

By Michelle Smith

SPOKANE, Wash. – You could say that Stanford was in the zone Monday night. The Cardinal dropped into a zone defense in the second half of the NCAA Regional Final against Gonzaga, and that defensive strategy paved the way for an 83-60 win and a fourth consecutive trip to the Final Four.

The four straight trips to the Final Four is a first in the storied history of the Stanford program, the Cardinal seniors completing the task on the same Spokane Arena court where they did it as freshmen back in 2008.

And much of the credit goes to a change in the usual gameplan.

Stanford went away from its favored person-to-person defensive look to a zone to combat the heroics of Gonzaga star guard Courtney Vandersloot, who had 21 points at halftime. Stanford led 47-38 at the half and the Bulldogs remained within striking distance.

“She was keeping her team in the game,” said Stanford senior Jeanette Pohlen.

The Cardinal had done their share on the offensive end – Nneka and Chiney Ogwumike were dominating the boards and the scoreboard – Pohlen was hitting from the perimeter and scoring was coming from all over the roster.

But defensively, it was time to shore things up, said coach Tara VanDerveer.

The team had walked through the zone at practice earlier in the day. And after Vandersloot’s hot first half, it was time to put it into play.

“The basket got really big for her,” said Cardinal coach Tara VanDerveer, named as the WBCA’s Division I coach of the year on Monday. “She’s just a great shooter and we had to do something different.”

VanDerveer said her staff convinced her zone was the way to go.

“I said, ‘All right, let’s look at it’. It was their ball first possession and I said we’d stay in it as long as they aren’t bombing us out of it. And we were able to stay in it the whole second half.”

Gonzaga struggled mightily in the second half, hitting just 8 of 34 attempts from the floor (23.5 percent). The more than 11,600 people in the Arena, most of whom where there to cheer for the hometown Bulldogs, got quiet.

And, most importantly, Vandersloot wasn’t getting good looks at the basket and she cooled considerably. She went 1 for 7 from the floor in the second half and finished with 25 points – only four points in the second half.

“I wasn’t getting the shot attempts, the looks that I was in the first half,” Vandersloot said. “They are long in there and usually we have such a dynamic offense...but our shots weren’t dropping and they cover a lot of ground with that zone. It’s a tough defense.”

But the Cardinal also crashed the boards – finishing with a 49-25 advantage and kept Gonzaga out of its transition game. In addition to their 38 combined points, the Ogwumike sisters joined forces for 26 rebounds.

“We really owned the glass tonight,” Pohlen said.

Gonzaga coach Kelly Graves paid his respects to the Cardinal.

“With a zone, you try to pick it the best you can, but it’s difficult to get a point guard to be able to get inside of it and penetrate,” Graves said. “So it just kind of snowballed and we couldn’t make stops at the other end and when we’re not out in

transition, you take a bit away from us. That's what happened. So I give them credit. They did a great job in that zone."

VanDerveer said her team probably played a zone only "six of seven percent of the time this year."

"We're not really a zone team," VanDerveer said.

But in the zone...that's a different matter.