Quietly emerging young Wolves

Written by Ryan T. Scott Monday, 14 March 2011 16:07



Lost in another of Kevin Love's huge milestone statistical performances was perhaps the birth of "What the Wolves really need". Rookie Wesley Johnson kept the intent look on his face during a stretch of game-winning offensive and defensive plays against the Golden State Warriors recently. That evening seemed to put a stamp on Johnson's increased role now that former defensive prodigy Corey Brewer has departed for the New York Knicks. While his peer Demarcus Cousins, whom many preferred the Wolves draft over Johnson, is fighting in the locker room in Sacramento, and occasionally 'beasting' on the court, Johnson just keeps his steady look of determined intent through the highs and lows of his early growth.

Johnson's game winning play, in which he perfectly guarded one of the NBA's best offensive players Monte Ellis, ended with the type of swatting block that an older brother gives his younger sibling. In Johnson's initial post-draft press conference, I asked him about the influence of his alma-mater Syracuse University. Syracuse has a long stream of solid professionals and mature, successful NCAA tournament teams that their men's basketball program can boast of. Both Johnson's defense on the mentioned play against Monte Ellis, and his reaction thereafter, finally answered that question. Wes Johnson is simply a sound, hard-nosed, professional basketball player. It takes sound defense to guard a shifty Monte Ellis, and it takes a professional to come back in the next game and give Kobe Bryant everything that a rookie can give on defense.

Though many are lauding Johnson's defensive emergence, it was his lack of fear shooting the ball that stood out from day one. Johnson's 17.5 ppg average during the recent 4game stretch ending with a victory over the Detroit Pistons shows that he really doesn't have to get too much better shooting the ball; if this is something he can do consistently. The intent look on his face says that he can, and that he'll likely be intent upon sharpening his shooting ability over the coming off-season.

And while Johnson's rookie team peer Lazar Heyward is also showing some 'belongonthecourtness' (meaning he's one of those players that doesn't do anything great, but hustles and plays really smart—kids note that you can get to the NBA that way), and even second year Syracuse drafted guard Jonny Flynn is getting his scrap back, it is second year center/forward Anthony Randolph that just earned the 'What do we have here' Award.

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Randolph was one of the quiet elements in the recent trade that involved Corey Brewer from the Timberwolves, Carmelo Anthony from the Denver Nuggets, and a partridge in a pear tree. Randolph quickly emerged in the game against the Detroit Pistons, displaying the athletic liveliness that the Wolves exactly needed. Randolph is another of Timberwolves General Manager David Kahn's projects, which include several highly drafted players whose fortunes have simply not jived in their previous NBA pit-stops. Forward Michael Beasley seems to be the crown jewel of that movement, though Randolph has shown some immediate abilities that could rocket him up the chain of command. Fortunately Randolph is a busy jumper in the middle, and thus may be able to earn his points without plays being specifically run for him. Together with 7ft Darko Milicic and the thick 7ft henchman Pekovic, Randolph provides some much needed length, which is necessary when the extra-long Lakers are reigning over the Western Conference.

The Wolves are a long way from worrying about beating the Lakers on any consistent basis, but even Lakers Head Coach Phil Jackson complimented the talent that the Wolves have surrounding their new All-Star Kevin Love. Jackson seemed to feel that the Wolves were only a player away from being able to make a little noise in the conference. Then again Jackson is retiring after this year, and former Laker player and assistant coach Kurt Rambis, now leads the Timberwolves team; a helpful compliment on the way out the door.

Spanish guard Ricky Rubio is on his way to the Timberwolves next year (supposedly). I've been a supporter of the strategy the Wolves have taken, and think that they just might... just might... be a year away. If you go to the inexpensive games now you can say that you aren't a 'frontrunner' when they start to play good next year... or the year after... or the Lakers could just keep winning everything. Hope springs eternal for us all.