

Keeping up with Jones a good start

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Coach George Karl says Dahntay Jones is "a runner and a defender." Jones shows he's a good leaper, too, with a block against the Clippers on Oct. 31. (Andrew D. Bernstein, Getty Images)

Since he entered the Nuggets' lineup, he sparked an altruistic attitude in the altitude.

He plays team-first, team-second. And he plays defense like the first quarter is the fourth quarter.

That's right, Dahntay Jones has jolted the Nuggets (oh, and Chauncey Billups has helped, too).

While Billups' homecoming is cause for a hootenanny, there has been an underlying story line to the new-look Nuggets, and that's the new shooting guard Jones.

He averages 18.5 minutes per game — eighth on the Nuggets — and Jones has started every game since the Allen Iverson-Billups trade, often setting the tone with his hungry defense.

It's safe to say that the Nuggets' master plan wasn't to trade Iverson in order to create a starting job for Jones. But since Jones' insertion into the lineup, it's as if the Denver chemists have cooked up a perfect formula.

"He's a runner and a defender. My first unit has a tendency of committing to running up and down the court hard," Nuggets coach George Karl said. "The pace of the game is important to me. Sometimes in the past, convincing a team to play at the pace I want has been difficult. Guys who play 35 or 40 minutes have a tendency to conserve their energy, and that's not how I want to play.

"You need one guy in the starting lineup who spikes up their commitment."

Some nights, Jones also contributes offensively — he's scored in double figures four times. Other nights, his offense has been unnecessary (perhaps a polite way to say there were seven outings when he scored four points or fewer).

But he's in there to score like Nene's in there to shoot 3s. Jones is a defensive specialist who generally plays smart man-to-man defense and conceptually just gets it.

For instance, in the Nuggets' game at Charlotte, Denver trailed by four points at halftime, but Karl credited Jones' "anger and intensity" on defense as "jump-starting" the Nuggets in the third quarter, when they outscored the Bobcats 29-16.

It'll be interesting to see when — and if — Karl ever decides to move Jones out of the lineup. As of now, J.R. "The Investment" Smith comes off Denver's bench. With the current setup, it will be hard for Jones to play himself out of the lineup.

Right now, the setup ain't broke. Why fix it, especially when the Nuggets spent all October fixing their defense?

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