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Seton Hall's defense slows down Iona

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For the Star-Ledger

Iona received its invitation, but the Pirates were the life of this New Year's Eve party.

Seton Hall capped off the year and its non-conference schedule in style yesterday, handing the highly-touted Gaels a 73-59 defeat before 6,226 at Continental Airlines Arena.

"One of our best wins, not just of this year, but since we've been here," said Seton Hall coach Louis Orr, whose team improved to 8-1 at home (8-3 overall).

With a victory over No. 23 Iowa State in November and a 73-67 loss to No. 20 Kentucky last Friday at Freedom Hall, Iona (7-2) had plenty of big-game experience.

"We knew they weren't going to come in here intimidated," said Pirates junior Grant Billmeier. "We knew it was going to be a real physical game, so we knew we were going to have to play a hard 40 minutes."

And that's exactly what the Pirates did. Seton Hall executed its game plan to perfection, limiting the Gaels' transition opportunities and holding the New York City backcourt trio of Steve Burt Jr., Ricky Soliver and Marvin McCullough in check. The three left-handed guards shot a combined 6-of-18 and scored only 18 points in the first half.

"They didn't play us one-on-one," said Burt, who scored a team-high 18 points on just 7-of-20 shooting. "They played us 5-on-1. Every time (Ricky) or I got the ball, it was a team effort, and they did a great job."

Junior Stan Gaines took the assignment of guarding the speedy 6-1 guard in stride.

"I pride myself on being able to guard anybody, from 5-10 point guards to big men if I need to guard them," said Gaines, who scored nine points and pulled down a career-high 13 rebounds.

But the Pirates' forward was not alone in stopping the nation's third-leading scorer. He received plenty of help from Seton Hall's big men -- Billmeier, Kelly Whitney and sophomore Marcus Cousin.

"Kelly, Grant and Marcus did an excellent job hedging," said junior Jamar Nutter, who sank his first two 3-point attempts and sparked the Pirates' 9-2 start. "Without them, they could have gotten a lot of open shots. It was a team defensive effort."

"Stan did an awesome job on him," Whitney said. "But it was a team effort. You've got to play team defense to stop a person like that."

Whitney also did the job on the offensive end, scoring 12 of his game-high 22 points in the first half as the Pirates rolled out to a 20-5 lead eight minutes into the game.

"We did a really good job of getting Kelly involved early," Orr said. "He got the ball in positions where he did some really good things."

The Gaels, on the other hand, could not find the basket, converting only two field goals in the opening 8:35 and shooting 33 percent (9-of-27) from the field in the first half. They also could not handle the Pirates' pressure, coughing up the ball 12 times before the break.

"They out-toughed us, out-hustled us, and outplayed us," said Ruland, whose team plays at Fresno State on Tuesday.

With Seton Hall's lead trimmed to 45-34, Whitney slammed home his 17th and 18th points, and senior Donald Copeland (17 points) followed with his third 3-pointer as Seton Hall ran off 11 of the next 13 points. Billmeier, who scored a season-high 11, capped off the run with a three-point play that gave Seton Hall its first 20-point lead.

"Grant Billmeier gave us a huge lift," Orr said. "Grant's a vet, he's a pro. He's like a security blanket -- you know what he's going to give you."

Notes: With Big East play opening this week -- Seton Hall plays host to St. John's on Wednesday -- the Pirates have positioned themselves for conference play after posting impressive back-to-back victories over Morgan State and Iona.

"The best confidence builder is to win and to play well," said Orr. "And the last two games we've done that. Playing and winning against a team like Iona, as dangerous and as talented as they are, and as well as they've been playing, (the players) would have to feel good about

themselves."... Seton Hall won the war, but lost the rebound battle to the Gaels, 36-35. It marked the first game the Pirates have been outrebounded since Richmond held a 31-29 advantage on Dec. 1....

The Pirates' pregame meal didn't agree with Jamar Nutter, but you couldn't tell. After returning from the locker room in the first half, Nutter continued his sparkling defensive play as the Pirates held Iona 18 points under its season scoring average. "He saved a couple of baskets, he came ready to play," Orr said of Nutter. "Jamar can help in a lot of different ways. He was on top of his game today."