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**ROBYN NORWOOD / ON COLLEGE BASKETBALL**

## Kentucky's Jodie Meeks comes into his own

The junior, who scored a school-record 54 points against Tennessee, was under the radar until this season.  
By ROBYN NORWOOD  
On College Basketball

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There's no such thing in Kentucky as a Wildcats player nobody knows much about.

But for plenty of folks elsewhere, when **Jodie Meeks** scored 54 points against Tennessee -- the most by a player in 106 seasons of Kentucky basketball -- the reaction was, "Who?" or a furrowed brow. "Is he a freshman? Sophomore?"

Meeks is a junior, but in his first two seasons at Kentucky, the 6-foot-4 guard from Norcross, Ga., averaged 8.7 points a game. This season, he is averaging 25.8 a game.

He has scored at least 45 three times this season, and at least 30 seven times. **Pete Maravich's** Southeastern Conference records are safe -- he scored at least 50 for Louisiana State 28 times -- but no SEC player had scored close to that since **Shaquille O'Neal** scored 53 for LSU in 1990.

"I've never seen anything like what he's done for us this year," Kentucky Coach **Billy Gillispie** said after Meeks scored 45 against Arkansas on Saturday, four days after scoring 23 and making a game-winning three-pointer against Florida. "He makes the same cuts at the beginning of the game that he does at the end of the game. He runs just as hard at the beginning as the end."

Meeks missed 20 games last season because of a series of injuries that culminated in off-season surgery for a sports hernia. As a freshman he was often the first player off the bench, but never had more than 18 points in a game.

The way Meeks is playing now, it's time to nudge the likes of Oklahoma's **Blake Griffin**, Davidson's **Stephen Curry** and North Carolina's **Tyler Hansbrough** to make room for him.

"He's definitely a national-player-of-the-year-candidate in my mind," Tennessee Coach **Bruce Pearl** said. "If he's seeing it, he's making it."

Griffin remains the leader for player of the year, especially after his monster 40-point, 23-rebound game against Texas Tech on Saturday. Curry is the nation's top scorer, at 29.0 points a game, and still an NCAA tournament darling. Hansbrough is the defending player of the year, and Connecticut's **Hasheem Thabeet** is a force despite being outplayed by Pittsburgh's **DeJuan Blair** on Monday.

What's intriguing about Meeks is that in an era when college players are trumpeted long before they arrive and often leave before they play a second season, Meeks has emerged in his third.

He wasn't a McDonald's All-American, but he led Norcross High to the Georgia Class AAAAA title, scoring 32 points in the final game. Kentucky only had to beat out Alabama and a few others on the recruiting trail.

**Tubby Smith** -- the once-beleaguered Kentucky coach now at Minnesota -- gets credit for recruiting Meeks, and called him "as gifted an athlete as I've ever coached."

"Even when he was a freshman, he was a guy, if we put him on the scout team, you knew he could be **Chris Lofton** from Tennessee, and make every shot," Smith said. "It was a matter of learning the game, and those injuries."

Ask Meeks' father, **Orestes**, how so many missed a player who would one day break **Dan Issel's** 39-year-old Kentucky single-game scoring record, and he professes to be stumped.

"My perspective is I can't answer that one," said the elder Meeks, an IBM sales executive who was an All-American long-jumper at Middle Tennessee State. "Jodie didn't start playing AAU basketball until he was 15, which should be enough in a normal world. But in the world where kids start playing at such a young age, kids get big reputations and that's hard to overcome."

One of the knocks, Meeks' father said, was people said he couldn't consistently make the outside shot. So much for that. Meeks made 10 against Tennessee, and shoots 44% from three-point range.

"But one of the things I taught Jodie is you don't have to brag about yourself. That's why you don't see him pulling on his jersey and all that stuff. Do something good and get down the court."

Meeks has a chance to become the first Kentucky first-team All-American since Ron Mercer in 1997, and he might soon be dining on steak as a finalist on the awards banquet circuit.

"I try not to get into that too much," Meeks said. "Blake Griffin is doing a great job. Stephen Curry is a great shooter. My name hasn't been

mentioned much the past two seasons. Nobody knew who I was coming into this season. Everybody was surprised, like, 'Who is this guy?' I just feel lucky to be mentioned."

#### Loose ends

Arizona was 11-8 less than a month ago, but now the Wildcats are 18-8 and interim coach **Russ Pennell** could end up the Pacific 10 coach of the year. Staying on without the interim tag seems unlikely, though. "The interesting thing is, people assume I have been told it won't happen. In my heart and mind, I just don't go there." . . . The only road to the NCAA tournament for a Big West team will be to win the conference tournament, but Long Beach State gets a chance to make a national impression Saturday when it plays host to 19-8 Green Bay in an ESPNU BracketBuster game. . . . Nice stat: San Diego State sophomore **Billy White** went 12 for 12 against Wyoming on Saturday and has made his last 19 shots.

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