

Arizona stifles Florida in Vegas on opening night, 93-87

Written by Sean Murawski // SM Sports

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LAS VEGAS, NV— Arizona's freshman big man, Koa Peat, has flown a bit under the radar within this stacked freshman class. Between the firepower of Kansas' Darryn Peterson, BYU's AJ Dybantsa, and Duke's Cameron Boozer, even freshman studs like Louisville's Mikel Brown Jr. and Tennessee's Nate Ament have seemingly been relegated to the second tier.

No matter what tier Koa Peat lied on before last night, he just bumped himself up a couple of notches. Peat's 30 points on 11 for 18 shooting stunned the defending champions, as Arizona defeated Florida in a fantastic opening night matchup.

One of the main questions for Florida heading into this season was how their new look backcourt would fare. After losing three studs to the NBA, they nabbed Xavian Lee from Princeton and Boogie Fland from Arkansas. The Gators' returning frontcourt of Thomas Haugh, Alex Condon, and Reuben Chinyelu seemed to be the most formidable regime in the country.

Early on in the game, Florida picked up where they left off in San Antonio last season. Lee (14 pts, 5 ast, 3-11 3PT) scored five of Florida's first six points. At first glance, Lee is an athletic and speedy guard. Lee and Fland are not necessarily as big as Walter Clayton Jr. or Alijah Martin, but they were able to get to the paint with ease in the early stages of this game.

Florida was able to disrupt Arizona's rhythm early on in the game, with Thomas Haugh (27 pts, 4 rebs, 1 block) looking relatively comfortable at the small forward role. About midway through the half, however, Arizona went on a bit of a surge and returned the favor. In particular, Arizona's defensive pressure and high octane offensive sets cut the lead down. By the 3:43 mark, Ivan Kharchenkov nailed a three pointer to give the Cats their first lead since it was 4-3.

By the time the second half began, it had already become the Koa Peat show. Peat looked comfortable on both sides of the ball. His patience in the post was admirable, especially against Alex Condon, who was voted an AP preseason First Team

All-American. Condon was stifled a bit, held to 11 points on 4-9 shooting. Peat also had a solid mid range game, in addition to two highlight dunks and a blocked shot.

The game was tied at 67 at the under eight timeout, and Arizona junior guard Jaden Bradley began to take over. Bradley (27 pts, 5 ast, 2 steals, 9-14 FG) was able to get to the paint and draw some crucial fouls in crunch time. Bradley hit nine out of his ten free throws, and Peat also got to the line enough to foul out both Condon and Chinyelu by the 2:20 mark in the second half.

A few inbounds passes gone awry in the final minute made the game a bit closer at the end, but a Lee missed three pointer with under 30 seconds left sealed the fate for Florida. Peat hit two more free throws to cement the six point win for Arizona.

While Florida's backcourt was certainly able to hang around, they obviously looked a bit less cohesive than last year's unit. Not too much can be taken from just the first game of the season, but it will be intriguing to see how the size of this year's backcourt plays a role. Thomas Haugh was undoubtedly Florida's best player on the court, and in this short sample size, he seems to have taken the jump many expected him to make this offseason.

Arizona can absolutely be a Final Four contender if this is their ceiling, especially if Koa Peat can play to his full potential. Jaden Bradley also looked wonderful, and they had solid minutes from a bench that helped them go eight deep on opening night. Arizona may have been undersold this offseason, but it's in their hands to keep the train rolling.

In the words of Tommy Lloyd....

BTFD.

Sean Murawski is a writer for his own personal sports website, smsports.net. He publishes weekly columns and rankings on men's college basketball, as well as coverage columns for the MLB.