We Should’ve Seen Lin Coming

While at Harvard, Jeremy Lin more than held his own in rare meetings with national powers like Connecticut.

Jeremy Lin’s surprising success over his last five games, his only five NBA games in which he’s played at least half the game, don’t look fluky for two big reasons: He has a track record of performing at this high a level; and he’s getting most of his points near the basket, not from a long-range hot streak.

Harvard, Lin’s alma mater, makes him a great underdog basketball story. It also helps explain why NBA general managers and coaches didn’t put much stock in his truly impressive college stats, which outshone many players who were drafted in 2010 as Lin watched all 30 NBA teams pass him by. Writers at the Wages of Wins, an NBA quantitative-analysis blog, have put together an index of college performance that shows Lin was significantly better than the average draftee during his days with the Crimson. Even if his Ivy League stats should be discounted, he’d still come out ahead of many of the players near the top of the 2010 draft class. And the limited evidence when he played top-flight competition while in school is impressive. In four games in his junior and senior years against Boston College, Georgetown and UConn, Lin hit 35 of 54 shots from the field.

He continued to impress in the NBA Development League, the NBA’s minor league. In 20 games last year and one this year he averaged 18.5 points and 4.7 assists per game while shooting 48% from the field. Wages of
Wins rates this performance well above average for the D League.

At both of the earlier stages of his career, Lin excelled as a scoring guard without getting many of his points from behind the 3-point line. In college barely one in five of his field goals was a 3-pointer, even though he was shooting from behind a closer line than what the pros use. But he made 54.7% of his 2-point attempts. In the D League barely one in 10 of his field goals were threes but he hit 50% of his 2-pointers. And in the NBA, he’s hit just four 3-pointers while hitting 49% of his 2-point attempts, and 82 2-pointers overall.

Detailed shot-location data isn’t available for the earlier stages of Lin’s career, but against the toughest competition of his life in the NBA, he has managed to hit a respectable chunk of his 2-point shots by consistently getting to the rim. Per 40 minutes this season, he’s taken 7.8 shots at the rim and made five of them. That’s the second-most made field goals from the rim for guards who’ve played at least 10 games and at least 10 minutes per game, and a percentage in line with the impressive Nos. 1 and 3 on the list, Dwyane Wade and Russell Westbrook. Just 6.5% of those shots Lin has made have been assisted by teammates, the lowest percentage of any NBA guard in that category with at least 2.3 shots per 40 minutes made at the rim. He’s creating those shots for himself at an astonishing rate, and making them.

This all raises the question: If Lin showed signs of being this good in recent years, how did the Knicks coaching staff give him less than an hour on court this season before he cracked the starting lineup, even as the Knicks started the season 8-15? We don’t know what they saw in practice. The Wages of Wins system for picking the most promising college prospects isn’t foolproof, as the site’s writers acknowledge: Damion Jones was a favorite of the site in the 2010 draft but has accomplished little as a pro. And Lin hasn’t been racking up points against the league’s toughest defenses: None of the Knicks’ opponents in their last five games ranks in the top 10 in the league in defensive rating, while three rank in the bottom 11. He’d also help himself if he were more capable when shooting from outside, as teams may eventually dare him to take threes while taking the lane away from him, much as they have tried to do to another top-flight Atlantic Division point guard, Rajon Rondo. Still, Lin isn’t so much outperforming all reasonable expectations as taking advantage of an overdue opportunity.