



Seth Davis>INSIDE COLLEGE BASKETBALL

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Retooled Syracuse will go as far as the once-reluctant Johnson leads

Story Highlights

A more aggressive Wesley Johnson leads Syracuse to the 2K Sports Classic title

The Iowa State transfer got hot early and torched North Carolina for 25 points
Orange coach Jim Boeheim already concedes Johnson will be a high NBA draft pick

Three weeks ago, Syracuse assistant coach **Rob Murphy** was looking over the statistics from the Orange's first week of practice when he noticed that **Wesley Johnson**, the team's promising 6-foot-7 transfer from Iowa State, had taken just three shots one day and two shots the next.

"I'm talking about in the whole practice," Murphy said. During a heart-to-heart talk in the basement of Murphy's house later that night, he chastised Johnson for being so passive. "I know you're a nice kid," Murphy said, "but you took two shots in our last practice. You want to be our go-to guy? You want to be an NBA player? You can't take two shots."

Murphy recounted that story Friday night while standing in a hallway at Madison Square Garden, where the stat sheet from Syracuse's 87-71 thumping of No. 6 North Carolina told a much different story. Johnson scored 14 points in the game's first nine minutes en route to a scintillating 25-point, eight-rebound performance in the finals of the 2K Sports Classic. That outing, combined with a 17-point, 11-rebound effort in Thursday's semifinal win over California, made him the easy choice as the tournament's most valuable player.

Johnson admitted that he had been waiting for the big stage to assert himself -- "I have to pick and choose the games," he said -- but he may not have that luxury anymore. If he is going to reach his potential, and if Syracuse is going to fulfill the promise it showed this week in New York, then Johnson is going to have to shed the gentle, deferential nature that has made him so universally popular with his teammates and coaches. "He is," said Syracuse coach **Jim Boeheim**, "the nicest kid I've ever been around, hands down."

He has a nice game, too. With his size, length, outside touch and freaky athleticism, Johnson is a prototypical NBA small forward. (During the win over Cal, he had one of the best missed dunks you'll see all season when he mistimed his leap from the left wing on a fast break and stuffed the ball into the rim.) He committed four turnovers (with no assists) in the win over Cal, but for the most part, he was poised and efficient. He shot 17 for 29 in the two games, including 6 for 12 from three-point range.

It has taken quite a bit of prodding to get Johnson to assume the mantle of primary scorer. A week after the talk in Murphy's basement, Boeheim held a team meeting and dissected the strengths and weaknesses of all the main players. When he got to Johnson, he grew angrier. "Wesley, we need you to get 30 [points]," Boeheim barked. "If you want to get 40, go get 40." After the meeting, Johnson looked at Murphy and said, "I guess you were right."

"He just has a very good spirit. He's a loving and caring kid who takes time to do everything the right way. He doesn't want to do anything wrong," Murphy said. "I told him, 'Wesley, great players are selfish.' Sometimes selfishness is looked at in negative terms, but the truth is he needs more of it."

Johnson has received similar encouragement from his teammates, who acknowledge that he has a little more nastiness in him than he lets on. "He talks trash out there. He does a lot of things the camera can't catch," said 6-9 senior forward **Arinze Onuaku**, who had 15 points and seven rebounds against North Carolina. **Gerry McNamara**, the former Syracuse icon who is now a graduate assistant coach, told Johnson that once he hit the floor at Madison Square Garden, he needed to seize the opportunity. Said Johnson, "Gerry told me, when

the lights come on, you're going to know it."

For his part, Johnson makes no apologies for stepping so gingerly into this role. "I can say this -- I'm a teammate first," he said. "I'm not going to go out and bombard anyone and say I'm the man. It was a must for me to step up tonight and be a scorer. I haven't really done that the first few games, but this was the best game for me to do it."

Yet, Johnson still did a good job blending in with a full team effort. Five Syracuse players scored in double figures against the Tar Heels, and six different players contributed during a devastating 25-3 run that blew the game open at the start of the second half. Moreover, with guys like Johnson, 6-4 senior guard **Andy Rautins** and 6-7 sophomore forward **Kris Joseph** working the perimeter, this team is uniquely well-suited to play Boeheim's vaunted zone defense, which North Carolina coach **Roy Williams** said Friday reminded him of **John Chaney's** old matchup zone at Temple for its ability to shut down long-range shooters. "It's like in football, when a defensive back closes out on a receiver," Williams said. "You think you're open and all of a sudden they block your shot."

Boeheim seconded Williams's assessment of the Orange's D. "Do you know how many times North Carolina will shoot 38 percent this year? One, maybe."

For all the balance and comity Syracuse put on display, in the end this team will go as far as Johnson will take it. After the win Friday night, Johnson, a native of Corsicana, Texas, candidly explained that the deterioration of his relationship with Iowa State coach **Greg McDermott** contributed to his decision to transfer. "Me and my coach's relationship got bad my sophomore year," he said. Because McDermott's offense relies on a lot of set patterns, it has taken some time for Johnson to cotton to the freedom he is granted in Boeheim's motion offense. Boeheim called a lot of plays Friday night specifically designed to get Johnson the ball in places he could score.

Boeheim has been promising all summer long that Johnson would be one of the best players in the country. "Would I lie? Do I just talk?" Boeheim said during his postgame press conference. "He's going to get better, too." Later, while standing in the locker room, he was still crowing about the major step forward his star player had just taken. "He just became a top-five pick [in the NBA draft]," Boeheim said, not bothering to pretend Johnson will return to Syracuse as a senior. "If anything, he could still be more aggressive, but tonight he was the most aggressive I've seen him. That's what we need him to be."