

# Halftime ‘man-check’ message resonates, Pitt tips UC Santa Barbara

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Pitt assistant coach **Dan Cage** had a stern message for his team as the Panthers entered their Petersen Events Center locker room at halftime trailing UC Santa Barbara by six points Wednesday night.

The Panthers hadn’t held a lead since **Terrell Brown**’s layup on the game’s opening possession, and they had allowed the Gauchos to shoot over 50 percent beyond the arc. They were outrebounded, giving up easy looks on the perimeter and failing to get back in transition. No one had reached double figures in scoring. There were seven turnovers.

“The coaches really kind of man-checked us in the locker room at halftime,” redshirt senior **Jonathan Milligan** said. “We came out and accepted the challenge.”

Milligan notched a career-high 14 points as Pitt (1-2) prevailed over the Gauchos, [70-62](#), in a second half that featured nine lead changes. **Jared Wilson-Frame** matched Milligan with 14 points, while **Ryan Luther** added 13 points and 10 rebounds to finish with his second consecutive double-double.

Milligan and Wilson-Frame were asked if any parts of Cage’s halftime speech were press conference appropriate. All they could do was smile.

“We kind of always have to have that sense of urgency,” Milligan said. “People don’t expect us to do well. We know that.”

The Panthers opened the second half on a 12-5 run by way of six quick points from Wilson-Frame and 3-pointers from both Luther and Milligan. From

then on, both teams would trade blows for nearly 13 minutes until a tip-in from Luther off a missed layup provided Pitt a 58-57 advantage.

After a defensive stop, Wilson-Frame attempted a long three from the right arc that clanked hard off the side of the rim. He followed his own shot, however, and snagged the loose ball just before an oncoming defender and finished it off with a second-chance layup.

Then, this happened:



Milligan – who earned the start over **Marcus Carr** – played a facilitator role and accurately delivered the ball to Wilson-Frame in an ideal catch-and-shoot situation. Milligan was a sparkplug all night while taking hard fouls at the rim, diving for loose balls and keeping the Panthers' youth composed down the stretch.

Milligan was widely considered Carr's backup entering the season despite being one of two lettermen to return from Pitt's 2016-17 team. While **Kevin Stallings** admitted fault in subbing Milligan out during the final 10 minutes of the Montana loss, he didn't have any reluctance to play the redshirt senior Wednesday night. Milligan finished with 27 minutes of floor time compared

to Carr's 13.

Milligan and **Khameron Davis** were key in holding UC Santa Barbara guards **Gabe Vincent** and **Max Heidegger** – who led the Gauchos in scoring at the half – to a combined four points on 1-for-13 shooting in the final 20 minutes.

“We’ve been sticking to our principles,” Milligan said. “I think those first couple games we didn’t stick to our defensive principles at all. We really looked at that on film. I think today we stuck the passes, we closed out well and tried to box out well in the second half. I think that’s ultimately what got us the (win) today.”

But Pitt wouldn't have emerged victorious without the efforts of **Parker Stewart**, who hit 5 of 6 free throw attempts within the final 45 seconds to close out the game. On the one he missed, it was Luther's savvy veteran tap-out that kept possession for the Panthers and led to another foul.



Stewart's 12 points and two rebounds were a positive step in the right direction for him. In Pitt's first three games (including exhibition), Stewart shot a combined 3 for 21 from the field and 2 for 15 on 3-point attempts. The slump was almost puzzling considering Stewart's primary strength in high school was his ability to catch-and-shoot, which followed suit with similar comments from Stallings during practice evaluations.

But Stewart's inefficiency hasn't been the only issue. He's visibly struggling with perimeter defense and staying in front of quick guards – Montana's **Michael Oguine**, for example – as they drive to the rim.

Stewart's certainly not there yet, but his efforts against the Gauchos served him in gaining some confidence back nonetheless.

“Parker's another one of those guys where he's a little more difficult to read because he's pretty quiet,” Stallings said. “I feel like I've got a really good relationship with him, but he wants to do well so badly where he starts thinking a little bit or whatever. ...He stepped to the line and made his foul shots, but one of those nights he's going to throw in four or five (shots) and he might be off and running.

“He really is a phenomenal shooter. We just have to keep going until we get him loose.”

Don't be mistaken, though. Pitt's performance Wednesday night wasn't all pretty. The Panthers were outrebounded again by another opponent without a significant size advantage. UC Santa Barbara collected 19 boards on the offensive end, but only totaled 13 second-chance points off of them.

Against any good opponent, the Panthers would have been exposed.

Same goes for the perimeter defense. Yes, the Panthers limited UCSB to 24 percent from the field in the second half, but that was often due to the Gauchos missing uncontested shots rather than having a hand in their face.

Against any good opponent – especially in the ACC – this game wouldn't have been close.

“How we play defensively right now is probably the worst way to play Santa Barbara,” said Stallings. “I could see that Monday night. I'm watching the game film after we lost and I'm thinking, ‘OK. Why?’”

With seven freshmen and 10 of 12 players experiencing their first season at the Division I level, Stallings is trying to walk a fine line in forcing the team to form good habits through experience while still putting them in a position to win.

“So now, I have choices,” he said. “I can throw a press in front of our defense. I can throw a zone in, whatever. It's tempting because you want to win the game and then you start making short-term decisions whereas we need to learn the fundamentals of what we're trying to do before, I don't want to say that I'm bailing them out, but before I try to fix problems for them. ...We started fixing problems (in the second half). When we started fixing problems, they shoot 24 percent.

“That's a much better lesson than me doing something the day before the

game that we could have pulled off that maybe made a difference to protect them and bail them out. ...It's a battle that I fight with a team that's this young."

The past seven days have undoubtedly been brutal. Consecutive losses to Navy and Montana coupled with the Petersen Events Center's lowest attendance total in its 15-year existence yielded a severe low-point of a once storied program. In the grand scheme of things, the Panthers beat *UC Santa Barbara*, a mid-major program that flew cross-country the night before and was coming off a six-win season in its first year with a new coach.

For a program of Pitt's stature, considering this as a positive is almost laughable. But with all of the negativity surrounding the players — through no fault of their own — any small step they can take will be beneficial in the long-term.

"After those first two losses, in practice, it was just hard work and a focus, everybody paying attention, not too much talking unless it was related to what we were doing," said Wilson-Frame. "It was definitely a relief to get this win."

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