

Wes Washpun enjoys life at Tennessee

Written by Jim Ecker

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He's been to Maui, faced Duke on ESPN and played before 17,000 fans at Thompson-Boling Arena.

Yes indeed, Wes Washpun likes Tennessee just fine.

"It's been going really well so far," the former Cedar Rapids Washington star told the Metro Sports Report. "I'm getting into the flow of games, I'm starting to figure out how this whole college basketball thing works, find my niche, find out where I fit on the team and how I can help them win."

The winning part, or lack thereof, has been the hardest part. The Volunteers have a 3-6 record and a three-game losing streak heading into Tuesday night's home game against UNC Asheville.

New Tennessee Coach Cuonzo Martin wooed Washpun for Missouri State last winter, and when Martin became the new coach at Tennessee he invited Washpun along. Washpun gladly accepted, spurning a late offer from the Iowa Hawkeyes.

Washpun said he feels good about his decision.

"It's a good place, I'm getting good minutes," he said. "It's really getting me ready for the next level, as far as physical-wise. The athletes you see coming through the SEC are going to be incredible, so it can't help but get me ready and make me a better basketball player."

Washpun is an incredible athlete himself, a 6-foot-1 point guard with a phenomenal vertical leap who can drape his elbow on the rim when he dunks. He was the slam-dunk champion at a prep all-star game at Linn-Mar High School last season, but he hasn't had an opportunity to

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slam one through in college.

"No, I haven't had any dunks yet," he reported, laughing. "I'm waiting for the first one."

Washpun has played in seven of Tennessee's nine games. He's averaging 13.9 minutes as a reserve and has contributed 11 assists, 10 points, three blocks and three steals. He's had only five turnovers in 97 minutes as a primary ballhandler.

"At this point I've been doing a really good job of playing defense and distributing the ball without turning it over as much," he said. "So I've been feeling pretty good about that."

"I need to work on a lot of my offensive stuff, being able to break down my man and score. I can get to the rim, but it's usually to dish off to somebody else or something like that, it's not really looking to attack hard to score."

Tennessee played three games at the Maui Invitational in Hawaii in late November, including a date with Coach Mike Krzyzewski and the Duke Blue Devils on ESPN. Washpun grew up watching Duke and "Coach K" on TV, and suddenly he was part of the show with Krzyzewski standing just a few feet away.

"You think about that kind of thing after the game," Washpun said. "In the middle of the game he was just another guy, another coach over there on the opposing team that was trying to beat us."

"I just kind of blanked it out, blanked out the name on their jersey and they were just another team that wanted to get a win. So I went out there and played them just like a regular game."



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Tennessee lost to No. 7 Duke, 77-67, and dropped a double-overtime thriller to Memphis, 99-97, before finishing the three-game trip to Maui with a victory over Chaminade. Washpun said he enjoyed his time in Hawaii.

"It was really cool," he said. "I went out there and played hard and tried to do what I was there to do. Our team went out there and competed and we played really hard, and I feel like we put on a pretty good show.

"We've proven we can play with some of the top teams in the country. We just have to go out there every night like we are playing one of the top teams and not play down to our competition and I think we'll be fine."

The Volunteers opened the season with a victory over UNC Greensboro before 17,483 fans at Thompson-Boling Arena in Knoxville, Tenn., and had a home game against Pittsburgh two weeks ago that drew 17,249 fans.

Washpun likes those big crowds.

"It's pretty cool," he said. "I just go out with the mindset thinking that it's just like a Kennedy or Jefferson game as far as the atmosphere, but of course it is a lot bigger and a lot bigger stage. But that really helps me calm down and just play my game."

Washpun had to overcome a few rough spots academically during his years at Washington, but said he's off to a good start at Tennessee.

"I've been doing just fine academically," he said. "I wasn't in danger of any bad grades in any classes, so everything has been going pretty smooth."

Washpun weighs only 163 pounds, which is slight for a point guard in the Southeastern Conference, but he's playing as a true freshman and holding his own.

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"The pace of the game is a lot faster, the guys are a lot more physical and stuff like that," he said. "I've learned my role as more of a defensive stopper, and I try to get the guys who have been here and can score a little better involved in the game and then stop my man on defense."

Washpun said he talks with former Washington teammate Josh Oglesby on a regular basis to see how things are going at Iowa. "I talk to Josh usually once or twice a week, just to check in and see how he's doing and see how they're doing and stuff like that," he said.

Washpun could have joined Oglesby at Iowa, but opted to stick with Cuonzo Martin and go to Tennessee even though it meant moving far from home.

"At first it was kind of hard," he said of the transition. "I do miss some of my friends and stuff, but being way from home isn't too bad. Not too bad at all."