

# YAHOO! SPORTS

## Harden leads Sun Devils into Top 25

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Dec 26, 3:56 pm EST

TEMPE, Ariz. (AP)—James Harden can be a reluctant superstar.

"He's the only kid I've ever coached who I had to tell to shoot," said Arizona State assistant coach Scott Pera, who also coached Harden at Artesia High School in Lakewood, Calif. "And I would yell at him to shoot it."

Good things happen when Harden shoots it. ASU's 6-foot-5 sophomore guard is the nation's fifth-leading scorer at 23.7 points per game, and he makes it look so easy at times that ASU fans, like his coaches and teammates, implore him to shoot more.

"I see what they're talking about," Harden said. "But I'm not that type of player who, I want to score every time or need 20 shots per game. That's not my game."

"Obviously, I'm going to be more aggressive, but I want to get my teammates involved," he said. "It makes me more happy when they're scoring and...getting more involved. If all of us are clicking, it's going to be that much harder to stop us."

Every now and then, Harden takes over a game, crashing into the lane for acrobatic lefthanded dunks or draining 3-pointers. Against then-unbeaten Brigham Young last week, Harden scored 21 points in the second half—13 at the free-throw line—as the 20th-ranked Sun Devils rallied for a 76-75 victory in Glendale's University of Phoenix Stadium.

But the biggest basket came when Harden dribbled into the lane, drew a flock of defenders and passed to wide-open teammate Ty Abbott, who hit a tying 3-pointer from the corner with 2 minutes to play.

It was a typical Harden moment. Just when the Cougars thought they had him stopped, he figured out a way to beat them.

"Great, great court sense," Pera said. "He has instincts that you can't teach."

ASU is 19-4 when Harden scores at least 20 points. In the Pac-10, the scouting report says that if you stop Harden, you stop the Sun Devils.

It's not so easy to do. Harden has scored 30 or more points four times this season, the most by a Sun Devil since Ike Diogu did it six times in 2004-05.

But when Harden has a rare bad game, the Sun Devils struggle to compensate. He scored nine points before fouling out against IUPUI on Dec. 14, and Arizona State had to go into overtime to avoid an embarrassing loss.

At times, the Sun Devils (10-1) look like they could be a tough out in the NCAA tournament. At other times, ASU resembles nothing more than an above average team with a future NBA lottery pick in its lineup.

Harden has attempted 137 shots, 34 more than the next-highest Sun Devil, and he has taken 100 of ASU's 235 free throws. Harden also leads the team in steals, minutes, turnovers and fouls, and his 46 assists are second to point guard Derek Glasser, his former Artesia High teammate. Harden is second to Jeff Pendergraph in rebounds.

The stat sheet paints a picture of a one-man gang. But don't tell Harden that.

In a recent interview, Harden grimaced when a reporter joked that he was going to dub Arizona State "Harden's Heroes."

"Awww, no," Harden said. "No, no, no."

Harden may not seek the spotlight, but he has brought it to a program that has long labored in the shadow of the Arizona Wildcats, whose McKale Center home is about 90 miles to the south.

Harden committed to Arizona State about two months after coach Herb Sendek hired Pera, who had coached Harden to a California state title in 2006. It was widely perceived as a package deal, but Pera said he still had to recruit Harden after joining Sendek's staff.

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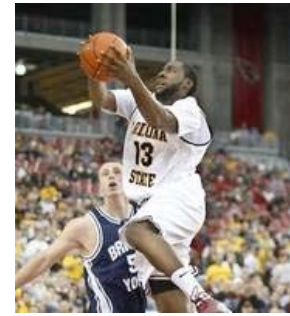
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Rival recruiters told Harden that his skills would be wasted in the methodical offense Sendek used in his first season at ASU, when the Sun Devils had little scoring punch.

"When I heard he ran the Princeton offense, I kind of paused," Harden said. "I was like, Oh, I don't want to run that."

Pera chuckled at the memory.

"Two years ago, James didn't know the Princeton offense from the man in the moon," Pera said. "All I told him was, 'It's a recruiting ploy, James. This is why they're telling you this. If you come here, I'm telling you what's going to happen. You have to trust me. What would the benefit be of bringing you here to not exploit your talents?' "



Harden signed with the Sun Devils. He was an unlikely catch for ASU, which has landed only five McDonald's All-Americans.

Harden said he was lured by the chance to help build something, so he passed on the opportunity to follow Artesia High products Ed and Charles O'Bannon to UCLA.

"That's how I've been raised, to take on the challenge and experience different things, to not always take the easy way," Harden said. "Create my own path."

Harden made another outside-the-box decision when he spurned the NBA last summer after averaging 17.8 points per game as a freshman and earning a spot on the All-Pac-10 first team.

"I was still a young kid who wasn't ready for that next level," said Harden, who won't say if this will be his last season. "The next level, it's all basketball. You're watched on what you do. It's a business. I wasn't ready for that. I was still young, I was still growing."

The Sun Devils are growing too—thanks to their reluctant superstar.

The year before Harden arrived, Arizona State went 8-22 and lost a school-record 15 consecutive games. In his freshman year, the Sun Devils went 21-13, missed the NCAAs by a whisker and reached the third round of the NIT.

"From the time he committed and then signed, and all the way through this conversation today, he's given us tremendous exposure," Sendek said this week. "He's improved our credibility. He's helped promote our program in ways that would have been difficult to accomplish otherwise."