

# Johnson knew he needed to step up, and did

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Created 11/20/2009 - 23:33

NEW YORK—Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim says he's known Wesley Johnson was a special talent from the first time he saw him play.



Wesley Johnson introduced himself to the Syracuse faithful with 25 points against UNC.

But it was not until Johnson, a 6-7 transfer from Iowa State, lit up Madison Square Garden the last two nights that the rest of the country got acquainted with his singular talent as well.

Johnson scored 25 points Friday night to lead Syracuse to a stunningly lopsided 87-71 victory over previously unbeaten North Carolina to win the 2K Sports Classic.

That came one night after he had 17 points, 11 rebounds and six blocks in a 95-73 semifinal victory over California. Those efforts earned him the tournament MVP award.

Leading an effort that Boeheim called his team's best ever at Madison Square Garden — especially in a second half that saw the Orange outscore the Tar Heels, 50-32 — Johnson

shot 10 of 17 from the field, 4 of 8 from 3-point range, pulled down eight rebounds and handed out two assists.

"I was feeling it from the get-go," Johnson said.

Under normal circumstances, Boeheim said Johnson "is very patient. He doesn't force things. In a lot of scrimmages, he'll take the fifth or sixth fewest number of shots."

But the occasion Friday night — against the defending national champs on national television at an arena many consider the mecca of the sport — demanded something more, and Johnson delivered in a game that made the 4-0 Orange's loss to LeMoyne in an exhibition game that much more difficult to understand.

"This was the most aggressive I've seen him," Boeheim said.

"I think it was a must that I step up," said Johnson, who scored 14 of his points in an early run that gave the Orange a 31-22 lead. "I knew I would have to be a little more aggressive than I had been in the first three games."

Johnson is only the fourth transfer at Syracuse in his 34 years at the school. Boeheim said an exception was made for him "because I felt that Paul (Harris) and Eric (Devendorf) were going to leave (after last season) if they had good years."

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Johnson's credentials were never in question. He had earned a spot on the Big 12 all-rookie team as a freshman before falling out of favor with Iowa State coach Greg McDermott, which led to his decision to transfer.

But not even Boeheim knew how good Johnson was before he actually saw him play in practice last fall.

"It didn't take me more than a second or two," Boeheim said. "We had one early scrimmage in which he went 15 for 17 (from the field). When we took him, we knew he was pretty good. But we didn't know at the time how good he was."

After two magical nights at the Garden, the rest of the college basketball can now say the same thing.

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