

Johnson shines in Big Apple spotlight

By Dana O'Neil
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NEW YORK -- To better understand what it's like to play in Madison Square Garden, [Wesley Johnson](#) went to the perfect source.

He asked Gerry McNamara for a little insight. The same McNamara who turned the famed arena into a Scranton high school pep rally during the Orange's unforgettable sprint to a 2006 Big East tournament title.

Now a graduate assistant on the Syracuse bench, McNamara offered simple advice.

"He told me, 'When the lights go up, you'll know it,'" Johnson said.

And now everyone else will know Johnson. The Syracuse junior lived a dream as old as the city itself: the unknown talent stepping into the Big Apple spotlight and becoming an overnight sensation.

Johnson scored 25 points and tacked on eight rebounds, carrying Syracuse to an 87-71 win over No. 4 North Carolina that was as stunning as it was dominant.

Rumors of the Orange's demise after losing three guys to the NBA early are apparently greatly exaggerated, as was the hand-wringing over the loss to Division II Le Moyne in a preseason game.

The Orange looked so efficient on offense and gruesomely tough on defense, they more resembled a team playing in March than in mid-November. North Carolina, a squad that looked pretty impressive dismantling Ohio State for 38 minutes the night before, got all but run out of the gym, digging a trench by opening the second half on the wrong end of a 22-1 run.

A late Tar Heels rally, which cut it to eight, was heroic but short-lived. In two minutes, SU was back up 14 and coasting to a victory.

"We got our tails beat by a very good basketball team," UNC coach Roy Williams said. "I would hate to play that non-Division I team [Le Moyne] on a regular basis if they are better than Syracuse."

The doubting Thomases indeed have received their comeuppance. Syracuse not only has restored itself as the best team in New York (sorry, Siena) but certainly has elevated itself to the top of the Big East.

And the difference is Johnson.



Against UNC, Johnson led the Orange in points (25), boards (8) and 3-pointers (4).

In two games in New York, he scored 42 points and pulled in 19 rebounds, earning most outstanding player honors for the mini-tourney and allowing his coach a moment to gloat.

"I told you so," Jim Boeheim said. "What have I been saying? I told you so. Have I ever lied about a player?"

True enough, Boeheim had been touting Johnson for the past year. But the former Iowa State player was not allowed to play in games because of NCAA transfer rules, so no one outside the program had actually seen him play. He was like an urban legend or a tall tale, the double-top-secret mystery player who was rumored to be eating up guys in practice. The one who made assistant coach Rob Murphy say, "If we had him last year, we're a Final Four team with a chance to win it."

Only problem was, who the hell was Wes Johnson?

Coming out of tiny Corsicana, Texas, Johnson wasn't under the radar. He was off the radar. A 6-2 guard, he was just another guy on the court, a maybe two-star prospect who had just one offer -- to Louisiana-Monroe -- and decided to go to prep school to boost his profile. After a brief stay at the Patterson School in North Carolina and a year at Eldon Academy in Michigan, he managed to score a scholarship to Iowa State.

"He was really under-recruited, just a late bloomer," Boeheim said.

Like the classic understudy waiting in the wings, Johnson showed flashes at ISU of what he could become. A Big 12 all-freshman selection, he averaged 12.3 points and 7.9 rebounds his first season but was slowed by an ankle injury as a sophomore.

During that frustrating season, Johnson said, his relationship with coach Greg McDermott deteriorated and he decided to transfer.

And that's where this rags-to-riches story finds its pixie dust and fairy godmothers. The summer before he transferred, Johnson went to stay with his brother, Craig Carroll, who lives in Detroit. Murphy, who spent three years as a high school coach there, started getting calls from people.

"They kept telling me, 'You have to see this kid, he's really good,'" Murphy recalled.

And because those same people told Johnson they could trust Murphy, when the Syracuse assistant called, Johnson listened.

He decided to visit campus and immediately liked what he saw.

Murphy, meantime, was working on Boeheim. In his 34 years at Syracuse, the coach has been loath to take transfers, always figuring there's a reason a kid is looking to leave a school.



It was a long wait for Johnson after transferring from Iowa State. It seems well worth it at this point.

Here comes the pixie dust: Boeheim attended an event at nearby Turning Stone casino and ran into McDermott. The Iowa State coach didn't have a bad thing to say about Johnson and assured Boeheim he was a good kid.

Forty-eight hours after Johnson visited Syracuse, he decided to cancel visits to Ohio State, Pitt and West Virginia and told Murphy he would play for the Orange.

"I had a feeling Paul [Harris], Eric [Devendorf] and Jonny [Flynn] would leave after last year," Boeheim said. "So I knew we would need him."

What no one knew, or at least no one outside the Syracuse coaching staff, was just how good Johnson was. The 6-2 scrawny kid has grown into a 6-7 monster who can break ankles with a crossover and drain a 3 with ease.

Against North Carolina, Boeheim switched Johnson to the 4, and the Heels were rendered helpless. He sank 10-of-17 from the floor, including four 3-pointers, over players who simply didn't have the speed or talent to keep up with him.

It was exactly the sort of night Johnson envisioned when he spoke with McNamara. Some kids might be overwhelmed by the grandiosity of such a stage, but soft-spoken Johnson welcomed the full spotlight.

"This is Madison Square Garden," Johnson said simply when asked about making such a (near) Broadway debut, "a chance to play the defending national champions. Of course I thought about it."

And just as McNamara said, when the lights went on, Johnson knew it and became an overnight sensation.

There should be a name for a story like this.

"A Star Is Born"?

Is that taken?

Dana O'Neil covers college basketball for ESPN.com and can be reached at espsoneil@live.com.