points of the half to send Tech into the locker room with a 38-34 advantage.

In the second half, Tech came out of the locker room firing as within six minutes into the final period the Wonder Boys had extended its halftime lead to as much as 12 points following a three-pointer at the top of the key by Dunbar to close out a 13-5 run. Dunbar's trey gave Tech a 55-43 lead.

The Bison, who entered the game 6-1 at home on the season, would not go away as they used the energy of the crowd to cut Tech's lead in half following two free throws by Blake with 9:34 left in the game. Blake led the Bisons with a game-high 22 points as he was 6-for-9 from the field, including going 4-for-4 from the 3-point arc.

Tech, though, would surge back in front by as much as 12 points at 69-57 following an alley-oop dunk by senior forward **Irvin Humphrey** (Boutte, La.) with

7:26 remaining, before Harding the Wonder Boys lead to 71-65 with 3:39 left in the contest following a free throw by Trent Morgan. The Wonder Boys, though, would use tough defense and 6-of-8 free throw shooting over the final two minutes of the game to hold off Harding and close out the victory.

"I was pleased with our defense for the most part tonight. Especially, late in the game, when we needed to make stops, we made them," the fourth-year Tech coach. With the victory, Downey tied former Wonder Boy coach **E.O. Brown** for fourth in the school's all-time win list with 63 victories. Brown posted a 63-54 record as Tech's coach from 1923-33, while Downey has now compiled a 63-41 mark at the helm of the Wonder Boys.

Senior guard **Brandon Friedel** (Victoria, Texas) led the way for the Wonder Boys as he scored 21 points and pulled down seven rebounds, while Dunbar added 18 points and seven rebounds in the win. Senior guard **Renard Allen** (New Orleans, La.) chipped in with 14 points off the bench.

In addition to Blake's 22 points, Kevin Brown added 19 points and 12 rebounds for the Bison.

For the game, Tech shot 40 percent from the field and 33 percent (10-for-30) from long distance, while Harding shot 42 percent from the field and 36 percent from 3-point range. Both teams combined to shoot 59 free throws as 50 fouls were called between the two teams. Harding was 22-for-36 (61 percent) at the line, while Tech shot 16-for-23 (70 percent) at the line.

Tech finished the game with a 43-35 edge on the boards, including picking up 19 offensive rebounds, as Massey led the way with eight rebounds for the game, while Tech forced 20 turnovers that led to 26 points.

The Wonder Boys will return to action on Thursday, Jan. 21, when they travel to Arkadelphia, Ark., to face Ouachita Baptist in an 8 p.m. game at Bill Vining Arena on the OBU campus. The Tigers fell to 4-12 on the season and 0-3 in the GSC following its 60-48 loss Saturday night at home to Arkansas-Monticello.

"We have another tough challenge in front of us on Thursday. Despite its record, OBU has played all three of conference opponents very tough, so we better be ready to get after it on Thursday," Downey added.

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