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Jalen Graham wasn't forecast to help right away, but he may end up saving Arizona State



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By Doug Haller (/author/doug-haller/) Nov 13, 2019

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Two years ago, a college basketball coach sat with then-Phoenix Mountain Pointe High coach Duane Eason watching film. The college coach was there to scout big man Jalen Graham, but Eason wanted to show him another player.

Finally, the college coach asked: “Well, where’s Jalen in here?”

Eason fast-forwarded the video then slowed it down.

“There he is right there,” he said.

“He’s got street clothes on,” the college coach said.

“Yeah,” Eason said. “He didn’t want to practice hard the previous day so he didn’t get to play that night.”

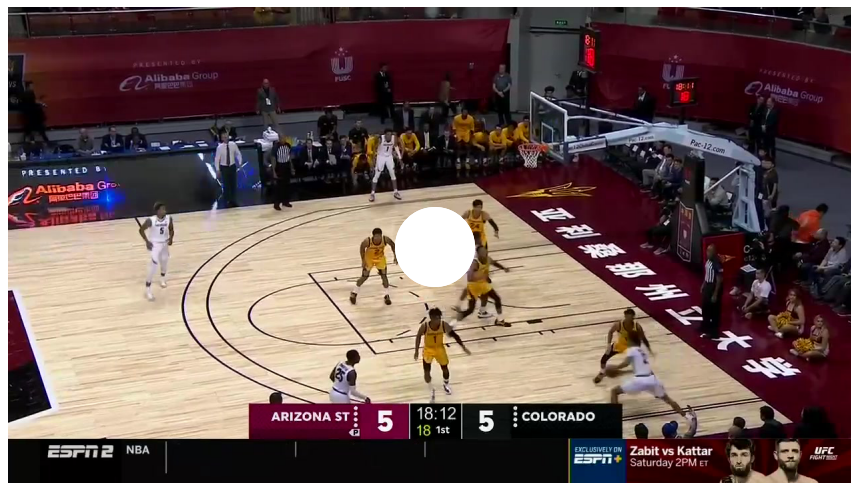
OK, then.

This was a turning point for Jalen Graham. Not this specific moment, but this specific time in his life. An old-school coach with New Jersey roots, Eason pushed the 6-foot-9 forward. He pushed him so hard that another coach told him that if he didn't back off, he might end up losing him.

Responded Eason: "If I lose him, he ain't going to make it so it doesn't matter."

Late Wednesday afternoon, Graham worked in the Desert Financial Arena weight room with strength coach Daniel Marshall. Most of his Arizona State teammates already had dressed and left for the day. The 205-pound Graham kept working on his lower body.

A week into the season, the big man Eason once described as "lazy as hell" already has made an impact. With junior Romello White suspended, the freshman forward started in ASU's opener against Colorado in China. In 28 minutes, Graham had six points, three rebounds and five blocked shots. With ASU dangerously thin in the post, his production was the most encouraging takeaway from the Sun Devils' 81-71 loss, mostly because it wasn't expected.

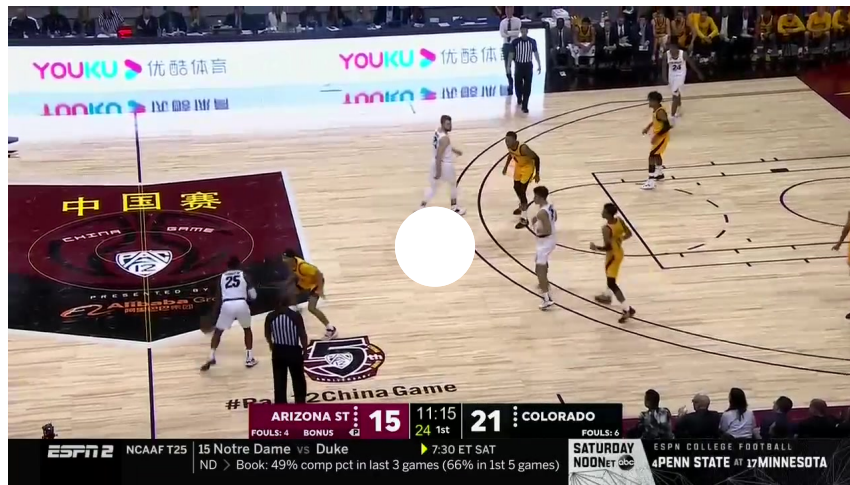


After ASU lost Zylan Cheatham and De'Quon Lake off last season's NCAA Tournament team, the Sun Devils signed Graham, but they also brought in junior-college transfers Andre Allen and Khalid Thomas to help in the frontcourt. Most viewed Graham, who initially had committed to previous ASU coach Herb Sendek at Santa Clara, as a longer-term option.

"He wasn't forecasted to be that guy," coach Bobby Hurley said. "If you look back a year ago, people weren't thinking of him in that regard. That's how quickly he's catching up."

Instead of running from competition, Graham used the arrival of the junior-college transfers as fuel. He said he put his work ethic into “overdrive.” With the absences of Cheatham and Lake, he knew he could make an immediate impact on defense as a rim protector. Even if he lacked strength, he had a 7-foot-2 wingspan and 32.5-inch standing vertical, both team bests.

“I knew if I wanted to play right off the bat, I needed to play defensively and block shots,” said Graham, who likely will start in place of White in Thursday’s home contest against Central Connecticut State.



In doing so against Colorado, Graham joined Lake, Carrick Felix, Jordan Bachynski, Eric Jacobsen and Jethro Tshisumpa as the only ASU players over the past decade to block five or more shots in a contest. Offensively, Graham also showed potential with his patience. He didn’t panic. He didn’t rush. He read the defense and reacted.

“He provided what we needed,” Hurley said. “He gave us a presence in the paint when we knew it was going to be an adventure to get a rebound with (Colorado’s) size. At just about every position they were bigger than us. But I thought he handled himself terrific for a freshman that hasn’t been through these types of games.”

In high school, Graham blew up on the EYBL circuit the summer before his senior season. While out recruiting, Hurley said he had other coaches coming up to him asking, “Who is this guy?”

In addition to Santa Clara, Graham, a 3-star prospect, had scholarship offers from schools such as Oklahoma and Texas Tech. He chose ASU because it was close to home, but also because of the coaching staff. In some ways, Hurley

reminds him of Eason — with one major difference.

“(He’s) a lot more scarier, I’m not going to lie,” Graham said.

Eason isn’t surprised. Coaching in New Jersey, he used to go watch Hurley’s father, Bob Hurley Sr., coach at St. Anthony in Jersey City. “Coach Hurley’s practices are legendary,” he said of the Hall of Fame coach. Eason knew Graham would do well at ASU because, like himself, Hurley was a no-nonsense coach. But just to make sure he told Graham:

“You want to stay home, you want to play against this level of competition, you want to be here, so when you get there put the work in. Don’t come in there crying. I don’t want to hear nothing about, ‘Yo, Coach, it’s too hard.’ This is it.”

So far, Graham, normal freshman struggles aside, has been up to the task. And if he continues to develop, he could end up helping the Sun Devils with their biggest need: interior defense.

“I think probably my proudest moment from him was when he called me this summer and he said, ‘Man, Coach, a lot of the stuff that we worked on and you talked about at Mountain Pointe is the stuff that we’re doing at ASU,’” Eason said. “And I was like, ‘Really? What a surprise.’”

(Top photo of Jalen Graham: Sun Devil Athletics)

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Doug Haller (/author/doug-haller/) covers Arizona State football and basketball for The Athletic Arizona. He previously worked 13 years at The Arizona Republic, where he covered three Final Fours and four football national championship games. He twice has been named Arizona Sports Writer of the Year. Follow Doug on Twitter [@DougHaller](https://twitter.com/DougHaller) (<https://twitter.com/DougHaller>).

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