

# Bradley holds off Drake to mark historic return to title game

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Photo by Kayla Johnson

According to senior Darrell Brown, he and classmate Nate Kennell couldn't sleep on Friday evening. Why? School history was at stake the next afternoon.

"We're roommates on the road, so we talked about this last night when we couldn't really sleep and we were getting ready for the game," Brown said.

Come Saturday afternoon, the seniors' lack of sleep was far from evident, as the Braves downed Drake 76-66 to advance to Sunday's Missouri Valley Conference championship game for the second consecutive season. The back-to-back appearances are the first in program history.

"It's pretty awesome," Kennell said, "It's just a credit to our hard work, all the preparation and the years, the off-seasons. It's what we've been working for."



Senior Nate Kennell scored 12 points while fellow senior Darrell Brown scored 25.

While Bradley held the lead for all but a minute of the game, it was far from a cruise-control victory.

After the Braves led by nine at the half and as many as 13 in the first minutes of the second half, the Bulldogs came surging back. Using a 10-0 run, Drake cut the Bradley lead to 52-49 with 11:35 to play, prompting a timeout from Brian Wardle.

Despite the adversity and a re-energized Bulldogs fanbase booming throughout the Enterprise Center, an experienced Braves' huddle remained composed.

“I think that’s when we were the calmest probably of the game,” Wardle said. “We knew we had to come out and execute that next possession, buckle down defensively.”

“All good teams make their runs, and they did,” Brown said. “We stayed calm. Seniors like Nate and Koch [Bar] showed leadership, stayed calm, and I think the younger guys followed.”

Out of the timeout, Bradley's cooler heads prevailed, as they sparked off a 7-0 run to extend the lead back to 59-49. From there, Drake never got back within six points.

In the first half, much of Bradley's offensive prowess could be credited to Brown, who scored 19 points on 6-10 shooting in the frame. But when Brown was held scoreless until under four minutes to play in the second half, Kennell, Bar and junior Elijah Childs stepped up to lead the Braves offense, combining for 21 points in the frame.

"They kind of played more aggressive on their ball screen coverage the second half," Brown said. "I tried to make the right reads and get my teammates involved."

Another key difference in the second half was Bradley's defense on Drake offensive juggernaut, 7-foot sophomore forward Liam Robbins. In the team's first two matchups in the regular season, he averaged 25 points per game.

In the first half, Robbins was dialed in, scoring 12 points and grabbing eight rebounds. In the second half, Bar and sophomore Ari Boya walled up on the big man and held him to seven points on 3-9 shooting. He would foul out with 1:31 left in the game.

"They played really good defense and stuff like that, especially their bigs," Robbins said. "They really made me work for position and stuff like that to get my shots."

Just as Robbins' performance declined in the second half, Bar's peaked. His four-second half points came on a two-handed slam at the 10:09 mark and a finish through a foul at the rim with 5:35 on the clock.

The senior finished with a statline of 10 points, five rebounds, an assist as well as a block, which came against Robbins.

"He's had some really good games for us, but tonight, and then this moment, hit some of the finishes he had at the rim, the and ones," Wardle said. "The defense, too, on Robbins in the second half was tremendous ... It was definitely up there, I would say, in one of his best games ever."

Overall, three other Braves reached double-figures. Brown finished with 25 points, four short of his season-high. Kennell posted 12, 10 of which coming in the second half, and juniors Danya Kingsby and Elijah Childs posted 11 points apiece.

Bradley fans, who have filled sections with red the last two seasons at Arch Madness, received ample credit in the post-game presser.

“Peoria supports Bradley like crazy,” said Kennell, a native of nearby Metamora. “It just makes playing basketball so much more fun, and just being able to celebrate with your friends and your family and everyone around you, it’s really special.”

“I took the Bradley job because I know the passion of Central Illinois and their love for basketball, and I wanted to be around a city that embraced the sport and loved the sport,” Wardle said. “Our fans do that. Our community does that.”

The Braves will square off against the winner of Valparaiso versus Missouri State tomorrow at 1 p.m. in an attempt to become the ninth team to successfully defend a MVC tournament title. The last repeat champion was UNI in 2016.

“We’re just excited to be back,” Brown said. “It’s a blessing. We put in a bunch of work to get here ... It’s all coming together at the right time. Hopefully, we can get this win tomorrow.”