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body

LAWRENCE The first sign something was wrong came 43 days before the end. On a snowy afternoon in early February, No. 8 Kansas was wrapping up an 83-69 victory over West Virginia inside Allen Fieldhouse. The Jayhawks were rolling, moving to 18-5 overall and 9-1 in the Big 12. Coach Bill Self and his young Jayhawks were already starting to dream big.

Then came a possession in the final minute.

On average, there are close to 67 possessions in a college basketball game. For those teams lucky enough to dance in the NCAA Tournament, there will be more than 2,300 in a season. So here was one. West Virginia guard Juwan Staten driving past Frank Mason into the teeth of the Kansas defense.

KU freshman center Joel Embiid, standing on the opposite block, took two steps and exploded straight into the air, contesting Staten's layup.

Embiid grazed the ball and grabbed the rebound, absorbing a quick foul from Staten. His back twisted backward, and immediately something was wrong.

<FZ_1,0,24>Embiid grimaced and reached for his lower back.

"He tweaked his back," Kansas coach Bill Self would say afterward.

Kansas would really never be the same.

The second-seeded Jayhawks' season ended Sunday afternoon with a 60-57 loss to No. 10 Stanford at the Scottrade Center in St. Louis, and one day later, the end was still defined by one unanswerable question: What if Embiid's back had held up?

"He's one of the best players in the country," Kansas freshman Andrew Wiggins said, sitting the locker room after the loss. "If he goes out, obviously that's going to affect the team."

Wiggins, perhaps, was more honest than most.

Most players offered no excuses on Sunday. Even with Embiid on the bench, the Jayhawks had enough to beat a Stanford team that finished 10-8 in the Pac-12. They had played without Embiid for six straight games. It shouldn't have mattered, freshman guard Wayne Selden said.

Perhaps that's right. But the numbers suggest KU was a shell of itself without Embiid anchoring the middle. After Embiid's initial back injury against West Virginia, the Jayhawks finished the season 7-5. His back pain plagued him for the rest of the season. First, when he missed a week of action after a road loss at Kansas State on Feb. 10. And again, when KU revealed that Embiid was suffering from a stress fracture in his lower back, first detected after he re-aggravated the injury in a loss at Oklahoma State on March 13.

In all, Embiid missed six games, and Kansas went just 3-3 in those games. The defense sagged. During the Jayhawks' last five games — against four NCAA Tournament teams — they allowed 77.6 points per game, seven six more than their season average 70.1, according to their website. On Sunday, the Jayhawks pulled together enough stops to handle Stanford, but their interior offense failed them. The Cardinal's length — which included 6-foot-11 center Stefan Nastic and 6-10 forward Dwight Powell — caused fatal problems for KU forwards Jamari Traylor and Perry Ellis, both listed at 6 feet 8.

"The majority of them we missed," Self said. "Length really affected us."

In the aftermath of the loss, it was easy to make the connection: Embiid's 7-foot frame and 63-percent field-goal percentage may have been useful against Stanford's defense.

"I think this team is good with me or without me," Embiid said. "I mean, it's just ... we didn't make shots."

In the weeks leading up to the NCAA Tournament, Embiid's back was one of the most intriguing topics in the country. Self announced March 3 that Embiid would be shut down for the rest of the regular season, and then re-evaluated on March 9, a Sunday. But he was adamant: The injury would not affect the NCAA Tournament.

But Embiid never played again.

On that following Sunday, he headed to Los Angeles for a second opinion from a spine specialist, and Self revealed grim news upon Embiid's his return. Embiid was out indefinitely, most likely until the second weekend of the NCAA Tournament.

In the locker room at the Scottrade Center, Embiid was confident that he could have played this week if Kansas had advanced to the Sweet 16. He added that he could have possibly played this last weekend in St. Louis, but his doctors and the KU training staff ruled against it. He wasn't sure how close he was to playing.

One moment later, he began to tear up as he spoke about his teammates, including senior forward Tarik Black.

"We were so close," Embiid said. "We did everything together, whether on the court or off the court. So I'll miss playing with guys like Tarik. He's like a big brother ... and that's his last year."

Now comes the second question: Wiggins is a near lock to declare for the NBA Draft, but was this Embiid's last year as well? Projected as a top-three pick — and with the back questions lingering — Embiid will now map out his future. He will consult with his family and coaches before deciding whether to leave school early. For now, he has the luxury of time. The deadline for underclassmen to declare for the draft is April 27.

"The future is very bright for him," Black said, "no matter what the decision is that he makes."

In his first college season, Embiid's back couldn't hold up. By Sunday, Kansas' season had crumbled before he could return.

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