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MEN'S BASKETBALL

From one John to another: John Blackwell steps up for Wisconsin basketball after John Tonje departure

After John Tonje's record-setting season and departure to the NBA, John Blackwell looks poised to take the Badgers' offense to new heights

By **Josh Murphy**

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For decades, Wisconsin men's basketball was defined by a stifling defense and a slow, rhythmic offense. Last season, that changed.

The 2024-25 Badgers underwent a philosophical shift from head coach Greg Gard, who adopted a modern scheme prioritizing faster tempo and more 3-point shots. This change in philosophy resulted in resounding success, as Wisconsin.averaged 82.2 points per game on offense, third-highest in program history, and broke a program record for most 3-pointers made in a single season.

No one was better from beyond the arc last season than John Tonje.

Tonje transferred to Wisconsin in May 2024, and his lone season with the Badgers was nothing short of extraordinary. He averaged 19.6 points per game and scored 724 points on the season, which ranks second all-time in program history behind Frank Kaminsky's 732 points scored during the 2014-15 campaign. Tonje earned Second Team All-American and unanimous First Team All-Big Ten honors after his spectacular season.

Tonje's breakout performance came during a 103-88 upset win over No. 9 Arizona, in which he scored a whopping 41 points. He made 8-of-14 3-point attempts in that game, which set the tone for the season. Tonje became a fan favorite from then on, and when it was all said and done, he sank 85 3-pointers — third-most in a single season in team history. His amazing season paid off, and Tonje was drafted 53rd overall by the Utah Jazz in the 2025 NBA Draft.

It's safe to say that Tonje's presence will be missed on the court this season. But that raises another question: who can step up and fill that void?

Look no further than the third-year heir apparent John Blackwell, who was the ice to Tonje's fire last season. Blackwell took a huge stride as a sophomore last season, averaging 15.8 points per game and making 58 3-pointers over the course of the season, both second on the team behind Tonje. He was also tied for first in steals per game with 0.9.

Blackwell initially declared for the NBA Draft back in April but withdrew his name from consideration in May, opting instead to return to Madison. He drew a little inspiration from NBA legend Michael Jordan in his announcement to return for year three.

"I'm back," Blackwell said in a post on Instagram.

Through this experience in the NBA Draft process, Blackwell gained valuable insight and feedback from top draft prospects and scouts ahead of the 2025-26 season, which Blackwell has hefty goals for.

"I want to be a defensive menace this season," he said in an interview with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "I want to try to make all-defense this year. I think that would help my team."

He also spoke on what he needs to do better to take that next step in year three.

"Obviously I'll make mistakes, but just cutting down on those mistakes," Blackwell said. "Cutting down on getting back-doored or in foul trouble. I was in foul trouble last year, so cutting down on those, playing smart, playing how my team needs me out there."

He has even made some changes to his diet.

"I do no diary," Blackwell said. "So I do no cheese … no ice cream, rarely any sweets. And it's helped me. It's helped me sleep better. It's helped me recover, not a lot of inflammation in my body from the milk or the cheese."

Blackwell got his first opportunity to show the world the work he's put in this offseason in Monday's season opener. The Badgers secured a 96-64 victory over Campbell and, unsurprisingly, Blackwell was front-page news after a stellar performance. He dropped 31 points and matched his career high with six 3-pointers. He also racked up seven total rebounds, three assists and one steal on the night.

Blackwell was asked during the postgame press conference what area of his game he thinks is most improved from last season.

"I think mentally," he said. "I think staying locked in the whole game and being more mature throughout the games."

He was also asked about what he did during the offseason to improve his 3-point shooting.

"Taking good ones, you know. 10 toes down, getting those up rather than the step-backs," Blackwell said. "Obviously, if it's a late shot clock I gotta take some of those. But, just focusing more on my mechanics and getting my shot right."

Blackwell's transformation into the player he is today is no fluke, it's the culmination of many years of rigorous training, a determined work ethic and a drive to be great.

Of course, the Badgers would love to have Tonje raining 3s in the Kohl Center this season. However, Blackwell seems poised to take another stride in year three at Wisconsin. If his performance in the season opener on Monday is any indication, fans should get excited for what could be a special season for Blackwell and his Badgers.

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