

Syracuse's Johnson magic



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NEW YORK – Late Friday night, shortly after his team's 87-71 embarrassment of sixth-ranked North Carolina at Madison Square Garden, Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim walked into his postgame news conference and smirked.

"I told you so," he said.

Boeheim hadn't predicted a win, but what he had promised months ago was that one of Syracuse's newest players would also be its best. And so, after Iowa State transfer Wesley Johnson scored a game-high 25 points and grabbed eight rebounds against the defending national champions, Boeheim couldn't help but rub it in a bit.

"What?" he said. "Did you think I was lying?"

Not exactly.

In two seasons at Iowa State, Johnson averaged 12.3 points and 6.1 rebounds, so it's not as if people didn't think he'd be effective. Most folks, though, weren't expecting performances like the one Johnson turned in Friday, when he went 10 of 17 from the field in a victory that upped Syracuse's record to 4-0.

As Johnson celebrated in the locker room after being named Most Valuable Player of the 2K Sports Classic, Boeheim stood in a nearby hallway and recalled the moment nearly two years ago when he heard Johnson was seeking a transfer.

"I wasn't interested at first," Boeheim said.

In 34 years as a head coach, Boeheim said he had signed just four transfers. But the more he thought about it, the more the move seemed to make sense. Boeheim was expecting to lose players such as Eric Devendorf and Paul Harris after the 2008-09 season, and he kept remembering those stats from Iowa State. Phenomenal, Boeheim thought, for a freshman and sophomore competing in the

rugged Big 12.

Boeheim decided to bring Johnson in for a visit.

“He was the nicest kid I’ve ever recruited, and still is,” Boeheim said.

Despite not watching any game film of Johnson, Boeheim offered him a scholarship. Johnson – who picked the Orange over Pittsburgh and Ohio State – made Boeheim feel good about the decision the following fall.

“I didn’t see him in the gym until you can watch workouts in the middle of September,” Boeheim said. “It didn’t take more than a second or two [to tell how good he was].”

“In one early scrimmage he was 15 for 17. We took him mainly because we thought we were going to lose guys and we knew he was pretty good. We just didn’t know at the time how good he was. Now we do.”

And so does the rest of college basketball.

Especially the North Carolina Tar Heels.

During one three-minute stretch early in the first half, Johnson scored 11 points. In a move his teammates described as uncharacteristic, Johnson smiled and winked at the camera following a dunk off his own steal. It was easy to understand why Johnson was so juiced.

He grew up in small town Corsicana, Texas, which is just outside of Dallas, and was passed over in the recruiting process by most of the schools in his home state. As well as he played at Iowa State, Johnson never experienced the NCAA tournament. He said he decided to transfer after a “falling out” with coach Greg McDermott.

Now, two years later, here Johnson was at the famed Garden, playing on national television against tradition-rich North Carolina in front of 15,552 fans. Before the starting lineups were announced he turned to former Syracuse star Gerry McNamara, who’s now an assistant coach.

“Gerry said, ‘Once the lights come on, you’re going to [feel] it,’” Johnson said. “After that, the shots just started falling.”

Syracuse trailed 39-37 at intermission before opening the second half on a 22-1 run. Johnson scored just one basket during that stretch, but his defense was one of the main reasons the Tar Heels missed their first 13 field-goal attempts.

“He brings a lot of fire, a lot of energy,” Syracuse point guard Brandon Triche said of Johnson. “It’s hard for coach to take him out because he does so much. He scores, he rebounds, he’s always around the basket, he plays good defense.”

He does a little bit of everything.”

North Carolina pulled within 68-60 with about seven minutes left, but that’s as close as it would get.

While the Tar Heels lamented their first loss of the season, the celebration was on in the Syracuse locker room. Just two weeks removed from an exhibition game loss to Division II LeMoyne, the Orange now appear to be one of the better teams in college basketball following this week’s victories over No. 12 Cal and North Carolina.

“Offensively, we played as well as we can play in the second half,” Boeheim said. “But you have to understand, this wasn’t the national championship [North Carolina] team. If that team was here it would’ve been a whole different story. They lost a number of players. It’s almost a completely different team.”

And so is Syracuse with Johnson in the lineup.

Even with loss of Devendorf, Harris and first-round draft pick Jonny Flynn, this Syracuse team may be even better than the one that reached the Sweet 16 a year ago.

Boeheim said his squad is better defensively on the perimeter thanks to the size and length of Johnson, Triche, Scoop Jardine and Andy Rautins. And offensively, they’re doing a better job of getting the ball down low to big men Arinza Onuaku and Rick Jackson.

The biggest difference, though, is Johnson. As Boeheim prepared to leave Madison Square Garden on Friday, he made another bold prediction about college basketball’s newest star.

“He’s still trying to figure things out right now,” Boeheim said. “I’m telling you, he’ll get a lot better.”

This time, we’ll believe him.