

CLEAN STREAK

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K-State defeats KU for first time in 12 seasons

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By JEFFREY MARTIN

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The sweaty embrace was natural, two men sharing a genuine, heartfelt moment. It occurred midcourt Saturday at Allen Fieldhouse, only making the clinch sweeter and more significant for Kansas State coach Jim Wooldridge and his star, junior Cartier Martin.

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Seconds after a 59-55 victory against Kansas, a win Wooldridge later described as "improbable," the coach beckoned the player and a hug ensued. While it only lasted a few seconds, it seemed cathartic for the appreciative Wooldridge.

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"We'd been through the fire together," Wooldridge said.

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Martin and his teammates saved their coach from being burned, at least for the time being. The other subplots -- the end of 31-game losing streak to the Jayhawks, an 0-12 record for Wooldridge against KU, the first Big 12 triumph for K-State -- were noteworthy, but Saturday was about the improved health of a beleaguered team and its leader, a man so downtrodden Wednesday following a 57-42 loss to Nebraska that several members of the media wondered if he was close to resigning.

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To accomplish what the Wildcats (10-4, 1-2 Big 12) were able to do Saturday, in a setting where K-State hadn't been victorious since 1994, is nothing short of amazing.

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"From Wednesday to Saturday -- you can't believe it," Wooldridge said. "How could you guess this would happen?"

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No one could, with the exception of the Wildcats.

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"The streak is over, and I'm tired of hearing about it," Martin said. "Now, we don't have to hear about it anymore."

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Adding to the implausibility was how K-State won.

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Martin was held to 14 points, about six below his season average, and was hindered by foul trouble. His fourth foul came with 13:45 left in the game, and normally that would lead to disaster for the Wildcats.

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Not Saturday. A trio of overlooked players -- senior guard Schlyer Thomas, senior forward Dramane Diarra and sophomore point guard Clent Stewart -- wouldn't allow a collapse to happen.

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Thomas had logged a total of 26 minutes entering Saturday's game but he played 12 against the Jayhawks (10-5, 1-1), providing a calming influence in addition to his five points. Diarra, not noted for his marksmanship, made all four of his field goals -- four long jump shots -- after halftime. And Stewart may have been the difference, finishing with a career-high 15 points.

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A switch to a 2-3 zone defense in the second half didn't hurt, either.

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The Wildcats trailed 26-18 at the half, mainly because they were unable to harness KU freshman guard Mario Chalmers (game-high 20 points). Wooldridge was happy with the defense -- the Jayhawks connected on 39 percent of their shots -- but he felt his team could do better. And once Martin picked up his fourth foul, when KU led 40-31, the zone did the trick.

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"They spread out the zone and really stretched us," said KU freshman guard Russell Robinson, who added 11 points.

"We became less aggressive."

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As the stops mounted, so did K-State's confidence. Within five minutes, after Stewart made one of two free throws, the Jayhawks only led 45-42.

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All momentum was with the visitors, and Wooldridge re-inserted Martin into the game with 5:35 left. Thirty-nine seconds later, his putback gave the Wildcats a 48-47 lead, if not control of the game. Robinson's three-pointer with 3:55 remaining tied it at 50, but two free throws by Stewart with 3:01 left pushed K-State ahead 52-50.

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The Wildcats never relinquished the lead, although they gave KU, which had won seven straight, plenty of chances in the final minute. But the Jayhawks, forsaking the three-point shot, couldn't convert late; Diarra swatted away Robinson's first drive and the sophomore guard missed the second.

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K-State guard Akeem Wright (four points, 10 rebounds) grabbed the rebound and was fouled. He sank one of two free throws with nine seconds left to not only account for the final margin but to launch a raucous celebration, one in which junior guard Lance Harris shed his shirt and junior forward Serge Afeli repeatedly mugged for the cameras, pointing at the "K-STATE" on his chest.

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Later, as Wooldridge and his players conducted interviews, "K-S-U" chants echoed through throughout Allen Fieldhouse -- a couple hundred fans clad in purple remained to greet their victorious team.

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"Give them credit," said KU coach Bill Self, whose team shot 32 percent from the field. "They came in here and beat us. We can talk about us playing poorly and all of those things, which is accurate, but they had a lot to do with that."

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Wooldridge challenged his team on Thursday and Friday, urging the Wildcats to focus on themselves instead of the opposition. After appearing so "disjointed" -- another of his descriptions -- against Nebraska, the coach wasn't sure how his team might respond.

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K-State responded with its best effort of the season, perhaps of the Wooldridge era.

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"This is a good feeling for me, but it's a limited accomplishment," he said. "I feel good about the direction we've taken. We took a right turn today.

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"A win here doesn't hurt."

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Standing on a set of stairs, he beamed as he basked in the media attention. An older man dressed in a blue Jayhawks shirt descended those same steps moments before, shaking his head. As he left, he uttered aloud a comment on behalf of KU's program:

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"At least we saved Jim Wooldridge's job."

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He was only half-right. By beating KU, the coach's players -- from a star like Martin, to overachievers such as Diarra, Stewart and Thomas -- may have saved Wooldridge's job, perhaps for the time being. At the very least, they have provided Wooldridge with some relief.

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"Hopefully, tonight he can get some sleep," Thomas said.

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