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At 8-1, these Gophers are worth watching

By [Heather Rule](https://web.archive.org/web/20170713050910/http://www.1500espn.com/author/heather-rule/) | [@hlrule](https://web.archive.org/web/20170713050910/https://twitter.com/hlrule)[December 8, 2016 9:46 pm](https://web.archive.org/web/20170713050910/https://twitter.com/hlrule)

A friend recently asked me about the Gopher men's basketball team. He wanted to know if they're any good this year and if he should watch. I told him yes.

Whatever people think about the non-conference portion of the Gophers schedule, the fact remains that they won their eighth game Tuesday night, a 74-68 victory over New Jersey Institute of Technology. File it under the "a win's a win" category.

The Gophers are 8-1 this season and, yes, they've matched their win total from last season – with four games before they'll reach Big Ten play. They didn't win eight games last year until Feb. 23. Coach Richard Pitino even had a little fun with this before Tuesday's win, piling on the sarcasm to say they'd cut down the nets if they indeed won game No. 8.

No doubt, when a team wins eight games for an entire season, there will be some skepticism the following year. Teams don't go from being terrible to the Final Four the very next season. So, it's expected that the fan base might be a little less willing to jump back on the bandwagon.

If there's one thing Pitino has said multiple times so far this year, it's this: "It's a different team than last year." It sounds simple and trite, but he makes a point.

Look no further than two players – Reggie Lynch and Amir Coffey – as two major reasons why this Gophers team is 8-1 and worth watching.

Blocking Lynch

First of all, Lynch falls in the "one of us" category that gives Minnesotans the warm fuzzies. He's an Edina grad who came home after playing for Illinois State. The 6-10 center takes advantage of his size to give opponents plenty of trouble in the paint. His shot blocking is probably the most impressive. He's got 30 in eight games (he sat out a game with an ankle injury), good enough to lead the Big Ten with an average of 3.8 blocks per game.

He's racked up plenty of boards, too, with 53 rebounds for the season. Tuesday, he started the game with an offensive rebound and the first basket of the game. He finished with five blocks, seven rebounds and nine points.

More Coffey, please

Freshman Amir Coffey is another Minnesota kid and has been one of the best and most consistent players for the Gophers this season. He leads the team scoring with an average of 13.8 points per game, a mark that puts him 14th in the Big Ten. He's had a 30-point night, then scored 19 points the next game against Arkansas to show it wasn't a fluke.

He's started all nine games averaging 29.8 minutes per night, which ranks third on the team. He's been so fun to watch that sometimes fans might need a reminder that he's just a freshman. He's a player that appears very focused on the court, but he can be a real difference-maker, too.

He hit a couple clutch shots near the end of the Vanderbilt game over the weekend. As part of his 30-point effort versus St. John's, he seemed to lift the slow-starting Gophers back into the game with a slam dunk followed by a rare display of screaming emotion. He can drive the hoop, hit jumpers and contribute from the foul line.

Springing into action

Akeem Springs, a graduate transfer and redshirt senior, is another new face on the floor for the Gophers. He had his best night with the Gophers in the NJIT game, leading the team with 19 points, including four 3-pointers, and seven boards.

What can be fun to watch with Springs is his shot selection. It's not necessarily all great shot selection, but he's got the element of surprise down sometimes. He leads the Gophers with 17 3-pointers in 48 attempts. He's also contributed double figures five times.

So yes, these Gophers are worth a chance this season.

Up next:

The Gophers play two home games over the weekend. They host Sun Belt Conference opponent Georgia Southern (4-4) at 8 p.m. Friday. The Gophers will look to contain Sun Belt's leading scorer Ike Smith, with 21.4 points per game, and Tookie Brown, who's second in the Sun Belt with 19 steals.

Then Northern Illinois comes to town for a 4 p.m. tip Sunday.

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