

San Miguel braces for Ginebra comeback

Written by NOLI CORTEZ

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WINNING MOMENT: Cabagnot frustrates Ginebra fans by sinking this shot against Hatfield last Wednesday.

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MANILA — Alex Cabagnot played hero anew for San Miguel Beer, but knows the feeling is as fleeting as, say, a 14-point fourth quarter lead against a never-say-die team like Ginebra.

It's the main reason the wily playmaker cut short his celebration, focusing at once on today's rematch between the Beermen and the Kings in their PBA Philippine Cup semifinals duel at the Araneta Coliseum.

Cabagnot scored on a right-handed, high-arcing drive against Rudy Hatfield in the last 1.7 seconds as SMB escaped with an 86-84 squeaker over Ginebra at the start of their best-of-seven series last Wednesday.

It marked the third time this conference Cabagnot bailed the Beermen out and this one should be the biggest since it atoned for his earlier turnover and saved the Beermen from imploding after blowing 79-65 lead early in the final quarter.

After celebrating with his teammates, Cabagnot insisted the team can't dwell on it too long, saying: "If we don't get them on Friday this is nothing."

Teammate Jay Washington, who wound up with a game-high 19 points to go with nine rebounds, agreed "Ginebra is such a hard team to put away," the 6-foot-7 do-it-all forward said. "It's so hard to keep them down. I hope we can close it in five or six games, but I don't know.

"If it goes down again to the last play it's going to be a very stressful series."

San Miguel coach Ato Agustin admitted only the late-game breaks decided the game in his team's favor after his relatively taller players got badly outrebounded 48-57, including 12-23 off the offensive glass.

The rebounding discrepancy, plus the fact the Beermen again failed to contain Ginebra's main small men in Mark Caguioa and Willie Miller, who combined for 31 points and led the Kings

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comeback, are things that have to be worked on.

"Gagawa kami ng adjustments, lalo na sa offense nila. Ang dami nilang options. One thing I'm telling my players is, ma-contain lang ng konti ang mga guards nila okay na sa amin," he said.

For his part, coach Jong Uichico summed his team's mindset up by saying: "Must win!"

Cabagnot finished with 15 points and four assists while Sunday Salvacion, Arwind Santos and Dondon Hontiveros chipped in at least 10 points each.

Ginebra center Rico Villanueva had 13 points and forward JC Intal added 10 before suffering a late-third quarter sprain after stepping on the foot of Salvacion. The former Ateneo standout is expected to see action today, as well as forward-center Eric Menk, who has recovered from a strained tendon.

It marked the third straight time Ginebra blew the chance to steal the game and lost a close one to its sister team, the latest defeat coming before hordes of its fans comprising a vast majority of the conference-high 13,200 paying fans who packed the Big Dome.

Miller was the goat in the two previous losses. This time, it was Rudy Hatfield as his passing error with the score tied at 84 led to SMB's final possession in the last 21.5 seconds. After receiving the inbound he immediately made a pass to Caguioa, thinking the latter would make an off-side cut to shake free of Hontiveros. Alas, Caguioa was streaking towards him.

That gave Cabagnot the chance to redeem himself from an earlier miscue, when he got stripped by Mike Cortez from behind. Actually, it was Cabagnot who forged the game's fourth and final deadlock with an eight-foot jumper.

Yet his biggest shot came after first shrugging off Ronald Tubid on a crossover and a pick by Danny Idefonso and then eluding Hatfield's help defense.

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Cabagnot insisted he's just repaying his teammates' trust in him. "The team gives me the trust and confidence to do what I have to do. They're giving me that and I'm paying back," he said.

Washington is also keeping an eye out for pro-Ginebra fans, who give their team additional energy. "If there were 13,000 tonight, there will be 15,000 the next game," he said, before adding what the Beermen should do on their part.

"We'll just have to worry about ourselves and focus on the stretch."