The Rivers Hoopers of Nigeria narrowly avoided a blowout defeat on Saturday night, falling 63-57 to AS Douanes of Niger in a BAL Playoffs matchup.

Despite trailing by as many as 22 points at the end of the third quarter, a spirited performance from the Hoopers' bench forced AS Douanes to sweat out the victory.

The Nigerian champions, who dominated the 2024 Sahara Conference with a 4-2 record, looked unrecognizable in the early going. They struggled to keep pace with AS Douanes' fast-paced offense and were plagued by poor shooting, particularly in the third quarter where they managed just one successful field goal out of 13 attempts.

Faced with a daunting deficit, Hoopers' head coach Ogoh Odaudu made a bold decision to bench his starters heading into the final period. This gamble paid off as the reserves sparked a 14-0 run, cutting the lead to just four points with under 30 seconds remaining.

AS Douanes, rattled by the unexpected comeback attempt, were forced to bring their starters back into the game to secure the win.

"We can't get complacent," admitted AS Douanes forward Madut Akec. "If we are up by that much we should be locked in; continue to get stops and not just get lazy on defense."

While the comeback fell short, the Hoopers' resilience is a positive takeaway. However, their struggles with turnovers (22 in the first three quarters) and containing AS Douanes' offense throughout most of the game will be areas they need to address moving forward.

Both teams now head to the BAL Quarter-Finals with identical 4-3 records.