

True freshman Jalen Graham a big contributor for surging Sun Devils
By Michelle Gardner, azcentral.com/Feb. 15, 2010

Jalen Graham doesn't look much like the lanky true freshman that first stepped on the Arizona State campus eight or so months ago.

His 6-foot-9 frame has filled out a bit, although he still has room to grow in that department. He dyed the top of his hair blonde.

And he has added a couple of tattoos, most notably one of his idol Kobe Bryant on his right leg which he added hours after the former NBA great perished in a helicopter crash.

The Sun Devil rookie has taken some good-natured ribbing about the physical changes but he takes it all in stride.

"My coaches said it was a mid-life crisis, and I was like, 'I'm way too young for that,'" he laughed. "But I don't know, I just decided to do it."

All kidding aside, Graham's contribution is one reason the Sun Devils (16-8, 7-4) are back in the mix for their third NCAA postseason appearance in as many seasons. They will play an afternoon road game Sunday against California (10-14, 4-7) at Haas Pavilion.

This season coach Bobby Hurley's squad was a bit thin when it came to personnel down low with junior forward Romello White the lone post player with significant experience. Last year's leading rebounder Zylan Cheatham graduated, as did his primary backup De'Quon Lake.

That has opened the door for Graham, a Mountain Pointe High School product, to earn considerable playing time as a true freshman and he has not disappointed.

"He's got great upside," Hurley said. "You're not sure how physically he's going to be able to handle himself versus older and more physical guys, but he's been up for the challenge. He had some really good moments in the preseason that would indicate that he would be ready. He's been another big plus for us."

Graham is seeing 11.5 minutes a game, backing up White. He did get starts in the first two games of the season when White was sidelined for disciplinary reasons. In the season opening loss to Colorado in China, Graham blocked five shots. Then in the home opener against Central Connecticut he scored 10 points, snagged four rebounds and had three steals.

He has had an impact in more recent games as well. With White dealing with foul trouble Thursday night at Stanford, Graham played 16 minutes, delivering six points, five rebounds and an assist in a 74-69 Sun Devil victory.

In last week's 66-64 win over USC at Desert Financial Arena, Graham blocked a shot by the Trojans' Jonah Mathews which triggered a fast break that, appropriately enough, ended with his slam dunk at the other end.

His 23 blocked shots are second on the team to only White's 29.

Asked what the biggest surprise of his rookie campaign has been, he says it's the physical nature of the game. That was never more evident than the recent road trip to Washington in which he found himself banging in the paint with the Huskies highly-touted freshman Isaiah Stewart who outweighed him by 40 pounds.

"They tell you that and you kind of expect it, but you really don't get it until you're actually out there," he said, after a recent practice at ASU's Weatherup Center. "I think I have done pretty well though."

Graham has been a pleasant surprise, but ASU wasn't originally his first choice when it came to colleges. He first committed to Santa Clara, which is directed by former ASU coach Herb Sendek, Hurley's predecessor. But Graham is close to twin sister Jenah and when he couldn't convince her to go there as well, he started thinking about other options.

His stock was also soaring which landed some offers from higher profile schools. Oklahoma, Texas Tech and Illinois were among the other suitors, but Graham has not regretted his eventual landing spot.

"She's the yin to my yang," Graham said of his twin, which elicited some laughter from the media gathered around him. "I'm really happy how everything turned out. I love playing here."

Graham usually enters in relief of White but during the road trip to Washington Hurley toyed with his two bigs on the floor at the same time. The experiment was well received. The argument against it is the potential for foul trouble for one or both.

"When (Graham) was in the game, I was kind of guarding a different position," White said. "That's helping me out, helping me move my feet, guarding the perimeter players. And it just opened up the floor for us. I got to play the '4,' which I've never really done. So I mean, that was definitely fun for me."

Graham liked the lineup as well.

"I feel like we complement each other great," Graham said. "We're both big. We can both finish. We can both rebound and sometimes in games, we lack rebounding. We're kind of a smaller team, so I feel like when me and 'Mello are in, it kind of balances out."

Graham says he wore No. 24 in high school and carried that over to this year at ASU because Bryant was always his favorite player. He got the help of White when it came to the tattoo with his older teammate recommending the artist he used.

He says he plays hard because that was always Bryant's trademark. He also concedes he is about done with the tattoos . . . for now.

"My mom is getting mad," he laughed.