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Pitt backcourt worries Terps

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Maryland coach Gary Williams knows the value of having an experienced backcourt.

Williams guided the Terrapins to their only NCAA basketball championship in 2002 with guards Juan Dixon and Steve Blake, and last season, his team won a share of the ACC regular-season title with seniors Eric Hayes and Greivis Vasquez, the ACC Player of the Year.

So, before the Terps (3-0) face off against No. 5 Pittsburgh (3-0) tonight in the 2K Sports Classic benefiting Coaches vs. Cancer at the Garden, Williams already knows what kind of challenges Pitt's Brad Wanamaker and Ashton Gibbs can present.

"Pitt's ranked where they are for a reason," Williams said. "Gibbs is one of those guys that really knows how to play. He plays a very intelligent game and is a great shooter who gives them great leadership in the backcourt. Wanamaker is another seasoned guard. He's a really good scorer.

"That's a pretty good combination. Not many people have that," Williams said. "In college basketball when you have those veteran guards, we went through that last year, it makes a difference as a coach and what you can do."

Wanamaker and Gibbs lead the Panthers, each averaging 19.3 points per game, with the former getting to the foul line a team-high 22 times, shooting 81.8 percent, and the latter shooting 45.8 percent from 3-point range, both helping Pittsburgh manage 11.7 turnovers per game as compared with Maryland's 20.3.

"I think they obviously had real good years last year, both of them, and they're better players this year," said Pittsburgh coach Jamie Dixon. "I said all last year Brad was overlooked and underrated. Now he scores a few points in a couple of games on TV and more people are talking about him. He does a lot of things for us."

Without Vasquez and Hayes, Williams will rely on his biggest body for his biggest contributions.

Sophomore Jordan Williams has opened the year with three double-doubles, averaging 21 points and 13.7 rebounds and winning the ACC Player of the Week award. As the new focus of Maryland's flex offense, the 6-foot-10, 260-pound power forward has improved his conditioning and demonstrated an offensive aggression that is needed to replace Vasquez.

"We do have veterans from last year like Jordan Williams who was first-team, All-ACC freshman last year and one of the 50 candidates for the Wooden Award this season," Williams said. "He's played very well so far."

Following the Maryland-Pittsburgh game, No. 13 Illinois will take on Texas in the nightcap. The losers of each game will meet in the consolation game tomorrow (5:00, ESPN2) with the championship (7:00, ESPN2) to follow.

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