

Tar Heels Beat Oakland In Opener

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J.P. Tokoto knew he'd have a bigger role while No. 12 North Carolina waits to learn when -- or if -- leading scorer P.J. Hairston or senior guard Leslie McDonald can play this season.

Tokoto looked ready in his first career start Friday night.

He scored a career-high 13 points -- all in a dominating opening half for UNC -- to help the Tar Heels beat Oakland 84-61 despite playing without Hairston and McDonald due to NCAA eligibility concerns.

"Just helping my team out wherever we need it," Tokoto said. "Coach is telling me I'm just going to have to focus on not turning the ball over ... but we were rolling in the first half and that's what we like to do -- just get out and run and share the ball. And that's what we're going to focus on this year."

Tokoto, a 6-foot-5 sophomore, has always possessed crowd-pleasing athleticism and leaping ability. But against the Golden Grizzlies, Tokoto displayed an improved jump shot after an offseason of work with assistant coach Hubert Davis and glided across the court with ease in his starting role.

Tokoto averaged 2.6 points last season, never played more than 19 minutes and didn't even reach 10 minutes in any of his last 13 games as a freshman. Against Oakland (0-1), Tokoto played 30 minutes and knocked down a 3-pointer shortly before the break -- he hit one all of last year -- that gave the Tar Heels (1-0) a 58-21 lead at halftime.

He even threw a pair of passes for alley-oop dunks in the first half.

"He's played really well," coach Roy Williams said. "He's been a great rebounder, he's been a great defensive player. His shot is better. We want him to understand it's a work in progress, it's going to get better and better and better."

The easy win was a welcome sight after all the turmoil that has hovered over the program since the summer.

The school had said Thursday that neither Hairston nor McDonald would suit up due to the ongoing review. Their absences also put more pressure on sophomore Marcus Paige to hit from outside while playing the wing instead of his normal point guard role.

Paige responded by scoring 14 points and hitting four 3-pointers. James Michael McAdoo had 21 points and nine rebounds while looking more aggressive and efficient than he had last season.

"We're working extremely hard to be the best team we can be, regardless of who's on the floor," Paige said. "Coach always says that regardless of who's on the team, North Carolina's still got to play tonight. And tonight we really came together and just decided we were going to come

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out and try to execute perfectly."

Williams found little to complain about in the first half, with the Tar Heels going on a 17-2 run to take a 19-point lead less than 9 minutes in. They nearly doubled that margin by halftime by shooting 74.2 percent (23 for 31) in their opening blitz, the highest percentage for any half in 11 seasons under Williams.

While the Tar Heels were rolling, Oakland shot 21 percent (6 for 29) in the half and couldn't match UNC's early energy.

Oakland coach Greg Kampe, in his 30th season, said his team was "shell-shocked" early.

"They made tough shots but they also got a lot of easy ones," Kampe said. "And then we start taking bad shots, which was leading to runouts and easy plays. And we couldn't stop the snowball from going."

Travis Bader scored 18 for the Golden Grizzlies, whose difficult first month will include games against No. 2 Michigan State, No. 15 Gonzaga and No. 22 UCLA.

UNC freshman Kennedy Meeks added 10 points and five rebounds in his first college game. The Tar Heels finished with 25 assists on 33 baskets.

Photo Courtesy: Roy Williams, UNC Athletics