

# YAHOO! SPORTS

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## Dixon, Pittsburgh get it done



By Jason King, Yahoo! Sports *10 hours, 31 minutes ago*

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NEW YORK – The fifth-best team in college basketball doesn't feature any future NBA lottery picks. There is only one McDonald's All-American on Pittsburgh's roster, and that's just fine with Jamie Dixon.

"When you have high-character kids," the Panthers coach likes to say, "you can do a lot of great things."

One of those great things occurred Friday night, when Pittsburgh improved to 5-0 with a 68-66 victory over a bigger, faster, more athletic Texas squad in the championship game of the 2K Sports Classic at Madison Square Garden.

Ashton Gibbs earned tournament MVP honors with a 24-point effort, but the biggest star for Pittsburgh had slicked-back hair and wore a suit as he stalked the sideline.

"Coach Dixon," guard Brad Wanamaker said after the game, "is the face of our program."

There may not be a more underrated coach in America than Dixon, whose accomplishments in seven-plus years at Pittsburgh have been nothing short of remarkable.

Dixon has never coached a first-round NBA draft pick, but year after year, his teams contend for the Big East title. Night after night, the Panthers share the ball and take good shots and defend like their season is on the line.

Still, each time Pittsburgh defeats teams stocked with bigger, faster, more athletic players who are months away from becoming future millionaires, Dixon hears the same comment.

The Panthers, people like to say, win ugly. Dixon smiled when the refrain surfaced again.

“I guess that’s better than losing pretty,” he said, and in some ways it was hard to tell if Dixon was amused or annoyed.

“Offensively, we’re one of the most efficient teams in the country year in and year out,” he said. “We outrebound people. We don’t turn it over. To me, those are pretty good stats. I don’t know what adjective you want to use.

“All I know is that we have good kids that play hard and believe in each other. That’s what helps you win.”

Dixon’s philosophy couldn’t have rung any truer in the Garden, when Texas did everything it could to overtake Pittsburgh’s 10-point second-half lead. Three times during the final six minutes, the Longhorns pulled within a possession of Pittsburgh – only to see Dixon’s squad answer with a clutch shot on the other end.



Two sequences near the end of the game illustrated the difference between the two teams.

With his team trailing 63-62, Texas guard Jordan Hamilton rushed an ill-advised 3-pointer – a defender’s hand was in his face – that clanged off the back of the rim.

Pittsburgh snared the rebound, went up the court and patiently worked the ball around the perimeter. Eventually, Gibbs freed up for a wide open shot beyond the arc that give the Panthers a 66-62 cushion with 1:24 remaining.

Down 68-66 with 11 seconds left, Texas still had a chance when Pittsburgh’s Travon Woodall missed the front end of a one-and-one. But instead of running a play, Longhorns guard Cory Joseph raced up the court, lowered his head and drove into traffic. Pittsburgh’s defense swarmed Joseph, who tossed the ball up wildly.

“We do some things that young teams do in terms of not listening all the time,” said Texas coach Rick Barnes, who went on to praise the Panthers for “knowing their roles.”

“How many of these guys have been with them for four years?” Barnes said. “Most teams that have superstar guys ... they don’t stick around four years. Jamie does a really nice job.”

Indeed, with three senior starters, the Panthers have one of the more experienced teams in the country. But even younger players such as freshman Talib Zanna and sophomore Dante Taylor haven't had a tough time accepting Dixon's insistence on sharing the ball and playing tough defense.

"Once you get to college, you adjust," Wanamaker said. "Everyone's roles change, no matter who you are."

Or what you may have done in high school.

"To be a No. [5] team ... sometimes you have to alter your ego," Gibbs said. "That's something you learn as a freshman. It's hard, but you've got to learn it quickly or you won't play."



Dixon said the key to building team chemistry begins long before players arrive on campus. Recruiting, he said, is about more than identifying great talent. It's about finding great people who are unselfish enough to buy into a system.

"It's not hard with the guys we have here now," Dixon said. "We've got guys from winning programs who have won all their lives. And they're used to winning. They're proud to be at the University of Pittsburgh and playing for the name on front of their jersey. That's important."

Successful as he's been, the one thing that often keeps Dixon from being mentioned among college basketball's elite coaches is his failure to get Pittsburgh to the Final Four. Granted, this is only Dixon's eighth season as the Panthers' coach, so any criticism he receives for not advancing that far is unfair.

Pittsburgh, though, has won 20 or more games – and at least 10 conference games – each season under Dixon. As good as his teams have been, this one may be his best.

"Where we are now is not where we're going to be next week or next month," Dixon said. "But I think our guys want to learn and want to get better and are willing to pay the price."

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