

New pieces fuel improved Duke



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KANSAS CITY

Less than 10 minutes before the start of the game against the top-ranked team in the nation, **Kansas State** coach Frank Martin stood in front of the chalkboard with each of his players in the locker room fixated squarely on him.

"All this is, is a Big 12 game," Martin said. "It's no different. No different than Missouri or Kansas or any of those teams. That's all it is."

Many of the players — including Kansas

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State's leader and star guard Jacob Pullen — shook their heads in agreement.

Forty minutes later, they came to terms with the fact that this **Duke** team *is* different.

This was a chance for the Blue Devils — the new and, yes, improved 2011-12 edition of the Dukies — to make it clear that it's them and then there's everyone else.

With a win against the No. 4 team in the nation in a hostile environment filled to capacity with fans soaked in purple, it was Duke's opportunity to re-establish itself.

It didn't take long to witness this is clearly a more intimidating and dangerous team than last year's version that clipped the nets in Indianapolis to win the national title.

No disrespect meant to last year's point guard Jon Scheyer, but freshman Kyrie Irving is an upgrade at that spot.

A significant one.

"He's special," Martin said after watching Irving attack and finish with 17 points, six assists and five rebounds.

Kyle Singler and Nolan Smith are both a year older, a pair of All-American candidates who already have a ring on their finger.

And Mason Plumlee's production is beginning to match his potential. Then, toss in a pair of

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knock-down shooters with Seth Curry and Andre Dawkins, and you've got a team that doesn't have many holes.

"It's pick your poison," admitted Pullen after making 1-of-12 shots from the field and finishing with just four points in the 82-68 loss. "They're No. 1 for a reason."

Kansas State never truly threatened after the first 10 minutes or so. With the top spot on the line after No. 2 Michigan State had lost earlier Tuesday to unranked UConn, the Wildcats had an opportunity to achieve their first No. 1 ranking in more than 50 years.

But Duke put on an offensive clinic.

"Definitely better than I thought," Smith said. "I thought it was going to come down to the wire, but we manned up and responded."

Smith and Irving shared team-high honors with 17 points apiece, but it was the frosh who walked off the court with the MVP trophy.

"He deserved it," Smith said.

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The scary part is that Irving is just five games into his college career — and also five games into his role as a full-time point guard.

"He's still developing as a point guard," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said after the win.

"Last year, I was a two-guard most of the game," Irving said. "I really didn't play the point much."

Seriously?

The New Jersey native looks as though he's been playing the position his entire life as he pushes the ball with ease and slices through a Kansas State defense that has been known to suffocate opponents.

But even more impressive was the defensive effort that Irving — with some help — put on Pullen.

Shortly before Smith and Irving (the two room together on the road) turned off their lights early Tuesday morning, they talked about who would be given the nod to try and contain Pullen — a preseason first team All-American.

"I told him I had Jake," said Smith, who became tight with Pullen this past summer while playing for a college select team that went up against the U.S. World Championship team.

But hours later, Coach K delivered the

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somewhat surprising news.

The young frosh would be given the task of trying to contain K-State's potent scorer.

"My head dropped," Smith admitted. "I wanted to guard him bad, but I also knew he (Irving) had him."

Pullen wound up having one of the worst games of his career, settling for perimeter shots (1-of-8 from beyond the arc) instead of attacking the basket.

He was still upbeat following the loss.

"We'll be OK," he said.

He's right. His Wildcats should be just fine this season — against Kansas, Missouri and the rest of the Big 12.

But even Martin realized after the game that his pre-game attempt to sell Duke in the same breath as rival KU or Missouri doesn't fly.

"They knocked the living piss out of us," he

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said. "If there's one better, I don't want to play them."

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