

Syracuse bigger and better than last season



by Jeff Goodman

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NEW YORK - Jim Boeheim watched Jonny Flynn depart early and become the No. 6 pick in this past June's NBA draft. Fellow starters Paul Harris and Eric Devendorf also left — or were nudged out — early.

It sounds insane, but this is clearly an upgrade over last season's Syracuse edition.

That's not to say the Orange are Final Four caliber, but they clearly belong in the conversation among the likes of West Virginia and Villanova — the preseason Big East co-favorites — after dominating No. 6 North Carolina in an 87-71 win at Madison Square Garden on Friday night.

This group — one with Iowa State transfer Wesley Johnson and the point-guard duo of Scoop Jardine and Brandon Triche — is vastly superior on defense.

"We're bigger than last year," Boeheim said after the victory.

But that's not the half of it.

These guys actually *want* to defend and are far more cerebral than their predecessors.

They challenge virtually every pass and shot.

The 2-3 zone is extremely difficult to score against, especially for a North Carolina team that isn't an offensive juggernaut and doesn't feature many perimeter weapons.

It was the most exciting game of the young college basketball season, and it took place in front of more than 15,000 rabid fans who saw two long and athletic teams getting up and down the floor.

Syracuse jumped out quickly, but the Tar Heels fought back and took a two-point lead into the break.

"That's when Coach told me I needed to be more aggressive," 'Cuse big man Arinze Onuaku said. "So I told the guys to get me the ball."

They did — and strength easily won out over length as he scored 13 of his 15 in the second half and dominated in the paint.

Onuaku and the Orange came out on a 22-3 run that virtually put the game away.

"That second half is about as bad as you can play," North Carolina coach Roy Williams said.

The guy who has spearheaded the Syracuse revival is Johnson, an unheralded recruit (I saw his Dallas Mustangs team play at least a half-dozen teams and don't remember him at all) coming out of Texas who ended up bouncing around to two prep schools before eventually landing at Iowa State, where he averaged 12.3 points and 7.9 rebounds as a freshman.

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Wesley Johnson (shooting against Carolina) has been praised by Jim Boeheim for being a nice person, but he showed off his nice game in New York. (Jim McIsaac / Getty Images)

After an injury-hampered sophomore campaign, Johnson decided to transfer and was courted by numerous high-major programs in search of a mid-year transfer.

Syracuse assistant Rob Murphy had seen Johnson play with the Mustangs a few years back when he was a 6-foot-2 shooting guard. Both have Detroit roots, and Murphy asked around about Johnson, now grown to 6-foot-7, who was disgruntled with his role in Ames, Iowa.

After receiving positive feedback, he brought the idea to Boeheim, who has taken four transfers in his 33-year career.

It was rejected.

Murphy tried again and persuaded Boeheim to take a chance, largely because the Orange head man had a strong suspicion he'd be losing a couple of guys early off last season's team.

"He's the nicest kid I've ever recruited," Boeheim

said. "He's the nicest kid I've ever been around."

Johnson has also been all the rave of Boeheim since he first laid eyes on him.

"I told you," Boeheim said. "Did I lie? People think I was just talking, but look at my record talking about players. He's going to get a lot better, too."

Johnson finished with 25 points and grabbed eight rebounds to win the Coaches vs. Cancer MVP.

"It's weird," Johnson said of his sudden rise from anonymity. "The road's been crazy."

Johnson hardly did it alone. There were contributions all the way around on this one, from Andy Rautins (11 points, seven boards and seven assists) to the dominance of Onuaku (15 points, seven rebounds) against the seemingly endless length of the Tar Heels.

Jardine, who has come a long way in his floor game, and Triche combined for 17 points and six assists. Kris Joseph came off the bench to knock down a couple of critical three-pointers.

Near the conclusion of the game, the partisan Syracuse crowd began the "overrated" chants.

Let's not get carried away.

The Tar Heels may officially be the *defending*

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national champs, but Boeheim and the rest of the team are well aware this wasn't even remotely close to the same team that cut down the nets last April.

"You have to understand, that's not the national championship team," Boeheim said. "If that team was here, it would be a different story."

But that team is long gone — and as I've documented before, this one doesn't have the look and feel of a Final Four club.

Point guard Larry Drew II had twice as many turnovers as points (six to three), the Tar Heels shot 4-for-16 from beyond the arc and when they were down 19 points, the game was over, because North Carolina doesn't have anyone to put the team on his back and dominate from the wing spot.

Now, those unrealistic North Carolina fans may finally begin to put those rose-colored glasses in the drawer and realize this team still has a long way to go on a road that may not take them to Indianapolis.

Also, doing some rethinking, those fans who had counted Syracuse out.

"Now a lot of people know we mean business," Johnson said.

The Orange certainly did take care of some on Friday night.

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