

The hosts of the inaugural Basketball Africa League (BAL), Patriots BBC were on the brink of elimination on Thursday when Aristide Mugabe and Kenneth Gasana propelled them into the semi-finals.

With Ferroviario de Maputo's prolific scorer Alvaro Masa - who averaged a team-high 22.3 points per game in their first three games - struggling to get baskets, it seemed as if the Patriots might have an easy win. But that's not what happened. Instead, the game was a nail-biting contest that could have gone either way.

The Patriots' 73-71 victory wasn't decided until the last two seconds of the game when Gasana made one of his two free-throws, sending the already enthusiastic home crowd into frenzy. The excited fans included Rwanda President Paul Kagame, who attended the game alongside French President Emmanuel Macron.

"It's an honor for us to play in front our president, and, of course, he had a guest. We had to make sure we make him proud," Mugabe said. "There was no way we would disappoint him. It's like your father brought the guest, telling him, 'My kid is doing well' and you disappoint him. We are happy that we made him proud."

The game had four lead changes in the last 10 minutes, but Mugabe and Gasana - the only Patriots to score in double figures - weren't prepared to disappoint an almost sold-out Kigali Arena.

Gasana finished with a game-high 23 points on 7-for-13 shooting, including 4-of-9 from beyond the arc. Mugabe scored only six points off the bench in the first half but saved his best for after intermission. The Patriots captain finished with 18 points on a 6-for-9 performance from the three-point line.

Mugabe said the crowd helped drive his team to victory.

"The energy [in the arena] was high. We can't thank enough our fans. They gave us extra energy when we needed them the most, especially in the last four to five minutes of the game. They kept us in our toes. We are happy that we gave them the joy that they needed."

The Patriots improved their BAL record to 3-1. In the semi-final they will take on US Monastir, a team they lost to in the group stages.

The Rwandan champions knew that stopping Masa would pay dividends.

The Spaniard didn't score a single point in the first 10 minutes and had only five points with five turnovers by the end of the first half. His team trailed 42-39.

Masa did slightly better in the second half. He finished the game with 12 points and nine rebounds but spent considerable time on the bench after picking up his third foul early in the third quarter.

Several of his teammates also lost considerable playing time. Ferroviario big man Adjehi Baru was vital on both ends of the floor, but he too picked his third foul early in the fourth, forcing head coach Milagre Macome to bench him.

Inelcio Chire picked his second technical foul at the start of the fourth and was ejected. And Claudio Muchate, who contributed 11 points and four rebounds, fouled out with two minutes left.

Ferroviario de Maputo had to find alternatives and reserve Hugo Martins came up strong. He sank a three-pointer that pulled his team within one point (54-53) with 2:10 minutes left in the third quarter. Muchate followed soon after with another three-pointer that gave his team a 57-54 lead - their first of the second half.

The Patriots' bench proved vital contributing 31 points Ferroviario's bench tallied only 16. But carelessness with the ball also proved costly: Ferroviario had seven turnovers in the last 10 minutes.

The two BAL semi-finals are scheduled for Saturday, May 29.

Meanwhile, US Monastir became the third team to advance to the Basketball Africa League (BAL) semi-final on Thursday after beating AS Douanes 86-62. Still, the team's leading scorer Majoc James wasn't impressed by the performance.

The Tunisian champions improved to 4-0 ahead of the next round, while AS Douanes not only registered its third straight defeat but saw its BAL journey come to an end.

James propelled US Monastir with a game-high 17 points on a 6-for-8 shooting along with six rebounds. Three other US Monastir players, Christopher Crawford, Radhouane Slimane and Makrem Ben Romdhane, combined for 47 points.

James later admitted that allowing AS Douanes easy points was a concern for a team with BAL title aspirations.

“Congrats to the Senegalese team for making it this far. They fought hard. I am happy with guys, we won the game. But we’ve got a lot of things that we have to work on,” James said.

The Senegalese team displayed a tremendously aggressive defense early in the game that forced US Monastir to miss its first seven three-point attempts.

And when Mamadou Faye came off the bench, things looked even more promising for AS Douanes.

Faye buried his first three shot attempts, including one that helped his team cut a nine-point deficit to just three points (19-16) at the end of the opening quarter.

But US Monastir’s intensity prevented the Senegalese outfit from getting into a good rhythm offensively, head coach Mamadou Gueye later admitted. The team instead relied on individual plays, which initially kept them in the game.

“It was a learning experience for us,” Gueye said. “US Monastir is one of the best teams in the BAL.”

Early in the second quarter, the Tunisians went on a 7-0 run and AS Douanes never challenged after that.

The Monastir-based team stretched its lead to 16 points in the second quarter, and James, Slimane, Ben Romdhane and company headed into the locker room holding a 48-34 lead.

James explained that being careless with the ball wasn’t much of an issue, but they must cut down on turnovers.

“We had 17 turnovers, going to the final four. That’s going to be a problem,” he said.

“We got to take care of the ball. We need to get more angry. The anger we showed today is not enough. I watched Zamalek and the Angolan team [Petro de Luanda], they were more angry playing yesterday. That’s not acceptable. We need to go back and have a conversation about how bad we want it as a team because we need to display it in our next game.”

US Monastir head coach Mounir Ben Slimane admitted that AS Douanes’ successful

drives to the basket can't be allowed going forward. "We have to stop those penetrations," he said.

In the semi-finals, US Monastir will face the winner of the quarterfinal game between Ferroviario de Maputo and host team Patriots BBC.