

Washpun thriving with No. 23 Panthers

Written by Jim Ecker

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CEDAR FALLS - Wes Washpun had to learn that his natural charm, smile and athletic ability would not get him everywhere he wanted to go in life.

He needed discipline and a serious approach to his classes to become a well-rounded person who could accomplish just about anything he wants, including the possibility of pro basketball and grad school.

Now that he's put the whole package together, there's no telling what Washpun might accomplish.

For the time being, he's one of the star players for the 23rd-ranked University of Northern Iowa basketball team as it approaches the Missouri Valley Conference opener at Evansville Thursday.

Northern Iowa Coach Ben Jacobson took a serious look at Washpun when he was playing at Cedar Rapids Washington High School, but Washpun was struggling with his classes at the time and there was no certainty he'd become eligible for Division I basketball. Jacobson did not offer Washpun a scholarship, but got him on the rebound after Washpun spent one unproductive year at Tennessee.

Jacobson said Washpun is a different guy now than he was four or five years ago in some important aspects.

"Oh, boy," Jacobson said Sunday. "In a couple of ways he's changed a ton, and in some other ways he hasn't changed at all."

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"He's kept the things that are so good about him - his energy, being upbeat, having a smile on his face, the way he interacts with his teammates. All of those continue to be there and get a little better.

"Now he's disciplined," said Jacobson. "He shows up on time, he does what he's supposed to be doing, he takes care of his business. It's taken a lot of stress out of his life.

"Now he can just be himself all the time and not have periods of time in his day where he's worried about not getting something done or worried about being late. He's doing great."

Washpun, a 6-foot-1 point guard with terrific speed, quickness and jumping ability, is averaging 11.8 points, 3.6 rebounds and 3.1 assists for the Panthers this season as a junior. He's shooting 60.3 percent from the field and ranks first or second on the team in steals, scoring, assists and blocked shots.

It's taken him awhile to put the whole package together, but he's found a home at Northern Iowa following his one year at Tennessee. He could have come to Cedar Falls as a freshman if his grades had been in order in time, but it didn't work out that way.

"Everything happens for a reason," said Washpun. "So the fact that I'm here now and not right away, it was for a purpose. I'm just trying to figure it out as I go along, I guess.

"I feel like I did a lot of growing up down there (at Tennessee) and through high school and not being able to go exactly where I wanted. I feel like it's all paying off right now."

Washpun is not starting for UNI, but he's averaging 25 minutes per game and sharing the point-guard duties with senior Deon Mitchell.

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Jacobson likes to bring Washpun off the bench to give the Panthers a jolt of energy, and he's the leader of a bench brigade that ranks eighth in the NCAA in scoring at a hefty 33.1 points per game.

Washpun, Nate Buss, Paul Jespersen and Wyatt Lohaus have been the primary reserves this season, with Bennett Koch and Klint Carlson also helping. The Panthers blasted South Dakota State in bench points Sunday, 45-10, en route to a 74-63 victory at the McLeod Center.

Northern Iowa's subs outscored their own starters, 45-29, on a deep and talented club.

"I think we've got one of the best benches in the entire country," said Jacobson. "I don't think there's much doubt about that. Those guys have been terrific."

Washpun has a tremendous knack of scoring when he gets to the rim. That's the primary reason he's shooting 60.3 percent from the field, but he's also made 8 of 11 3-pointers and is a much better outside shooter than he was in high school.

Jacobson gives Washpun high marks for his athletic talent and ability to score inside for somebody who's only 6-1.

"On those two fronts, I think he's as good as anyone we've played against in terms of explosiveness and then finding a way to finish when he gets there," the coach said. "I think his improvement from last year to this year has just been terrific."

"Now he's able to put those things to really good use. In the past, if anything wasn't going quite right he immediately went to his quickness and speed. Now he makes sure that it's the right time to go to his quickness and his speed, and I think that's why he's so much more effective."

Washpun scored only 16 points in 17 games at Tennessee as a freshman during the 2011-12 season and played sparingly in conference games. He transferred to Northern Iowa and took a mandatory redshirt year in 2012-13, giving him a chance to adjust to Cedar Falls and practice with the team. He averaged 8.3 points

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last season and has hiked that mark to 11.8 this year.

He poured in a career-high 27 points against VCU this season in Northern Iowa's only loss so far. He's also had career highs of nine rebounds, eight assists, four steals and three blocks in different games, showing his versatility.

The Panthers are playing well and Washpun has played a big role in their success.

"Having a bunch of fun," he said. "We're just all jelling together well. A lot of us have been here since the year before, so we have that chemistry and that experience together.

"We're just figuring out each other's games and how to play off each other and it's all coming together nice."

Washpun said the Panthers knew they had a chance to be successful this season.

"We definitely thought it was possible," he remarked. "We knew we had a really good team. We just had to go out there and trust our scouting reports and really focus in on defense. That's been a big thing for us this year.

"We're coming together as a team and we're getting it done," he said. "It's a really exciting time to be a Panther."