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Plumlee's big night could mean big things

By Eamonn Brennan

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- [Kyle Singler](#) and [Nolan Smith](#) are back. [Kyrie Irving](#), perhaps the best point guard prospect in the country, has arrived. Your backcourt is loaded, your coach is a legend, your program is one of the best in college sports, and seven months ago, you won a national title.

What else do you need to know?

That kind of talent doesn't exactly lend itself to doubts. There's a reason, after all, the Blue Devils are the No. 1 team in the country, not to mention any rational observer's odds-on favorite to win the national title. They're really, really good. Breaking news, right?

Despite all that, the Dukies still came with qualifiers attached, the biggest of which was this: Which big man would step up? Could Duke replace the rebounding -- especially the ever-crucial offensive rebounding -- it lost when center Brian Zoubek and forward Lance Thomas graduated this spring? If so, who would it be? And if not, could the Blue Devils, even with all that perimeter talent, dominate as effortlessly as everyone expected?

There's still plenty of season left, and plenty of time to test the theory, but for now, Duke looks like it found an answer. His name is [Mason Plumlee](#).

"What he did tonight was huge," Singler said. "He was just huge for us when we needed it most."

Huge is one word for Plumlee's performance Monday night. Dominant is another. The sophomore scored 25 points on 12-of-15 from the field and added 12 rebounds and five blocks in a performance that powered Duke past a scrappy Marquette squad 82-77.

The Golden Eagles were even better than advertised, fighting off an early Duke run and pulling even at 53-53 with 11:21 left in the second half. That's when -- and if you thought I'd be writing these words in a Duke recap this early in the season, I would like to hire you as my personal financial adviser, because you can see into the future -- Mason Plumlee took over.

With just less than 11 minutes remaining, the 6-foot-10 forward grabbed an offensive rebound and finished for a three-point play. On the next possession, Plumlee grabbed another offensive board and -- in classic "get a rebound and find an open shooter immediately" Zoubekian fashion -- found Smith for an open look that the senior guard promptly drained. At the 9:24 mark, an Irving steal led to a thunderous breakaway Plumlee dunk. At 8:46, Plumlee worked his way inside for another bucket.



Mason Plumlee seemingly did it all Monday: 25 points, 12 rebounds and five blocks against Marquette.

Three minutes after Marquette tied up the game, Plumlee had almost singlehandedly built Duke's sudden 66-57 lead. Marquette would never get so close again.

It was an impressive performance in its own right, but the larger implications are the real story. This season's Duke squad is a much different team than the last one -- more guard-oriented, more up-tempo, less methodical in the half-court offense -- but no matter how free-flowing a team's style, it's hard to be a national title favorite if you can't lock down the glass. That's why Plumlee's 12 rebounds, six of which came on the offensive end, mean so much to Duke.

They also mean a lot to Plumlee, a prospective lottery pick who arrived in Durham last summer with loads of hype attached but failed to contribute much once Mike Krzyzewski narrowed his rotation in the team's 2009-10 stretch run. If Plumlee couldn't, at the very least, cut into Zoubek's minutes, how good was he, really?

"I'm so proud of him and so happy for him," said [Miles Plumlee](#), Mason's older brother, after the game. "I know what he's capable of, we see what he can do in practice, and it was great for him to show it in the game."

The Blue Devils didn't seem all that surprised by the younger Plumlee's performance, but that doesn't mean they weren't thrilled.

"Mason is a really talented basketball player," Singler said. "Late in the game, he just dominated on both ends of the floor. If he can do that, he can get some confidence, and he can keep that sort of thing going."

"We're still a work in progress," Singler said. "But I think we already have some good things happening, and now we just need to keep it up."

Translation: If Mason Plumlee is this good -- and there's still plenty of basketball to be played before we can definitively make that statement -- then Duke could be even better than we realized. That is a scary thought.

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