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Greg Hansen : Harden will be a big task for Cats

Opinion by Greg Hansen

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Arizona's Mysterious Mr. X, publicity-shy strategist Mike Dunlap, will draw the obligatory X's and O's on a grease board today and explain how the X's are to stop the O's.

The Wildcats will be the X's; there will be many of them. They will trap, harass, surround and out-number the single O on the board. That will be Arizona State's James Harden.

In the Pac-10, James Harden is the Big O.

As diagrammed by Mr. X, the scheme will appear to be a work of genius. It will sound good. It will look good. All of those X's against one O. Brilliant.

But it will not work.

Whenever James Harden needs to get from Point A to Point B tonight, he will get there. The X's will scatter and the O will find daylight — and probably draw a foul in the process.

It does not matter that Jim Livengood is paying the Mysterious Mr. X \$375,000 to do nothing more than draw X's and O's. It does not matter that tonight's game is a career challenge for Dunlap; the opportunity to create a hybrid defense to stop James Harden, even though UCLA's defensive master, Ben Howland, and a slew of Final Four-tested players could not do so.

In 30 seasons of Pac-10 basketball, James Harden is one of the three most difficult defensive matchups to step on the McKale Center court.

There was UCLA'S 6-foot-10-inch shooting machine, Don MacLean, who could not be guarded effectively by anyone in an Arizona uniform, not even by those Wildcats who wound up NBA multimillionaires.

There was Oregon State's 6-11 human layup, Steve Johnson, who waited patiently near the basket as two of Ralph Miller's Pac-10 champion screening machines worked backdoor cuts and put on passing clinics so well that Johnson shot .746 percent from the field in 1981-82.

Now comes Harden, who is a bull of a young man, 6-5 and maybe 225 pounds, a mixture of Khalid Reeves' full-speed-ahead strength and Chris Mills' size, versatility and go-to-the-hole instincts. The only thing Harden lacks is Sean Elliott's breakaway first step.

"Harden actually seems to seek contact; he plays better that way," says Tucson attorney Mike Redhair, a Sun Devils starting point guard from 1986 to 1990. "He's got a mean streak, a tough streak. He'll jump into you, leading with a shoulder or an elbow. Sometimes, he's unstoppable."

The four Sun Devils who start opposite Harden are willing role players, rooks and pawns to Harden's king. One of them, senior center Jeff Pendergraph, possibly has a future playing overseas pro basketball. The others are Joe the Plumber.

"He reminds me a lot of (ex-Sun Devil and NBA star) Lionel Hollins," says Tucson real estate executive Joe Nehls,

an Arizona All-Pac-10 guard in 1980. "They're both big shooting guards, lefties, aggressive guys who go to the basket."

Over the last 25 years, ASU has just three NCAA tournament teams. All of those, and several others, had superior personnel to this Sun Devils team. Yet because Harden is so dynamic, and coach Herb Sendek is so effective at getting the most out of limited resources, this ASU team has the look of one that could play on to the Sweet 16.

Much of that can be seen in Harden's 149 free throws. That's 54 more than Arizona's Jordan Hill, who seems to get fouled every time he touches the ball. That's a lot of easy points.

It's possible that Harden will shoot more than 300 free throws this year. Only one man in Pac-10 history, ex-Sun Devil center Ike Diogu (311), has done so. Stanford's marvelous Adam Keefe, who seemed to be shooting free throws all night, never topped 267 in a season.

Harden isn't infallible. He scored a mere four points against USC's Daniel Hackett a week ago. It wasn't unlike Arizona's Jerryd Bayless, who was limited to eight points by Hackett a year ago.

Alas, Arizona doesn't have a Daniel Hackett to guard Harden tonight.

"Harden presents a real predicament for Arizona's coaches," says Nehls. "If you put a big guy on him, he'll go around him. If you put a smaller guy out there, he'll post him up. Arizona doesn't have anyone to match up with him."

A year ago in Tempe, Harden scored 22 points in the second half, including an overtime-forcing drive to the bucket when everyone in the gym knew he was going to get the ball and drive to the basket.

The O's beat all the X's that night 64-59.

Now it's Arizona's move again.

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