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Gruda Makes Presence Felt As Sun Slow Fever

By Ned Griffen

Mohegan - Tammy Sutton-Brown, the Indiana Fever's starting center, ravaged the Connecticut Sun earlier this month when her team won a laugher.

Center Sandrine Gruda hadn't arrived from France yet to play for the Sun.

Gruda was there for Connecticut on Sunday, and in more ways than one. She controlled the interior as the Sun snapped the Fever's 11-game winning streak 67-61 before 6,517 at Mohegan Sun Arena.

"Sandrine was a presence for us today," teammate Asjha Jones said.

Said Erin Phillips: "She was unbelievable."

Gruda had 10 points and a game-high nine rebounds for Connecticut (8-6). But the stats that really stood out were Sutton-Brown's 1-for-3 shooting with six points and four rebounds.

Sutton-Brown made 6 of 11 shots for 14 points with 14 rebounds and five blocks when Indiana embarrassed the Sun 67-53 on July 2.

"Let's just put it this way, the difference in having Gruda at center versus a rookie in Chante Black was big," Fever coach Lin Dunn said. "We should have a field day against a rookie in that first meeting. We knew the challenge would obviously be greater with Gruda because she is a world-class player."

Said Gruda: "(Sutton-Brown) is tough because she posts up pretty hard and she runs the floor a lot. Offensively and defensively, she's going to be there. I think I was ready for that because I know her a little bit, and also because I knew we had to defend hard on those post players."

The Fever's starting frontcourt, Tamika Catchings, Ebony Hoffman and Sutton-Brown, combined for 26 rebounds in the first game against Connecticut.

That trio had 14 rebounds Sunday.

"(Gruda) had every rebound, I swear," Phillips said. "Her presence, her athleticism, she doesn't look like a big body, but she plays big. It's great to have."

The Sun's defense held Indiana to 29 percent shooting from the field (19 of 66).

"They certainly had a little more grit to them than they did in the last game," Hoffman said.

Lindsay Whalen had 15 points, eight rebounds and six assists for Connecticut. Jones added 12 points, five rebounds and four assists.

Katie Douglas and Hoffman both scored 15 for the Fever.

The Sun were on their way to a rout in the second half. Phillips' 3-pointer with 4 minutes, 53 seconds left gave Connecticut a 60-40 lead.

And then the tide turned.

The Sun stopped attacking offensively.

The Fever, which had missed 44 of 58 shots to that point, played with reckless abandon and cut their deficit to 60-56 with 26.8 seconds left.

"We got trigger shy," Jones said. "From there, (Indiana is) going to be able to trap, and that's what they did. They're an aggressive team. If you let them just come at you and trap you, they're going to get the ball."

Connecticut had seven turnovers in the final five minutes. It finished with 25.

"I told our players you're supposed to be happy after every win," Thibault said. "That one was hard to watch. We played so great for long stretches, to have the last seven minutes like that was almost unfathomable, certainly embarrassing. And hopefully it never happens again."

"The fact that (Indiana) got 50 percent of their points off of our turnovers is incredible."

Jones and Phillips (11 points) combined to make seven of eight free throws in the final 22.6 seconds to ice the game.

"We've got to go into the fiery pits of hell in Indiana (on July 19)," Phillips said. "They'll be waiting."