

Johnson always ready for his next chance to play

BY JEFFREY LUTZ
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TULSA — Elijah Johnson has spent most of two years on Kansas' basketball team as the next man up and little time as The Man.

When guards get suspended, as three have during Johnson's career, Johnson's playing time and production jump substantially. When those players return, Johnson goes back to playing a smaller part.

It happened when point guard Tyshawn Taylor was suspended for two games in February. Johnson moved into the starting lineup and stayed

there briefly after Taylor returned. When Taylor regained his starting position, Johnson went back to being a reserve.

An important reserve, but still a reserve.

"I never want to settle," Johnson said. "I don't want to settle for (playing) eight minutes when I should be playing 15. But it's about the team and whatever is working for the team at that time."

It may not be ideal for Johnson, but the Jayhawks are best when Taylor starts and uses his speed to establish the tempo. Then the more-stout Johnson can further wear

down opposing guards by playing physical on defense.

The change of pace allows the Jayhawks to match up with any opponent. Taylor's and Johnson's contrasting styles don't equal a dropoff in production from the rest of the offense. Johnson led the Jayhawks to five wins as the starting point guard in February and March.

"I think the rest of the other guys saw him as their new leader and they were ready for him," Taylor said. "Me being out, I was still practicing and I was able to talk him through some stuff. It got to the point where he was talking me

through stuff and helping me out when I came back."

Johnson played in the first nine games as a freshman in 2009-10 when Brady Morningstar was suspended, then didn't play in Morningstar's first game back and in 12 games after that, including last season's NCAA Tournament loss to Northern Iowa.

When Josh Selby was suspended by the NCAA for the first nine games this season, Johnson, after returning from his own two-game suspension, played double-figure minutes in every game. Then Selby returned and Johnson played 15 total minutes the next two

games.

When he started five of six games late this season, Johnson thought he finally had nailed down a permanent spot. But Taylor scored 20 points in his return start against Texas, a game in which Johnson played four minutes.

"The last round I thought I established that I was the guy," Johnson said. "But I don't want to jump to conclusions, I just wanted to keep playing. I just got comfortable but I now see where (coach Bill Self) was going. He just put me at a comfort level so we could have that ammunition going into the tournament."

Johnson and Taylor said Taylor's suspension brought the friends even closer, because Taylor saw things from the bench that Johnson couldn't see from the court, allowing Taylor to offer frequent advice.

The two could be in closer proximity when advising each other during the tournament.

"We need them both," Self said. "That's what I tell them, we need them both. One is more of a possession-type guard and the other one is kind of a roadrunner-type guard. But we need Elijah's athletic ability, and maybe we'll play those two together more than what we have."

Elijah Johnson

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