

By Michelle Smith

SPOKANE, WASH. – It was a sister act for the Stanford Cardinal in the Sweet 16. And the way Nnemkadi and Chiney Ogwumike – not to mention coach Tara VanDerveer and senior Kayla Pedersen – were able to laugh and smile after the game, everybody was good with that.

Junior forward Nnemkadi Ogwumike led the Cardinal with 19 points and sister Chiney added 16 as Stanford survived a start-to-finish battle with North Carolina and won 72-65 to advance to the Elite Eight of the NCAA Tournament.

Stanford needed to score seven straight points in the final two minutes to nail down the win and earn a trip to the regional finals where the Cardinal (32-2) will face Gonzaga on Monday night.

The Cardinal are playing for their fourth straight trip to the Final Four.

VanDerveer called it a “classic survive and advance” kind of game against a tough, big Tar Heels team who pushed Stanford from beginning to end. North Carolina was only the second team to out-rebound the Cardinal all season.

And nobody played a bigger role in the hard-fought victory than Stanford’s super sisters.

Nnemkadi Ogwumike scored 12 big second-half points for the Cardinal after struggling in the first half to find her offensive rhythm.

In a game that featured 12 ties and nine lead changes, every one of those points proved key for the Cardinal.

Chiney, meanwhile, came up with 10 rebounds to go with her 16 points for her 10th double-double of the season to lead the team.

In fact, Chiney scored a pair of late baskets in the paint that broke a 65-65 tie and put Stanford ahead for good.

She scored the first on a runner to give Stanford a 67-65 lead with 1:57 to go.

On the second of those baskets, she grabbed a missed shot by Nnemkadi, scored on the put-back and drew the foul, sliding to the floor on her knees.

Nnemkadi said she didn’t realize her sister had scored until she saw her on the floor. “Honestly, that was an awesome play we ran and I was really sorry that I couldn’t make that shot,” Nnemkadi said. “I was thinking that I should have used my left hand, but when I turned around, I saw she got the rebound.

“I wasn’t surprised at all. That’s just kind of characteristic of her. She’s very aggressive and relentless and she does a really good job of firing the team up.” Nnemkadi said she considers her freshman sister a “junior out there.”

“She knows what she’s doing and she knows how to get involved in any way possible,” Nnemkadi said. “That was just a really exciting play and I think that really turned the game around.”

VanDerveer called Chiney a “warrior”.

“There were some real big bodies, some real strong, aggressive, experienced players and Chiney battled,” VanDerveer said. “And Nneka had a great second half. We struggled a little bit in the first half, but I thought Nneka made some real big plays for us.”

North Carolina coach Sylvia Hatchell, who has known both Ogwumike sisters through their high school recruiting process, paid her respects to the players that helped to end her team’s season at 28-9.

“They are both incredible athletes,” Hatchell said. “Stanford is fortunate to have even just one of them, but with both of them they, they are going to win a lot of games because they are just so athletic and intelligent and skilled.

“It’s just so hard to keep them off the boards. Even when you box them out, they are just everywhere. And they can intimidate on defense too with how athletic they are. I think they probably caused some of those turnovers in how quick they are. In my book, they are both All-Americans.”