

ASU needs a go-to man? Kuksiks is ready

The Arizona Republic

October 21, 2009

By: Doug Haller

Rihards Kuksiks shot 44.3 percent from 3-point range last season, eighth nationally among those who qualify. He also made four or more from that distance in 11 games.

And yet, his ASU teammates insist fans haven't seen Kuksiks at his best. At times in practice, they say, the junior forward goes through stretches where he simply doesn't miss.

"The thing about Rik," freshman Trent Lockett said, "is if you're in a drill with him, like in skill workouts, and you're at his basket, you better make some shots or he'll embarrass you. He'll just go 40 in a row or something crazy."

Kuksiks is ASU's returning leading scorer at 10.3 points per game. Although he cooled in the Pac-10 Tournament, Kuksiks was a perimeter threat for most of the season. He canned six 3-pointers and scored 20 points in the season-ending loss to Syracuse.

It wasn't enough.

Asked to describe last year's effort, Kuksiks shrugs and says simply: "Average."

"I think I was a one-dimensional player," he said. "I'm not that type of player. I just really took that role so my team could get better."

The versatility Kuksiks craves surfaced only in flashes. Trailing Brigham Young 75-73 with a minute to go, Kuksiks -- quiet all game -- drove past one defender and scored over another to knot the score.

Three days later against Idaho State, Kuksiks again abandoned the arc, driving and dishing to Ty Abbott for an open 3-pointer.

"Whenever Rik made something off the dribble -- a layup or a dunk or a pullup -- everyone was "Ohhhhh!" But he can do it," senior point guard Derek Glasser said. "Rik's a multidimensional player, and people are going to see it."

Even at this early date, ASU's biggest hurdle is no great mystery. With James Harden and Jeff Pendergraph earning NBA paychecks, everyone has the same questions:

Who's going to score? When the Sun Devils need points, where will they go?

In other words, who is this team's go-to man?

Fourth-year coach Herb Sendek doesn't see it in such defined terms. He points out

that ASU had numerous players deliver clutch baskets last season. Glasser hit 3-pointers in wins against UCLA and Arizona. Abbott buried one against Brigham Young.

"Every team is different," Sendek said. "Some teams have a go-to player and everybody knows on a certain possession where the ball is going. Other teams are very effective and it's much more of an equal distribution in those situations. I think you can be effective in either case."

Whatever the coaching staff decides, Kuksiks insists he's ready.

"Definitely, definitely," he said. "I've been waiting for this since I came here. I've been working hard to get ready."

His teammates have noticed.

"The other day he was a little upset with himself because he made 9 out of 10," Lockett said. "Missing shots really isn't acceptable for Rik."