

BY JEREMY CURTIS

CINCINNATI – West Virginia and Cincinnati showed just how much football can become a game of inches, but it was the Bearcats who left Nippert Stadium with the only measure that mattered Friday night -- a 24-21 victory.

WVU (7-3, 3-2) turned in a valiant effort against the No. 5-ranked Bearcats, who improved to 10-0 on the season, which marks their best start in school history.

The Mountaineers were in need of a critical Big East win against UC, one that would've easily been the team's signature victory of 2009. The feat inched closer as each minute of the game pressed on, but in the end, the upset bid vanished in front of a sea of Bearcats fans circled around the field, mostly dressed in red, all cheering raucously.

"I've been on both sides of these," said WVU head coach Bill Stewart. "That's not a moral victory."

The play that will likely haunt WVU for quite some time came when UC running back Isaiah Pead reached the football towards the goal line and then fumbled, with 5:26 to go before halftime. WVU nose tackle Chris Neild corralled in the loose ball, which initially appeared to preserve the Mountaineers 14-7 lead.

However, a review by game officials over-turned the call, citing that Pead undisputedly crossed the plane of the goal line, before losing grip of the ball.

Following the referees' reversal, an uproar of cheers resounded for the home team, as UC tied the game, 14-14, dodging an enormous momentum swing for the Mountaineers.

"I really thought he didn't break the plane," Neild declared, noticeably frustrated following the gut-wrenching loss. "I thought I had the fumble."

WVU linebacker J.T. Thomas said, "Of course that was the turning point of the game. We'll never know exactly what happened."

Stewart was a little more politically correct in addressing the game-changing call. "I'm going to save that for the Big East," he said. "They called it like they saw it."

The Bearcats, owning a potent-passing attack ranking near the top of the NCAA, switched up things on offense, this time turning to Pead and his rushing ability. Pead produced a career-high 175 yards on the ground, along with the controversial touchdown.

Tony Pike returned at quarterback for UC and immediately reminded WVU why he was a Heisman contender prior to injuring his non-throwing arm and missing three games. Though Pike only attempted four passes, two went for touchdowns.

Pike's first scoring pass came on his first play from scrimmage since exiting a conference game against South Florida, back on Oct. 15. He hooked up with Armon Binns, just 5:04 into the game, helping put UC up, 7-0.

Pike appeared again early in the third quarter, when the Bearcats needed him to fire the ball into the end zone again and cap off another Zach Collaros-led drive. Pike pinpointed D.J. Woods on a slant route, just beating WVU corner back Brandon Hogan, who broke on the ball one moment too late. The play put UC back up, 21-14.

But WVU battled back.

Mountaineers quarterback Jarrett Brown threw a three-yard touchdown pass to Bradley Starks with just 0:39 left showing on the clock. Brown's pass cut the deficit to 24-21, but WVU still needed a miracle on the ensuing on-sides kick. Josh Lider footed the on-side attempt harmlessly into Binns' chest, ending any hopes of a comeback.

The contest, however, wasn't all decided in those final moments.

The Bearcats had to stage off WVU on an earlier fourth-quarter drive, when the Mountaineers took the football into UC territory, down 21-14. Brown, Noel Devine, Ryan Clarke and Jock Sanders marched the Mountaineers down field, combining to rush for 56 yards on the drive.

But on a third down and nine play from the UC 25-yard line, Sanders was called on to run the ball up the middle and gained just a yard, which set up a fourth down and eight play. Brown passed incomplete, as WVU came away with no points and with 5:23 still showing on the clock.

Stewart explained the third down run with Sanders, saying, "We were going for the win. All we were trying to do was run a basic football play to set it to fourth and five. I'll make the same decision again in that situation."

WVU offensive coordinator Jeff Mullen said, "Coach [Stewart] decided that he wanted to go for it. He let me know that prior to it. That's why we went with the run on third and nine trying to get to a manageable fourth and five instead of having to go for a fourth and ten. Unfortunately, the run that was there all night didn't get in, in that situation."

Like Stewart and Mullen, Brown admitted WVU was in four down territory, at that point of the game. "It was a pretty good call we had on," he said. "But we just didn't execute that [fourth down] play."

Stewart did not feel his defense could stop the Bearcats, so he elected to try to set up the fourth down play intended to score a touchdown. "We hadn't stopped them all night," he said. "I could not go for the field goal at that time."

But the Mountaineers defense did hold UC to a 38-yard field goal on the following drive, which provided the game-deciding three-point cushion for the Bearcats.

Brown finished 17 of 25 for 188 yards and a touchdown, and carried the ball eight times for 34 yards and a touchdown.

Clarke rushed for 60 yards and a touchdown, off of just five carries and Devine contributed 88 yards, off of 25 carries. Starks led all Mountaineers receivers with five catches for 50 yards and a touchdown.

“They gave me everything they had,” Brown said of his teammates. “I’m proud of my guys no matter what happens -- we ride or die together.”