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USVI Mounts Big Comeback But it Wasn't Enough: Canada Clinches Americup 2022 Qualifier

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Walter Hodge attempts a lay-up under a Canadian defender during his 44-point performance Saturday, Feb. 20, 2021. By. FIBA BASKETBALL

The Virgin Islands Men's National Basketball found itself down big again on Saturday, this time by 18 points with just two minutes into the second half of the qualifying game against Canada. But the team would not go away easily: they came storming back behind Walter Hodge's offense, who finished with 44 points, but the gargantuan effort was not enough to outperform Canada, leading to a 95-90 loss.

The Virgin Islands was down 58- 40 with 7:55 left in the third quarter before Walter Hodge got hot from three point range, and the Virgin Islands outscored Canada 24-10 for the rest of the third quarter. Hodge hit 3 three-pointers in the third quarter, while Trivante Bloodman and Deon Edwin both hit one downtown shot, leading to the run that catapulted the Virgin Islands right back into the contest.

In the post-game press conference, Hodge said, "In the third quarter I made a couple threes and that got me going."

One of those Hodge three-pointers cut the once 18-point deficit to six points with just under 3:30 left in the quarter. A Hodge floater with 1:45 left in the third quarter cut the lead down to 5, 67-62.

An Ivan Aska lay-up with 7:45 left in the fourth quarter tied the game at 72. Canada strung a few baskets together and regained a seven-point advantage, 85-78 with about four minutes left in the game.

Hodge hit a three-pointer for his 40th point with just over three minutes left, cutting the Virgin Islands deficit down to 4. An Xavier Richards three-pointer narrowed the deficit to three with 2:05 left, but Canada scored the game's next five points to give Canada an eight point lead with one minute to go in the game.

A Hodge lay-up cut the lead to six with 17 seconds left and after a turnover on the ensuing inbound pass, he hit another jump shot to make it a four point game, 94-90. However, the Virgin Islands did not get any closer as Canada clinched its spot in the FIBA 2022 AmeriCup.

Hodge's 44 points led the team followed by Aska, who had 17 points and Romani Hansen with 10 points. No other USVI team member finished in double-digits.

In the post-game press conference, Virgin Islands head coach Donald Bough spoke about what he thinks made the difference in Saturday's game. "I think the threes, we couldn't hit the open threes, which they did." Canada shot just over 40 percent from three-point range while the Virgin Islands made just 33 percent of their attempts, with a majority of the Virgin Islands' successful attempts coming during the second half.

Free throws were an issue for the Virgin Islands in the first two games, but they made all 18 of their attempts from the line during Saturday's game.

Bough thinks the competitive nature of the games during this window shows, "You can't count us out." He added, "Three games, averaging 94 points a game, and options to win within a minute or two of every game... that's kind of an indicator right there."

He added, "I think we did a great job as a team this week. I'm very proud of my teammates and my coaching staff." Even so, Hodge wants to be "in every tournament."

"We didn't have as much depth as the other teams have, and it bends us to have guys play a little more minutes and the elephant in the room is fatigue," said Bough. "The guys sucked it up pretty well and I was amazed at that."

The team played three games in four days, including an overtime loss Friday night, and were without two players on their initial roster, Kyle Clarke and Jalal Johnson due to Covid-19

protocols.

The Virgin Islands will be following developments closely to see if there is any punishment for Cuba for not attending last week's window of games in Puerto Rico. If Cuba is not punished, the USVI team will be eliminated and Cuba will qualify for the AmeriCup. If there is a punishment, it will depend on the severity thereof, which gives the USVI a glimmer of hope.

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