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Green rises to occasion for hometown fans

Associated Press

The Detroit Pistons didn't win a basketball game Sunday night.

They did, however, accomplish the one thing they most wanted to do: They stayed healthy.

In a game that saw little-used reserve Amir Johnson lead the team in minutes, the Pistons lost a lackluster 102-91 decision to the Sixers.

Pistons coach Flip Saunders said that he would have preferred a better performance, but readily acknowledged that, with a week to go before the playoffs, avoiding injuries is the only real issue.

"That's right," he agreed.

Sunday was Fan Appreciation Night at the Palace of Auburn Hills, but Detroit native Willie Green was the one putting on a show for the crowd. Green scored 26 points — 10 more than anyone else in the game — and added seven assists and five rebounds.

"I really like coming home and playing in front of my hometown fans," said Green, who attended Detroit Cooley High School and the University of Detroit. "I had about 50 people here — family, friends and church."

The game was meaningless for both teams — Detroit has clinched the Eastern Conference's top seed, while the Sixers were eliminated from playoff contention on Saturday — and it showed.

"I'm very proud of our guys to go out and play a game that doesn't have a whole lot of meaning," Sixers coach Maurice Cheeks said. "Our young guys went out there and played it the right way."

The Sixers were missing several regulars, as Kyle Korver (wrist), Andre Iguodala (back) and Kevin Ollie (eye) stayed home, while the Pistons gave their key players a light workload.

Ex-Sixer Chris Webber was the only Pistons starter to play more than 23 minutes, while the 19-year-old Johnson had 12 points and a career-best 10 rebounds in just his sixth game of the season.

Johnson has been dominating the developmental league and blocked six shots, but also missed nine of 12 shots and committed five fouls. On one possession, he had two shots blocked by Samuel Dalembert in a span of five seconds.





"Amir's still got a ways to go," Saunders said. "During one timeout, Chauncey [Billups] hit him on the top of the head and reminded him that this isn't the NBDL. He can't just launch shots over everyone in this league."

Johnson had already figured that out.

"It was pretty tough out there — this isn't

like the D-League," he said. "It's taken me two years to get this comfortable with my game, and I have to keep going."

Steven Hunter finished with 16 points and eight boards for the Sixers, and Andre Miller had 12 points and nine assists.

"It was fun — all the guys came out and played really loose," Hunter said. "Everyone is trying to work on their game and get better for next season."

Tayshaun Prince led the Pistons with 15 points, but the next five players in Detroit's usual rotation combined for only 24 points.

The game was tied at 50 at the half, but the Sixers dominated Detroit's mix-and-match lineup in the third quarter, and built a 77-70 lead. Saunders pulled all of his starters before the period ended, and played Rasheed Wallace only three minutes in the second half.

The Sixers pulled away in the fourth, dunking almost at will against a Pistons lineup that featured three guards and two small forwards.

"The one thing that we have to avoid is getting into bad habits," Saunders said. "I think we competed harder Saturday in practice than we did tonight, and I don't understand that. Starting next weekend, our effort has to be at the max."

Notes: The Pistons started their usual lineup, but Johnson was the first player off the bench, and usual sixth-man Antonio McDyess was the 10th player used by the Pistons and only played nine minutes. ... The Pistons honored the 60th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's first major league game by asking the fans for a round of applause in his honor. ... The win snapped the Sixers' six-game losing streak against the Pistons, and was just its second victory over Detroit in 13 tries.

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