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Big man's big test

By Liz Clarke
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Just about everything has gone [Jordan Williams's](#) way since the 2010-11 college basketball season tipped off.

In October, Maryland's 6-foot-10 sophomore forward was named to the preseason watch list for the [Wooden Award](#). This week, he appeared on the [Naismith Award](#) watch list (both are awarded to the national player of the year). And after notching double-doubles in all three [Terrapins](#) games to date, he was named ACC player of the week for the first time in his career.

But Maryland's heralded big man faces a test of a higher order Thursday at Madison Square Garden, where the Terrapins will take on fifth-ranked [Pittsburgh](#) (also 3-0) in the 2K Sports Classic benefiting Coaches vs. Cancer. On Friday, Maryland will play either 13th-ranked [Illinois](#) or [Texas](#), which meet in Thursday's late game.

Pittsburgh, the Big East coaches' preseason pick to win the conference regular season, is the first team Maryland will play this season to boast a bigger, more seasoned front line. As such, the Panthers can be expected to double- and even triple-team team Williams, who leads the Terrapins in scoring (21 points per game) and rebounding (13.7 per game) and has had a seemingly effortless time so far doing everything except shooting free throws (62.5 percent).

Relishing the challenge, Williams said he's eager to be pushed by Pittsburgh's imposing front line, which is anchored by 6-11 center [Gary McGhee](#), and confident he'll get all the help he needs from teammates such as 6-7 senior forward [Dino Gregory](#) and 6-8 sophomore forward [James Padgett](#).

"In high school I was double- and triple-teamed every night, so I'm kind of used to the feeling and sensation of being surrounded by lot of different players," Williams said this week. "I'm definitely ready for it."

Williams, a native of Torrington, Conn., grew up following Big East basketball, with an uncle, Murray Williams, who played for Connecticut. But Thursday's game will mark the first time Williams - or any of the Terrapins - have played at Madison Square Garden.

Williams has set foot in the hallowed basketball venue just once, during a recruiting visit to St. John's, which plays its home games there. And even though it was set up for a concert rather than basketball, Williams recalled a palpable aura of tradition in the arena.

That's just one more source of motivation for the Maryland standout - along with playing against a ranked opponent, the chance to prove himself against Pittsburgh's towering front line and the spotlight of an ESPN2 broadcast.

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"I've always played with a little chip on my shoulder," Williams said. "Coming out of high school, I wasn't recruited that heavily. I was always the type of person who was a question mark in scouts' books. There has always been something [skeptical] said about me somewhere: 'He can do this, but he can't do that.'"

"The big question coming out of high school was, 'Yeah, he had his 38 [points] a game, but that's against people who are 6-2.' Every game is just a challenge for me to prove people wrong."

Toppling the nation's fifth-ranked team would be a tremendous achievement for the Terrapins, who lost their top three scorers and three-fifths of the starting lineup from last season. But a loss also can be instructive at this stage of the season.

[Scoring 105 points against Seattle](#) got the Terrapins off to a feel-good start on Nov. 8. The last-minute comeback on Nov. 10 [against the College of Charleston](#) attested to their grit. And Sunday's [30-point victory over Maine](#) represented a step forward in fundamentals such as ball control, rebounding and free throw shooting.

But, as Coach Gary Williams noted, "You're measured by who you play."

Pittsburgh will be a telling measuring stick.

With four starters returning, the Panthers are led by a pair of veteran guards, senior [Brad Wanamaker](#) and junior [Ashton Gibbs](#), who each average 19.3 points per game. With their height inside, they are averaging 21 more rebounds per game than their opponents. Sophomore [Dante Taylor](#), a 6-9 forward who comes off the bench, is grabbing 5.3 offensive rebounds alone.

That's a marked difference from the less-heralded teams Maryland has faced - teams whose fortunes rely almost exclusively on guard play.

Jordan Williams says he ready for the focus to shift to the paint.

This time last year, he got winded just 25 minutes into games. But having shed nearly 20 pounds in the offseason and transformed much of what remains to muscle, he said he hasn't felt tired yet.

Win or lose, the sophomore said, Thursday's game won't define who he is as a player or who Maryland is as a team.

"If we beat them, that's absolutely great," Jordan Williams said. "If we lose, it's not going to seal who we are for the rest of the year. We'll know who we are in March, when we're in the NCAA tournament. Until then, we're going to keep working hard."

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