

Pitt's all about wins, not style points



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NEW YORK

Ashton Gibbs walked over and received the MVP trophy in his arms following his 24-point performance in **Pittsburgh's** victory over Texas in the championship game.

Then he instantly motioned for his entire team to join him on the court.

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“To be the No. 4 team in the country, you've got to alter your egos,” Gibbs said after the 68-66 win to wrap up the title at the 2K Sports Classic benefiting Coaches vs. Cancer at Madison Square Garden. “It's hard to learn, but you've got to learn it or you won't play.”

These Pittsburgh Panthers haven't just learned it. They've embraced it.

The team is a bunch of largely unheralded guys with a chip on their shoulder who believe they're among the elite in the country as a whole, but thrive on the fact that most outside of their home city question how they arrived near the top.

Just one McDonald's All-American resides on the roster: Dante Taylor, who's been relegated to a role on the bench behind two guys few wanted or knew about — big men Gary McGhee and Talib Zanna.

Panthers coach Jamie Dixon hasn't coached a single first-round pick since taking over for Ben Howland in 2003, yet his program ranks fifth behind Duke, Memphis, Kansas and North Carolina over that seven-year span.

The Tar Heels have had nine first-rounders come through the turnstiles the past seven seasons, Kansas has produced a half-dozen, Memphis a handful and Duke's had four chosen in the first round.

But, a few years ago, there was — at the very least — a face to the Pittsburgh program.

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It was that rotund, big teddy bear who could rarely be found without a smile named DeJuan Blair.

But now coach Jamie Dixon literally goes with an 11-man rotation, led by the underappreciated backcourt of Gibbs and Brad Wanamaker.

“We don't have a face of the program,” Wanamaker said. “Not at all.”

“It would probably be a picture of the skyline of Pittsburgh with the whole team in the background,” added fifth-year senior Gilbert Brown.

Let's face it, Pittsburgh doesn't pass the “look” test of a top-five team. I'm not sure exactly what that means, but what I am sure of is that Dixon's group isn't loaded with guys the NBA's drooling over.

Yet, a team with one likely surefire NBA guy just came out on top over a Texas club that could feature a trio of first-round picks.

“They understand their roles,” Texas coach

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Rick Barnes said of Pittsburgh. “And they play hard.”

Those are a pair of compliments that rank about as high as you'll get via an opposing coach.

They defend, screen for their teammates and don't have much flash or sizzle.

In a day and age where style usually wins out over substance, Dixon's somehow managed to flip that with his players.

And that's translated into Pitt basketball becoming synonymous with the word “ugly.”

“We want to do it looking good,” Wanamaker said.

But they've grown to accept that it rarely occurs — and ultimately doesn't matter.

“Winning ugly is better than losing ugly, I guess,” Dixon said. “Or losing pretty.”

Dixon has 191 of those so-called ugly wins on his resume after many were puzzled when he was handed the reins of a program Howland rebuilt in his four seasons in the Big East. That's an average of more than 27 wins per season.

“At the end of the day, we understand the best thing for us and our careers is to win,” Brown said. “So, you have to check your egos at the door.”

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“We still have that underdog mentality,” he said. “We feel we’re doubted by a lot of people.”

Maybe it's the way the Panthers muck it up — or it could be because they don't have a face of the program.

“We've got a lot of them,” Dixon said.

But they just seem to blend together, which is exactly how it's supposed to be in Pittsburgh.

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