

Pitt Surviving With Five New Starters

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — None of the five players Pittsburgh started in the NCAA tournament regional final last March — the one the Panthers lost in heart-wrenching fashion to Scottie Reynolds' dramatic drive — was around for Monday's CBE Classic semifinal against Wichita State.

Well, technically, one was. Guard Jermaine Dixon was on the bench in his warmups, but didn't set foot on the Sprint Center floor; he's still recovering, slightly behind schedule, from a broken foot from last summer. All he could do was watch the five players who had combined for one start last season try to stay unbeaten.

Pitt did, without him. And without sixth man Gilbert Brown, out for academic reasons until the end of the fall semester but one of the scant returning contributors from the 31-5 season that briefly saw Pitt ranked No. 1. It goes without saying that Pitt also did it without DeJuan Blair, Sam Young, Levance Fields and Tyrell Biggs, too. The total career starts for the rest of the roster as the season began was ... one. (Junior center Gary McGhee, early last season when Blair's knee swelled up.)

Five games in, it hasn't mattered, and even after Pitt lost for the first time this season in Tuesday's final — to third-ranked Texas in a game it led early in the second half — the Panthers and coach Jamie Dixon should feel good about how they are managing in the season of transition. Particularly in how the transition has included shifting from a frontcourt-dominated team to one reliant on its backcourt.

"People will be a little bit surprised by the character of some of the guys who didn't play last year, or who didn't play a lot last year," the coach said, praising the effort the newcomers made in the 68-55 win over a bigger, active Wichita State team, the strongest competition to that point in the young season.

"I'm really happy for our guys," Jamie Dixon said. "We didn't play well, but we

played hard."

Pitt actually did play well in stretches, and the reasons were the waves of guards Dixon used. Sophomore Ashton Gibbs — who had played last summer for Dixon on the U.S. under-19 world championship team in New Zealand — had taken the lead role with consecutive 20-point games in the previous two wins, but Wichita State took him out defensively much of the night. Up stepped Travon Woodall, a 5-foot-11 red-shirt freshman who was injured nearly all of last season; he broke out with 19 points, five assists, four steals and six rebounds. He sparked the aggressive pressure defense and played a big role in forcing Wichita State's 24 turnovers and in holding it for long stretches without a basket or even a point.

Chase Adams, a senior transfer from Centenary, also keyed the defense and managed key baskets at critical times. Brad Wanamaker, who played little last season, was an all-around presence. And Gibbs heated up at the end as Pitt pulled away and finished with 18 points, taking his scoring average after four games to 16.5 a game, just 12 more than he did as a freshman a year ago while playing 10 minutes a game off the bench.

Pitt played three guards most of the game, except when they were playing four. Whatever combination was there, so was the defense that has been a Pitt trademark since the Ben Howland days; it make every possession a chore for Wichita State, despite being outsized inside. In its 4-0 start, Pitt did not allow an opponent to score more than 60 points or shoot as much as 43 percent.

"Man, that is a good, good team," marveled Wichita State coach Gregg Marshall, who kept using football terms to describe Pitt: "They kept the chains moving."

Plus, he added, "When they get [Jermaine] Dixon back, they're gonna be pretty good."

When that will happen is up in the air, since original projections put him back in the lineup for this very tournament. The solid play so far from the rest of the guards — who, among other things, helped keep the rebounding deficit to two — gives Jamie Dixon reason for optimism. "We're thankful that we have a little bit of depth there," he said.

That depth wasn't enough against Texas, which won 78-62 and held Gibbs, Woodall and Adams in check (20 points on 7-for-25 shooting combined).. But even with a loss — their first November defeat overall since 2001, ending a 38-game streak — Pitt has shown signs that with the rebuilding they had to do from last season, they managed to do a little reloading.