

Men's basketball eliminated from NAIA Championship in tight contest

GLENDALE, Ariz. – The 14th-seeded USK Firebirds battled No. 18 Arizona Christian, the third seed in the Duer Quadrant, to the final shot on Saturday night but fell just short for a 76-74 defeat. The result eliminates USK in the first round of the NAIA Men's Basketball Championship and ends the Firebirds' season with a final record of 23-9.

"It was an awesome game and we had our chances," USK head coach Kevin Williamson said. "It was a game of the 'shoulda-couldas.' We unpredictably missed free throws which kept us from extending leads and being able to pull away further. Just a gritty game that went back-and-forth all night. We had two chances in the final 15 seconds to either tie or win, and both came up just a little short. It was a great game and a packed, loud house. Huge shout-out to our softball team and Fuego the Firebird for showing up and out on the road, we loved it!

"I also want to thank the seniors and this team," Williamson added. "They set the all-time win record for USK basketball and broke many other records while also ultimately raising the standard of this program up another level. I love and appreciate you all for your contributions to this program."

USK's 23-win season and .719 winning percentage both surpass the previous records of 20 and .714 set in the 2022-23 season. The Firebirds have improved their win tallies in each complete season under Williamson, who arrived in San Marcos ahead of the 2019-20 campaign.

Saturday's contest saw thin margins across the box score. Arizona Christian finished with a 49.2% to 45.2% advantage on field goals, which was countered by USK making more three-pointers and winning the turnover battle. The Firebirds finished 11-of-21 at the free throw line while ACU went 8-of-11.

Arizona native Tampa Scott IV enjoyed a successful trip home as he led USK with 18 points on 7-for-12 shooting. Four Firebirds would finish in double figures as Scott was joined by Chris Harper (12 points), Dorian Harris (12) and Maur Tablada (10). Rounding out the starting five was former ACU player Xavier Cooper, who had 11 rebounds, nine points and six assists.

Cooper knocked down an early shot from deep three minutes into the game to give the Firebirds their first lead, which grew to 11-6 a minute later with a jumper by Tablada. Arizona Christian eventually settled into the game and used its home-court advantage to retake the lead at the 12:56 mark. The hosts would stay in front as the half progressed, going up by as much as six with 5:51 left before halftime.

ACU still led 32-29 at the two-minute mark. Tablada and ElJay Gallegos then kicked-off an 8-0 run that gave USK a 37-32 lead at the break. The stretch was started by a three from Tablada that tied the game, followed by a Gallegos jumper that put the Firebirds back in front. Gallegos then grew the advantage on the final play off the first half as he grabbed an offensive rebound and finished the putback through contact with 0.4 seconds left. The guard knocked down the ensuing free throw to send the teams to the locker room with the Firebirds up by five.

USK struggled to open the second half, not scoring for the first three-and-a-half minutes as Arizona Christian retook a two-point lead. The USK drought was broken by a jumper from Scott, who was followed by Cooper knocking down a three. Harris then added a pair of free throws as the Firebirds found themselves back up 44-39 with 15 minutes to play.

The USK lead stayed intact for the next six minutes. Arizona Christian then started to pull away with a 12-2 run that left the home side leading by double digits and prompting a timeout from Williamson at the six-minute mark. The break allowed the Firebirds to start cutting into the lead, but with 2:47 to play ACU still led 70-63. USK's fortunes then changed in the final two minutes as the visitors made three-straight threes. Scott kicked the Firebirds off with a steal and pull-up shot in transition before adding another on the next possession. He was followed by Harper connecting from downtown to see the ACU advantage at 74-72 at 1:12 remaining despite the Firestorm making layups on their two possessions.

Arizona Christian responded out of a timeout with another made basket in the paint before Scott answered again with a jumper that put the score at 76-74 with 37 seconds remaining. Harris then grabbed a steal to give the Firebirds a chance to tie or take the lead, but a Scott jumper and Cooper putback attempt both rimmed out. USK then intentionally fouled to send ACU to the line for a one-and-one with 14 seconds on the clock.

The front end was missed, giving the Firebirds one last look. With no timeouts, USK ran a pick-and-roll with Harris that left the forward open on the left elbow. His jumper missed, but Harris tracked down his own rebound and found Cooper on the wing. The graduate senior got up a three-point attempt that beat the buzzer, but the potential game-winner barely skipped out to end the game.