

Pitt's knocked out, but the best is yet to come

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ORLANDO, Fla. -- Pitt's players spent the day before their matchup with top-seeded Florida assuring everyone that they weren't intimidated. Cameron Wright's quote, the one that said the University of Pittsburgh isn't intimidated by anyone in anything, went viral on social media.

The Panthers said defeating the Gators wouldn't be an upset. They looked like they believed it, too, as they spoke to reporters in a laidback locker room. Pitt isn't scared of Florida, they said. Pitt isn't intimidated.

So why then, on game day, did the Panthers play like they were?

The team that had been playing with so much confidence, that looked loose and relaxed and more than capable of scaring the No. 1 team in the country two days ago, vanished on Saturday. In its place, a team took the floor that played tight, that looked intimidated and unsure.

Well, except for the freshmen.

It was a strange sight, to see Josh Newkirk, Mike Young and Jamel Artis often playing with more authority than their more experienced counterparts. Just a game ago, senior Lamar Patterson stood on the sidelines and watched them grow up. He was proud of them for keeping the pressure on Colorado.

And when it came time to put the pressure on Florida, the freshmen showed up again. Newkirk had eight rebounds and two assists. He was one of the few Panthers who attacked Florida's offense and drove to the basket with consistency. Young came out and calmly knocked down the first shot of the game. Jamel Artis came off the bench to score seven points, grab three rebounds and even attempt a 3-pointer.

The group of players who had the biggest right to be a little intimidated, didn't look intimidated at all.

“Me, Josh and Jamel, we have a great deal of confidence in our games and our abilities,” Young said. “When we come into the game, there’s no dropoff. There’s no nervousness. We come into the game and we’re confident.”

It took awhile for Newkirk’s play to catch up with his speed this season, but once it did, he was impressive. He helped fill the void when sixth-man Durand Johnson was lost for the season with an injury and the Panthers needed a spark off the bench.

Young has steadily improved even while playing with a fracture in his back. Once he’s completely healthy, Pitt could have a force inside to take the place of Talib Zanna. Artis takes advantage of every moment he’s on the floor. He never hesitates to shoot -- and usually that’s a good thing for the Panthers.

This class will leave its mark on the program. It’s a talented group, and one that will only get better after a year of playing significant minutes. It’s going to be special.

“For us freshman and sophomores, we were able to come here and win a game in the tournament,” Young said. “That’s something we didn’t do last year. And we experienced playing against the best team in the country. We have a lot of guys coming back. We have to learn from this and be ready for next year.”

‘Being ready’ doesn’t seem to be a problem for this group. And because of that, on a day when two 1,000-point scorers in Patterson and Zanna played their final game, the future doesn’t look that dim.

The future arrived on Saturday and knocked down the door instead.

“Big games we always show up,” Young said. “Big games we always come ready to play.”