

Mueller: Embarrassing opener, empty Pete ... what other lows await?

November 14, 2017

A brutal and sudden sense of reality struck within the Petersen Events Center dome Monday night when **Parker Stewart** clanked a corner 3-point attempt off the side of the rim with 11.5 seconds left in overtime.

This brutal: A Montana team with no one taller than 6-foot-8 in its rotation, with just one senior, with a .500 record in the Big Sky Conference last season, with 14 consecutive losses to Power 5 programs since 2010, would somehow walk off the court a winner, [83-78](#).

This brutal: Pitt's 0-2 for the first time since 1996, having also lost at Navy over the weekend.

This brutal: The game, the Panthers' home opener, drew only 3,102 spectators, an all-time low at the Pete that blew away the previous low of 4,614 last season against Gardner-Webb.

Everybody knew these growing pains were coming in year two of the **Kevin Stallings** era, but to experience them, *to really feel them*, still brought that into a harshly powerful perspective. This Pitt program is likely in for an agonizing six months, while long gone are the glory days of last-second thrillers against elite Division I opponents in front of sellout crowds.

“It's going to take patience. I could have told you that last year,” Stallings said after the loss. “It's going to take patience. We've had to start over so, you know, that's a little bit of what we're dealing with.”

That and more. Pitt lost four senior starters (**Jamel Artis, Michael Young, Sheldon Jeter** and **Chris Jones**), its top returner (**Cameron Johnson**), multiple role pieces (**Corey Manigault, Justice Kithcart, Damon Wilson** and **Rozelle Nix**) and its top recruit (**Aaron Thompson**) following an underperforming 16-17 mark during Stallings' first season. Thus, a complete rebuild was in effect with 13 new players, 11 of whom have no prior Division I experience. **Ryan Luther** was suddenly thrust into a singular leadership role with only two career starts to his credit.

And now, the drastic changes are coming to light. Pitt's season-opening loss over the weekend at Navy – which would then get blown out Sunday, 89-55, by Miami – coupled with the Montana setback, are just the beginning.

“We run out there tonight with three freshmen in the starting lineup and a junior-college player who is playing his second Division I game,” Stallings said. “We’re going to have some growing pains. We just are.”

It's one thing to ask a fan base still fresh off the successes of the **Jamie Dixon** era to remain patient. And it's understandable for this young team to experience bad losses against the likes of Duke, North Carolina and Louisville

while competing in college basketball's top conference.

But Montana? Really?

[#BeatPitt](#)

— Montana Griz BB (@MontanaGrizBB) [9:23 PM - Nov 13, 2017](#)

And here? Really?

The Pete has often been recognized as one of the best college basketball venues in the country. In 2013, *USA Today* ranked it second among the NCAA's top 10 basketball atmospheres, behind only Duke's Cameron Indoor Stadium. Now, Pitt's home opener drew just 1,144 more than Robert Morris' average attendance of 1,958 last season.

Stallings was asked after the game if he was concerned about a lack of support for his program.

“I mean, I don't think about that,” he said. “I support my team. I'm just worried about making my team better, so that's not really something that I've — you know, I hope so. I hope these guys have the support of the fan base, because they certainly deserve it. They're good kids.”



Montana's Michael Oguine puts up two of his 29 points by rolling around Parker Stewart. – AP

There's no doubt the 13 players on Pitt's active roster aren't at fault. That's on the athletic department as a whole. There's also no doubt some bona fide talent is here. Whether it's **Marcus Carr**, **Shamiel Stevenson** or **Jared Wilson-Frame**, Stallings has some young pieces to build on for next season. But for the short-term, he'll need to do everything he can to avoid losing them to transfers.

That will be the hard part.

“My responsibility is to help these guys play as close to their potential as I can get them to play,” he said. “You hope that in doing so, you achieve results that are pleasing to the players mostly, and certainly pleasing to the fans and everybody else that supports the program. ... I can't worry about records or worry about if we're this or if we're that. My concern is helping these guys

grow. At this juncture, helping them maintain some confidence and supporting them so that they know their coaches are firmly planted right there with them and we're going to do the best we can with this thing."

WHAT'S BREWING?

- *DK* had a day (and night) filled with business meetings, so I picked up the Grind. My regular game coverage of Pitt's loss to Montana is [right here](#).
- Outstanding [in-depth work](#) by *Matt Gajtka* on how the Penguins are handling **Tristan Jarry's** arrival into the NHL.
- The second of *Taylor Haase's* [Wheeling Watch](#) has arrived, and it's got prolific Robert Morris alum **Cody Wydo** front and center.

DK SPORTS RADIO

Here's the [livestream](#), and here are our daily [podcasts](#):

STEELERS TODAY

- **Event:** Practice
- **When:** TBA
- **Where:** Rooney Sports Complex
- **Our coverage:** *Lolley*

PENGUINS TODAY

- **Event:** Practice
- **When:** 11 a.m.-noon
- **Where:** PPG Paints Arena
- **Open to fans:** No
- **Our coverage:** *Brown*

RIVERHOUNDS TODAY

- **Event:** Personnel press conference
- **When:** 2 p.m.
- **Where:** Highmark Stadium
- **Our coverage:** *Krysinsky*

MILLER LITE LIVE Qs AT 5

- **Monday:** [Carter on Steelers](#)
- **TODAY:** *Lolley* on Steelers, [entries at 2 p.m.](#)
- **Wednesday:** *Gajtka* on Penguins
- **Thursday:** *Mueller* on Pitt
- **Friday:** *Snyder* on Penn State

DAILY FUN THING

- **Monday:** [Harry Potter sports](#), by *Hong*
- **TODAY:** [Cartoon Canon](#), by *Ullman*
- **Wednesday:** Benstonium, by *Benson*
- **Thursday:** Buried Treasure, by *Wolper*
- **Friday:** Favorites and Likes, by *Haase*

WEEKLY FEATURES

- **Monday:** [Wilkes-Barre Watch](#), by *Haase*
- **TODAY:** [Wheeling Watch](#), by *Haase*
- **Wednesday:** Midweek Reader, by *Lysowski*
- **Thursday:** Matt's Stats, by *Gajtka*
- **Friday:** Friday Insider, by entire staff

PNC STAFF LOCATOR MAP

All home!



OTHER ESSENTIALS

- [Gift subscriptions](#)
- [Our subscription levels](#)
- [Our apps](#)
- [Our advertising kit](#)
- [Our newsletter](#)