

Texas learning how to play as a team



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The last time that **Texas** forward Gary Johnson displayed his trademark smile — the one I first saw him flash as a freshman at Aldine High in Houston — was Dec. 22, 2009, following the Longhorns' victory over Michigan State in Austin.

That was when Rick Barnes' team was in the midst of making its climb to a 17-0 start and the No. 1 ranking.

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“It’s been a while,” Johnson said following Texas’ 90-84 overtime win Thursday night over No. 13 **Illinois** in the 2K Sports Classic benefiting Coaches vs. Cancer semifinals at Madison Square Garden. “This is about as good as I’ve felt.”

It’s because Johnson feels as though he’s once again a part of a *team*.

“Last year we had the talent, but too many individuals,” Johnson said. “Everyone had their own agenda.”

Now, Damion James, Avery Bradley and Dexter Pittman are all collecting paychecks in the NBA.

They’ve been essentially replaced by a pair of heralded freshman from north of the border: point guard Cory Joseph and forward Tristan Thompson.

Both were on the court when the game began and also when the game was on the line in overtime.

“Cory’s the most unselfish guard,” Johnson said. “You have to keep telling him to shoot.”

“They didn’t come in with a sense of entitlement,” Barnes added.” And they earned it.”

Joseph sank what appeared to be the game winner, a 12-foot step-back jumper in Illinois guard D.J. Richardson’s grill with 24.6

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seconds left in regulation.

However, Illini frosh Jereme Richmond answered with a bucket under the basket to force overtime — where the Longhorns proved to be the tougher *team*.

“They took it to us,” Illinois coach Bruce Weber admitted after the game. “They out-toughed us.”

And it started with the Canadians.

Joseph finished with only 10 points, but his basket showed he has it in him to want the ball in his hands — and deliver — with the game on the line. It was Thompson who proved to be the difference maker on both ends of the court with 20 points, seven boards, four assists and five blocks.

Even Jordan Hamilton (25 points) and J’Covan Brown (eight points) — a pair of sophomores this season who endured their share of criticism last season for their me-first play — have matured and appear to have become mentally tougher.



“That’s in the past,” Brown said of the Texas Tailspin last season that culminated in a first-round NCAA tournament exit at the hands of Wake Forest.

Hamilton and Brown both had a rocky adjustment a year ago. Neither played their senior season in high school — and neither was able to attend summer school in Austin prior to enrolling in August.

“It makes a difference,” Barnes said.

Much has been made of the wholesale alterations in Barnes’ offensive system following an offseason in which he was criticized for his team’s inability to put the ball in the basket.

Barnes laughed at the recent rumor that swirled on a message board, the one that he and his staff spent in excess of a month out in Utah with Jerry Sloan and the Jazz.

“I spent one day in the summer and two days in training camp,” Barnes said. “I actually changed more when Kevin Durant got here than we did this year.”

But the offense is different.

Significantly.

Instead of running ball screen after ball screen — as was the case last season in Austin — now there is far more ball and player movement.

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“This offense takes away a lot of ballhandling and adds more ball movement,” Johnson said.

It plays to the strengths of the personnel.

But it’s not just the tinkered offense that has people talking positively about Texas basketball for the first time since the second-half collapse a year ago in which the Longhorns won just seven times in their final 17 games.

“I think they trust each other,” Barnes said of his players.

“Just look out there and see,” Johnson added. “It’s a completely different team.”

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