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Akeem Springs emerging as a leader for Gophers



By Heather Rule (<https://web.archive.org/web/20170713035131/http://www.1500espn.com/author/heather-rule/>) | [@hlrule](https://twitter.com/hlrule)
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MINNEAPOLIS — Freshman Amir Coffey went to the hoop for a two-handed dunk with about five minutes left in Sunday's game versus Ohio State. He clung to the rim for just an extra second or two, then let out an emotional yell once he returned to the ground.

The bucket put the Gophers up 62-55 on their way to a 78-68 victory at Williams Arena, their third in a row in the Big Ten.

Coffey was nonchalant when asked about that dunk postgame: "Just got up there and made a good play. Just excited."

That's when his older teammate, 6-foot-4 guard Akeem Springs, couldn't resist jumping in to elaborate.

"He was more than excited," Springs said. "First of all, Amir Coffey does not celebrate. So when you see him celebrate, he was more than excited."

Perhaps that rare show of emotion was warranted. After all, Coffey and Springs led the Gophers with 19 and 18 points, respectively, to keep the victory train rolling. The Gophers are 15-2 overall and, more notably, 3-1 in the Big Ten.

Springs had a phenomenal game, with a career-high five 3-pointers on eight attempts. Early in the game, Coffey and Springs hit back-to-back 3-pointers for a 16-3 Gophers lead. Springs hit another one to go up 21-6, which brought the lively crowd of 11,267 at The Barn to its feet.

Springs hit three treys in the first half as the Gophers built up a lead that reached 18 at one point, before Ohio State trimmed it down in the second half. Oh, and for those that love milestones, he also scored his 1,000th career point.

Coach Richard Pitino was also impressed with his five assists and only one turnover.

"Akeem Springs was terrific," Pitino said. "He really carried us tonight. He was tremendous."

Having him out there showed the depth of the team, plus he's fearless and plays good defense, Pitino said. He added that Springs is a "funny kid," a quality that definitely showed at the postgame press conference when he talked about Coffey's slam dunk.

Springs also said he focuses on the little things in the game, such as playing hard on the defensive side. He recognizes that it makes a difference.

"That's what I try to focus on because I have been in some of these big situations," Springs said. "So that's what I try to give to these guys."

The redshirt senior is obviously a veteran player on this relatively young Gophers team. He played his freshman year at Northern Illinois then went to Milwaukee his sophomore through redshirt junior seasons.

He came late to the party this season, joining his Minnesota teammates in September, which made it a little difficult to get him integrated, according to Pitino.

"And I kept telling him, 'relax. It's going to happen,'" Pitino said. "He was a little impatient at first, which is normal, but I think he's really starting to take great leadership role."

Part of that is the veteran presence he brings, along with junior Nate Mason, which includes asking a lot of questions when the team is going over scouting reports. It sets the tone, Pitino said.

Though Springs started out a little slow and inconsistent on the scoring side of things, like hitting double-digits one game before scoring just 3 points the next, he's still been an important piece to this 2016-17 Gophers team.

Springs even said that it's been a bit of a roller coaster so far, but it's been fun.

"The reason it's so fun is... playing with a team that's so close and that's so tight, it just makes everything that much better because you can win games," he said.

Springs showed from the start of the season that he wasn't afraid to take a shot from just about anywhere on the court. More of those shots are falling, too. Last season with Milwaukee, he made a career-high 39 3-pointers (.351) in 32 games. This season, he's already up to 36.

He's averaging 9.1 points per game, and he's contributing (with the exception of one game when he started) from the bench. Points aren't the only thing his coach likes about his game. Springs is solid as a defender, rebounder and a leader for his teammates, according to Pitino.

"He's not just a shooter," Pitino said. "He plays at times like he's just a shooter. He's not."

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