

## Washpun finds new home at UNI

Written by Jim Ecker

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CEDAR FALLS - Ben Jacobson loves what Wes Washpun has added to the University of Northern Iowa basketball team this season, both on the court and off the court.

Both parts have been important.

"I'll start with maybe the non-basketball stuff. His enthusiasm, his competitiveness," the UNI coach said Saturday night after the Panthers beat Iona, 90-78, in the McLeod Center.

"Most of the time he's got a smile on his face. When he doesn't," Jacobson said, smiling himself and chuckling, "it's because he's usually arguing with one of his teammates."

They are good-natured arguments, the stuff you see among friends and teammates who are united in a cause.

"That kind of competitiveness and combative spirit is really good for our team," Jacobson said. "It's something that this team really needs. So he's brought that to the table.

"It's before practice, it's during practice, it's after practice, during the games. It's all the time. It's who he is."

In the middle of a tight game Saturday, Washpun and fellow UNI guard Deon Mitchell were laughing and joking on the court about something that struck them as funny. This was while the game was going on.

"That's just how me and Deon are," Washpun said after the game. "We're kind of a bunch of jokey guys. That's kind of how we are as a team."

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Washpun, from Cedar Rapids Washington, is serious about the game, but manages to have fun at the same time. And he's made a big impact at Northern Iowa after transferring last year from the University of Tennessee.

Washpun, a 6-foot-1 guard, leads the Panthers in steals and has played more minutes than anyone else on the team. He ranks second in assists, second in blocked shots, third in rebounds and fifth in scoring. And as far as Jacobson is concerned, he's just starting to scratch the surface.

"He gives us another guy who can really go in transition," Jacobson said. "His speed with the ball, as we know, is as good as anybody's. And he can get up and finish around the rim.

"He's got a really good feel for passing. When he gets in there and guys help (against him on defense), he knows which guy is going to be open. Guys don't always know that. That's been good for us."

Washpun played sparingly at Tennessee as a true freshman during the 2011-12 season and decided to change schools. He picked Northern Iowa and is glad he did, giving him a chance to come home for the rest of his college basketball career.

"I like the school, I like the program, I like my teammates, so things have been going really good," he said. "It's nice to be back."

Washpun practiced with the Panthers last year, giving him a chance to get acclimated to his new school and new team. He showed everyone what he's capable of doing when he collected 18 points and eight assists against 14th-ranked Iowa State in Des Moines.

He's always been a confident player, but that performance helped his confidence even more.

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"I just went out there and tried to play," Washpun said. "I always try to go into a game with a lot of confidence and a lot of belief in myself and my teammates. That was just a game where everything was clocking."

Washpun's biggest problem with the Panthers so far has been with his outside shot, which has been erratic at best. He hit a 3-pointer against Iona, but he's only 1 for 12 on 3-pointers this year and Iona did not guard him on the perimeter, daring him to shoot.

"To finally see one go in was nice," he said. "I've definitely worked really hard to improve my jump shot. It's been one of the big focus points of the coaches and myself over the summer, just drilling, drilling, drilling and working at it."

"I think I've come to a place where I just have to have more belief in it and start shooting it more and believing that it's going to go in."

Washpun and Mitchell share the point-guard duties for Northern Iowa. Mitchell is the main ballhandler when they are on the floor together in the starting lineup, but Washpun slips comfortably into the role whenever Mitchell takes a breather.

"When you play them together, it gives you a lot of options in transition," said Jacobson, who likes to see his team get the ball and go. "It fits this team. It's the way this team is built to play."

Mitchell likes playing alongside his buddy in the backcourt.

"He's really athletic, he's always guarding the best player, he's quick, he's good at finishing," Mitchell said. "He's just a good all-around guy. And once he gets his jump shot down, the sky's the limit for him."

Washpun and Mitchell operate on the same frequency.

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"It's nice to have somebody there that understands the game the same way I do," Washpun remarked. "We see it from the same perspective and the same angles and stuff like that.

"It's nice to have somebody out there like that, that I can get the ball to and know he's thinking the same thing I am."

Washpun starred for the Washington Warriors on the same team that featured Josh Oglesby, now with the Iowa Hawkeyes. Washpun struggled academically as a junior at Washington, which hindered his recruiting, but he turned things around and became a solid student.

"I was not into it as I was other things," he said. "I worked really hard on my basketball and not on my books. It came back to bite me. I had to change my ways and everything is going good now."

Washpun, a redshirt sophomore, is a Family Services major at Northern Iowa and would like to get a master's degree in counseling. He also hopes to play pro basketball after college.

"Things have been going really well," he said.