

BY JEREMY CURTIS

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. – In three marvelous minutes during the first half against Pitt, West Virginia found its post presence on offense, sixth man off the bench and instant crowd favorite.

Deniz Kilicli, a 6-foot-9, 260-pound freshman center from Turkey, showcased a pair of silky-smooth hook shots that would have made Kareem Abdul-Jabbar smile, in the midst of a scoring surge that gave WVU a 10-point lead in the early going.

More importantly, sixth-ranked WVU (18-3, 7-2 BIG EAST) seized a whirlwind of momentum from Kilicli and never relinquished the lead en route a 70-51 blowout over Pitt, their arch-rivals, in the Backyard Brawl.

Seven minutes into the first half, Kilicli, whose 20-game amateurism suspension ended, headed to the scores table during a timeout to check in for the first time.

“I just wanted to yell,” Kilicli said. “It’s been a frustrating period for me and it’s done. I’m so happy to be here.”

The WVU student section, decked out in gold, waving Turkish flags, chanting ‘Turkey, Turkey’ and slinging a barrage of explicative-riddled chants directed at Pitt, roared with applause in anticipation of Kilicli’s debut.

“It was awesome,” Kilicli said. “When you have that support behind you, it’s so easy to do everything. I felt nervous at the beginning, but I knew these guys were behind me.”

He did not disappoint. While getting just seven minutes of playing time, Kilicli finished with nine points and a rebound, against No. 21 Pitt (16-6, 6-4 BIG EAST).

On his first offensive possession, WVU senior forward Da’Sean Butler saw Kilicli hit the low post on the left side of the basket and dropped in the entry pass. Without hesitation, Kilicli rose the ball in his left hand and released the hook shot which trickled around the rim, teased the home crowd and dropped through the net. A shockwave of applause resounded through the WVU Coliseum.

“That’s why I passed him the ball,” said Butler, who had a game-high 18 points against Pitt, and became the schools’ fifth all-time career scorer, passing the legendary Rod Thorn.

On the next possession, Kilicli dropped in a tear-drop hook shot from the right block in the low post, which drew a slightly bigger rise from the sold-out crowd of better than 15,000. “They just give me the ball inside and I try to score,” he said. “I did today.”

Butler sees Kilicli pull off similar hook shots all the time in practice. “I love it,” he said. “He can go both ways. He’s strong and versatile, it makes it difficult for them to guard.”

Kilicli struck again on the third consecutive offensive possession by tipping in a missed jump shot by Butler, giving WVU a 20-10 advantage and sending the crowd into a sheer state of euphoria. “They were cheering for me and everything,” said Kilicli. “I just tried to give them what they

expect.”

He checked out of the game at the 11 minute mark to his fourth ovation from the fans, after just the first three minutes of his budding career.

“That was probably the most fun I had the whole game,” said Butler.

WVU coach Bob Huggins -- usually unimpressed with anything -- offered a hand shake as Kilicli headed to the bench. “I honestly thought he could score,” Huggins said. “I don’t think they spent a lot of time [scouting] Deniz. The kid can score the ball.”

Reserve forward Cam Thoroughman was the first teammate to greet Kilicli, who was immediately bear-hugged by freshman forward Dan Jennings.

Kilicli added a free throw late in the first half and capped off the win with a left-handed finger roll lay-up after an impressive dribble drive, with less than a minute to go in the game.

“He showed off his ball skills at the end of the game,” Huggins quipped.

Kilicli had no reservations about getting his first action of college basketball against Pitt. “I was expecting the maximum. I was thinking they were going to push me around like a kid,” said Kilicli. Besides revving up home crowds by scoring old school buckets in the paint, Kilicli showed his potential in being the Mountaineers legitimate scoring threat off the bench, which is something the team is still searching for.

“Deniz was a great part of our team today,” said sophomore forward Kevin Jones. “He brought a lot of energy. He came out and produced really well for us. Hopefully he will keep doing that for the rest of the season.”

Kilicli played just three minutes in the second half and was whistled for a three-second violation. He wasn’t particularly pleased with getting just one rebound and knows he has room to improve, which is understandable for a freshman center playing in the Big East.

“One rebound is horrible,” Kilicli said. “My expectation is at least five rebounds for a game.”

Huggins said, “He could get 10-11 rebounds a game, too.”