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The team of no stars does it again

By Dana O'Neil
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NEW YORK -- Pretend, I asked [Gilbert Brown](#), that you were designing a book about this [Pittsburgh Panthers](#) team. You need a cover, someone to stick out front that is the face of Pittsburgh basketball.

Who would you pick?

"You mean like a player?" Brown asked incredulously. "Nah, I couldn't do that. It would have to be like the Pittsburgh city skyline with the whole team in front. That's who we are. There's no star."

Conventional basketball wisdom circa 2010 says you can't win unless you have superstars, guys who are merely biding their time in the college game until the NBA payout arrives.

Pitt doesn't do conventional wisdom.

Since Jamie Dixon took over seven years ago, the Panthers have won 193 games. Only four teams have won more: Duke (207), Memphis (206), Kansas (204) and North Carolina (197).

In that same span, four Blue Devils have turned into first-round draft picks, five from Memphis, six from Kansas and nine more from North Carolina.

The Panthers? Exactly zero (the NBA's DeJuan Blair swing-and-a-miss notwithstanding).

Yet here sit the faceless, star-less Panthers, 5-0 after beating Texas 68-66 to win the 2K Sports Coaches vs. Cancer Classic. They are ranked fourth in the nation, picked to win the Big East and expected to make a deep run through March.

"That's who we are, a balanced team," [Brad Wanamaker](#) said. "Coach recruits unselfish players."

So those didn't go the way of the dodo bird? Who knew?

In the era of one-on-one iso, Pitt might be the biggest throwbacks of them all: an actual team. Against the Longhorns, Ashton Gibbs' numbers suggests star -- he scored 24 -- but the night before, it was [Talib Zanna](#) who led the way with 14. In the season opener, Wanamaker took a turn. [Travon Woodall](#) has had his time in double-figures; ditto Brown.

And no one cares whose turn it is.



Ashton Gibbs struggled Thursday, but came back with 24 points in Friday's championship game.

"That's what makes us so hard to beat," Brown said. "You never know."

Now these aren't guys that were left on the recruiting scrap heap, content to just be playing somewhere. They were all highly recruited, all from winning programs.

Yet when Dixon went out to evaluate them, he wasn't merely measuring their vertical leap and checking out their crossovers; he was looking for guys willing to check their egos at the door, searching for a kid who might have been a high school phenom but was content to average 12 in his college career.

In other words, these are guys just like him.

Dixon is different from many of his peers. He is not a preening promoter yearning for the spotlight. He wants to coach, not shill, sell, Tweet or boast.

And he's not about to let his players act any differently.

"He gets his point across," Gibbs said. "He yells. Oh yeah, he yells. If you don't play defense and rebound, you don't play. It's pretty simple."

Dixon, though, is hardly a modern-day Bob Knight. Demanding? Yes. But he's not interested in breaking his player's will. Rather he gets players with the right kind of will to begin with.

"It depends on what kind of guys you get," he said. "These are guys who are used to winning; they've won their whole lives. But character is what I look at. If you start with high-character kids, they can do a lot of great things."

For Pitt, those great things have equated to a run of excellence that defies traditional logic and often defies teams that would appear on paper to have an edge.

"These guys understand their roles so well," Texas coach Rick Barnes said of Pitt's players.

Pardon him if he sounded a little wistful.

Barnes' team is loaded with so much talent he has the luxury of bringing [J'Covan Brown](#) and [Jai Lucas](#), each high school All-Americans, off the bench.

And this version of Texas looks better than the one that freefallen its way from No. 1 to no one last season. The Longhorns have potential stars in freshmen [Tristan Thompson](#) and [Cory Joseph](#) and they play with more fire and intensity than last season's crew.

But Texas also, at times, remains a team full of individuals, guys trying too hard to do everything alone.

[Jordan Hamilton](#) scored a career-high 28 and nearly dismantled the Panthers in the endgame himself. Hamilton, of course, didn't have to do it himself and on too many possessions forced bad shots that gave way to easy Pitt possessions.



The self-proclaimed team of no stars was the one holding the trophy in the end.

When he got others involved, it worked. On two successive trips in the second half, Hamilton made an extra pass -- both to [Gary Johnson](#). Each time the extra pass resulted in a score.

Those, however, would be his only two assists.

"We know we're not a finished product yet," Thompson said.

No, the finished product wore blue and the finished product hardly flinched in the final seconds.

After Texas crept back into the game, the Horns actually had the ball and a chance to tie or take the lead once Woodall missed the front end of a one-and-one. Joseph drove the ball off the missed free throw, curling from the baseline toward the basket.

The freshman went way too deep with his drive and though there was more than enough time to gather himself for a pass or better shot, he tossed up a wild heave that had absolutely no chance of even glancing the rim.

"I was trying to make a play for my team," Joseph said. "I had the ball in my hands and I was trying to make a play and it didn't happen."

It was a shot part-and-parcel of a freshman, but also a defense part-and-parcel of a team.

"We were definitely confident," Gibbs said of the last play. "We go over a lot of situations like that in practice, with five seconds left, that kind of thing. And we've been in a lot of tough games like that. We trust each other."

Teams do that.

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All Texas could do is watch as the Panthers celebrated at MSG.

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