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## Meeks a shooting star for Wildcats

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Jodie Meeks has been a big deal in local basketball circles before — the AJC’s high school player of the year and a star on a state championship team at Norcross in 2006.

But when Meeks returns to his home state this weekend — his Kentucky Wildcats play at Georgia on Sunday — his celebrity will be at a new height.

He will arrive fresh off the highest-scoring game in the storied history of Kentucky basketball — 54 points in a nationally televised victory at Tennessee on Tuesday. That broke the school record of 53 points held for 39 years by Dan Issel, a Hall of Famer. And it made Meeks the buzz of college hoops, a star on ESPN’s “SportsCenter,” a magnet on the UK campus and a recipient of hundreds of congratulatory text and voice messages.

“It’s been exciting,” Meeks said by phone Friday. “Everybody is just amazed they saw part of history, me breaking the record. But I just see myself as still a normal person.

“It hasn’t really set in yet. I’m still just a little bit dazed.”

It’s a fun time to be coming home, or thereabouts.

Meeks said his parents, two younger sisters, high school coach and family friends will make the drive from Norcross to Athens on Sunday.

“Probably more people are now wanting to come,” he said, “ever since that game.”

The deeper you look at Meeks’ performance against Tennessee, the more it amazes. With his father in the stands, the 6-foot-4 junior guard scored the 54 points on 22 shots from the field, was 10-for-15 from 3-point range (also setting a Kentucky record for treys), made all 14 of his free throws and had eight rebounds and four assists. Notwithstanding the Vols’ weak perimeter defense, it was a performance for the ages.

It increased Meeks’ scoring average for the season to 25.9 points, which leads the SEC and ranks No. 4 in the nation.

This is a somewhat different player than the one you might have seen at Norcross High, where Meeks said he was “more of a driver.”

“What he is doing now is different from what he was as a high school player from the standpoint of shooting the ball,” Georgia coach Dennis Felton said. “I know it may be amazing to hear, but if he had a hole in his game, shooting from the perimeter was that hole. He did start turning a corner in that area in his last year in high school, but I don’t think anything to indicate the kind of explosiveness he’s exhibiting now as a deep shooter.”

Said Meeks: “In my opinion, I was always a good shooter. But I think he’s right: I wasn’t as good a shooter as now.” He said his highest point total in high school was 32 when Norcross won its first basketball state title.

Georgia recruited Meeks but didn’t get far. He said he signed with Kentucky, then coached by Tubby Smith, largely because of the Wildcats’ “overwhelming” history.

Now Meeks owns a prominent place in that history.

After a promising freshman season in which he usually was the first reserve off the bench, he struggled as a sophomore, playing in only 11 games (averaging 8.8 points) because of injuries. But he has been on a tear this season, the explosion at Tennessee following games of 46 points against Appalachian State, 39 against VMI and 37 against Kansas State.

All of which led ESPN analyst Jimmy Dykes to say during Tuesday’s telecast that Meeks must be mentioned “in any legitimate conversation right now about national player of the year.”

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