

Kansas State just wanted to get to March Madness. Now it's in the Sweet 16



By Nicole Auerbach
Mar 19, 2023

GREENSBORO, N.C. — Thirty-four minutes had passed since the final buzzer sounded, and Markquis Nowell knew that he'd get the trip home to New York City, that the 5-foot-7 kid from Harlem would get to play in a Sweet 16 game at Madison Square Garden. The idea was so surreal, even though he swore he'd dreamt of it.

The facts slowly started to sink in as Nowell sat up on the postgame dais six inches away from his head coach, blinking back tears and rocking back and forth. Jerome Tang reached over, put his arm around his point guard's neck and pulled him close. The two embraced and then grinned at one another the way only a teacher and pupil can after a job well done.

"Quis and I went to lunch one day (last spring), and I said, 'Quis, I'm going to do everything in my power to put a team together to get to the NCAA Tournament,'" Tang said. "He said, Coach, I don't care if we only have five dudes. We're going to the tournament because Kemba Walker won a national championship with, I think, three freshmen and (one) sophomore.

"That kind of confidence — it just inspired me to work harder and our staff to work harder. He always believed it, and he helped me believe."

And Tang, in turn, put his faith in Nowell. He pieced together a roster around him. Tang got, as he likes to put it, his dudes — and he got them to believe, too.

Kansas State, the No. 3 seed in the NCAA Tournament's East Region, is still here, still alive in this win-or-go-home jamboree. The team that only returned two players, had a first-time head coach and was predicted to finish last in the Big 12 just knocked off the bluest of blue bloods, beating the sixth-seeded Kentucky Wildcats, 75-69. Tang's group took punches and countered with their own over 40 minutes which saw 12 lead changes. Kansas State missed its first 13 3-point shot attempts and endured a 13-0 second-half run by Kentucky, but kept fighting and clawing to stay in the game before ultimately pulling ahead for good with a pair of 3s from Ismael Massoud and Keyontae Johnson late. Nowell spent the first half dazzling the crowd with his passes, and then scored 23 points in the second half. He later said that his purple Wildcats were the tougher team on the floor on Sunday.

The final score said as much, leaving the big, blue crowd in a stunned stupor. Sure, Kansas State had the higher seed — but Kentucky was the team that was supposed to win. Just about everyone at the Greensboro Coliseum knew that. Vegas believed as much, too.

When it was all over, and all those Kentucky fans had trickled out of the arena, Tang and athletic director Gene Taylor bear-hugged one another on the court. It was one of those big hugs where neither person wants to let go, both arms wrapped tightly around the other person. Taylor grew emotional when asked about it, thinking back on the string of decisions he had to make to set this all in motion. The first was letting go of Bruce Weber after 10 seasons.

"I'm thinking back to a year ago and how big this decision was and how fortunate we were that (Tang) was available," said Taylor, choking up outside of the Kansas State locker room. "And I think about how difficult it was to make the decision about Bruce, who is really a tremendous person. But to get Jerome here and what he's done? It's phenomenal."

Taylor knows he has a special coach, and he knew he liked Tang almost instantly the first time they met. Tang interviewed with him twice last March — the first time for an hour in Kansas City, and the second time for more than two hours with a few staffers at Tang's home in Waco, Texas. That second meeting didn't really need to last so long, Taylor admits now. He knew within the first half hour that Tang was his guy.

"I could see that they were giving each other looks, trying to give each other hints," Tang said. "I was like, I'll take a 30 and go use the restroom."

Or as Taylor recounted it: "Two hours in, he said he needed to go to the bathroom. I said, 'It's your house.' So, he walked into the bathroom. I looked at my (colleague) and said, 'What do we do? We need to make an offer.'"

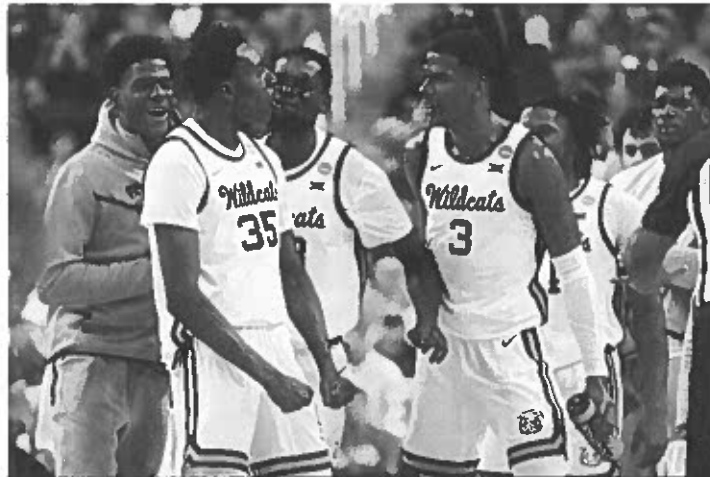
By that point, Tang knew, too. He'd known it was the right job at the right time ever since the first question Taylor asked him in his home. Did he have any concerns? Yes, he did. He'd be the first Black men's basketball coach at Kansas State. He didn't know how he'd be received in Manhattan, Kansas. The wife of one of Taylor's colleagues was Black, too; he told Tang that she'd initially had the same concerns and they'd been living and working in the community for years. "When he said that, I got this real, calm peace over me," Tang said. "Then, I could just talk basketball." It didn't take too much longer to get the deal done.

"They were taking a chance on me," Tang said. "I didn't think it was a risk, though."

Tang had worked under Scott Drew at Baylor for nearly two decades. He'd seen what it took to build the Bears into a nationally relevant program, what it took to compete in the Big 12 and then what it took

to win it all. Taylor has long believed in hiring from successful programs; he thinks knowing how to win is something that will translate, even for a first-time head coach.

Still, no one expected this much success this quickly. Well, except maybe the players in that locker room — the ones who believed that they belonged on that court with Kentucky and that their shots along the perimeter would eventually fall. Individually, each tried to do his own part to support the collective. For Massoud, so much of that meant trying to match the physicality of reigning National Player of the Year Oscar Tshiebwe in the paint. K-State felt it could win even if Tshiebwe got his — and he did, finishing with 25 points and 18 rebounds — as long as it controlled the rest of Kentucky's roster. And as long as it played tough.



Kansas State returned two players from last season. Now it's in the Sweet 16. (Jacob Kupferman / Getty Images)

Massoud's deep 3 with 2:21 to play gave Kansas State the lead for good.

"I knew there would be a time when I would get an opportunity to make a shot, and I just had to make sure I was ready," Massoud said. "Quis found me, and I just let it go with no hesitation.

"I didn't really think much of it until after I hit it, but just grateful Quis had trust in me to pass that ball."

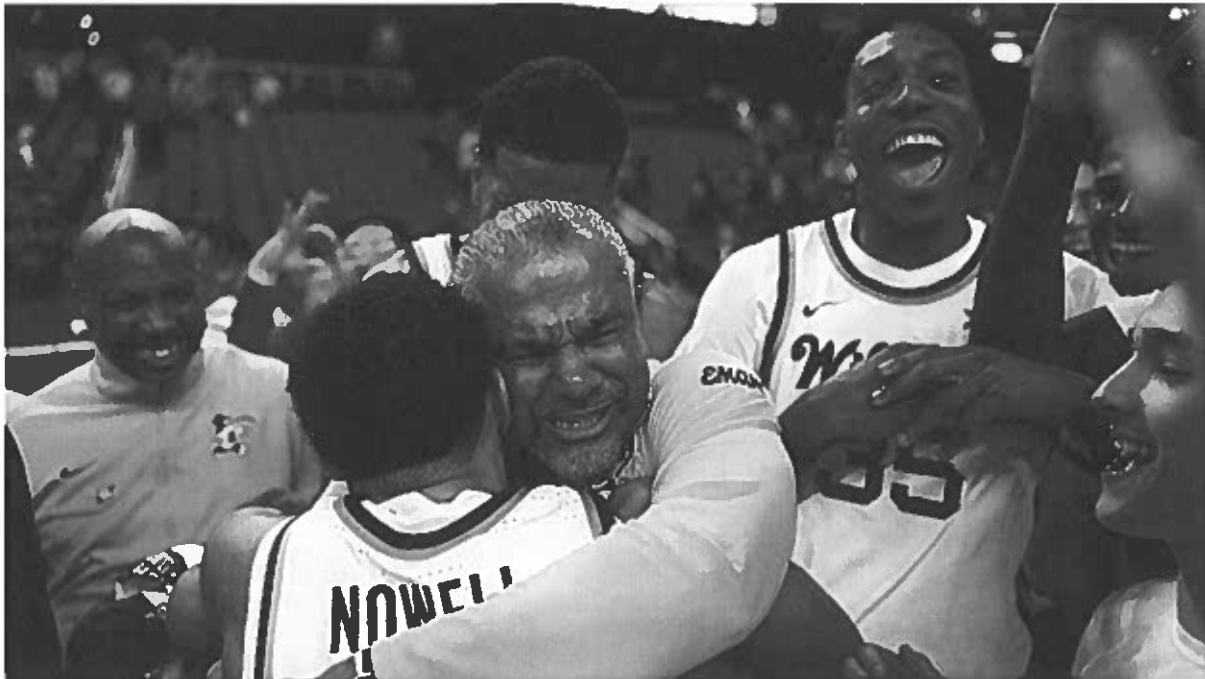
Tang said he knew Massoud would hit the shot because he wanted to go to New York City. He's from East Harlem, and he's never played at the Garden. Nowell hasn't played there either. It took a Herculean effort from him to get his team there, too. The smallest guy on the court became the game's biggest player, scoring 23 of his 25 points after halftime and 16 of those in the game's final eight minutes.

"I was just in attack mode the second half because I had seen how they were playing me," Nowell said. "They were playing me for the pass because I dropped a lot of dimes in the first half. I tried to look for my own shot a little bit more and be more aggressive, and I wanted to go to New York."

Now, he gets to go home. So does Massoud. The team no one expected to still be playing will go from one Manhattan to the other, the Little Apple to the Big. This is real, even if it feels like it's not.

"It hasn't really hit me just yet, and I kind of don't want it to," Nowell said. "I don't want to lose the hunger I play with."

(Top photo of Kansas State's Jerome Tang: Jared C. Tilton / Getty Images)



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

Dancing on to NYC

March 20, 2023

By D. Scott Fritchen

He said that the whole year has been a dream come true. But this moment just hit a little bit different. Kansas State head coach Jerome Tang stood before a throng of reporters outside the Wildcats' locker room in his lavender quarter-zip and nursing a can of Coca-Cola in his right hand in the innards of Greensboro Coliseum — at the moment the most popular man in the arena, and perhaps the odds-on favorite for National Coach of the Year in college basketball.

Three-hundred and sixty-three days after his hiring on March 21, 2022 and when he proclaimed that he intended on elevating the K-State program, the 56-year-old immigrant from San Fernando, Trinidad, just took his first Division I team to one of the best NCAA Tournament victories in K-State history, a 75-69 win over sixth-seed Kentucky, sending the tougher Wildcat team on Sunday to the Sweet 16 in New York City.

Kentucky entered 32-9 in the NCAA Tournament under John Calipari with eight Sweet 16s, seven Elite Eights, and four Final Fours, but a reporter's question about how it felt to dethrone a blue-blood program caused Tang pause.

"You know," Tang said, "we have a program that's rich in tradition, also. All those old dudes that played for Kentucky, they aren't coming back. Tradition does not help you if you don't get out there on the floor and play with some dudes.

"We had more dudes than they did today."

And that's why No. 3-seed K-State, 25-9, is headed to play seventh-seed Michigan State, 21-12, in Madison Square Garden for the Sweet 16.

K-State has dudes.



A K-State fan in the purple section at Greensboro Coliseum waved a white t-shirt that read, "HEART OVER HEIGHT" — the calling card for one of the nation's most electrifying players, point guard Markquis Nowell, the third-team All-American who poured in 27 points, drained three key 3-pointers in the second half, added nine assists and three steals in nearly 40 minutes in one of the top individual NCAA Tournament performances by a player in K-State history. Nowell, a native of Harlem, New York, dazzled the national TV audience with a bevy of smooth passes at breakneck speed — a couple resulting in dunks, and others resulting in 3-pointers by awaiting teammates.

The 5-foot-7, 160-pound Nowell simply wouldn't be stopped, not when K-State trailed by eight points midway through the first half, and not when K-State came off a 29-26 halftime lead only to see it slip away, and not when he helped build the Wildcats' lead to seven points with under a minute to go.

"I was just in attack mode the second half because I saw how they were playing me," said Nowell, who shot 7-of-14 from the floor, including 3-of-8 on 3-pointers and 10-of-11 from the foul line. "They were playing my pass because I dropped a lot of dimes in the first half. I just tried for my own shot a little bit more and to be a little bit more aggressive — and I just wanted to go to New York."

Next to Nowell in the postgame interview room sat senior-transfer Keyontae Johnson and junior forward Ismael Massoud — both of whom made crucial long-range bombs in the final 2 minutes, 20 seconds. Massoud drained a 3-pointer from in front of the K-State bench for a 64-62 lead, then Johnson drained one of his own for a 67-62 advantage with 91 seconds on the clock, sending some of the 16,517 mostly-blue fans heading toward the exits.

"We got dudes," Tang said. "That's what it takes. People get caught up in the coaching and stuff, but it's dudes — you have to have players, and they work and put in the time. We talked about it before this game that we're going to trust our work. We won really

good games against other really good teams in really tough environments before, so we were prepared for this.

"I expected them to play great."

And they played great.



All-American Oscar Tshiebwe, the 6-foot-9, 260-pounder, had 25 points and 18 rebounds but fell largely silent over the final five minutes. Star guard Cason Wallace had 21 points and four assists but also suffered five turnovers against a K-State defense that forced Kentucky into 16 turnovers.

"We knew Oscar was going to be Oscar," Tang said. "The stats showed that in wins and losses he put up the same numbers in scoring and rebounding, so our job was to stop everybody else."

Kentucky had 19 offensive rebounds but scored just 17 second-chance points. K-State at one point had 11 personal fouls to Kentucky's four. K-State didn't hit its first 3-pointer until less than 15 minutes remained in the game.

But K-State outshot Kentucky 48.1% to 41.3% from the floor, and was the grittier and tougher team. And it starts with its point guard who is going home to the Big Apple.

"Tim Floyd said when you get a point guard, get one from one of the big cities because they take pride in big-city toughness like Chicago, New York and New Orleans," Tang said. "That 'You don't know where I'm from,' that's Markquis all the time: 'I'm from New York.' That kind of toughness and grit, you love that."

As the final horn sounded on K-State's Sweet 16 berth, the Wildcats celebrated with family and friends near the edge of the stands, Tang and Nowell appeared on postgame TV, and then Tang found K-State athletic director Gene Taylor for a warm extended embrace near midcourt. It was Taylor who brought Tang to Manhattan, less than five years after bringing football head coach Chris Klieman to the Little Apple. Klieman guided

K-State to the 2022 Big 12 Championship and three months later Tang has the Wildcats in the Regional Semifinals.

"I actually watched Gene and Coach Klieman hug after a win I was watching on TV and you could tell that there was this love and appreciation for each other with the hug and I was like, 'Man, I'm going to get a hug like that,'" Tang said. "I absolutely love him. I can't tell you how much I appreciate him taking a chance on me. Words can't express it."



Words escaped Massoud, another Harlem native, as he stood near midcourt in happy tears, thinking back to nearly a year ago, when he and Nowell, the only two returning players from a squad that went 14-17, began the process of helping bring players to Manhattan — and the storybook tale that followed.

"Just love and happiness and emotion," Massoud said. "It took a lot for us to get here. We were picked last (in the Big 12 preseason) and all the workouts in the summer, for me to have that moment just meant a lot, because you never know when you'll have another opportunity for this.

"For me to play my role and help us to accomplish our goals, it was just so much emotion that I just couldn't contain other than crying."

K-State has come so far so fast that it likely elicited emotion from K-State Nation as well. This was the farthest K-State has gone in a NCAA Tournament since it beat Kentucky in the Sweet 16 in 2018 — previously the Wildcats' last tournament win.

"I had faith that if I got at least five players, I don't care who it is, that we were going to make March Madness and do something special," Nowell said.

Asked whether he understood that he was a 5-foot-7 guard who took down Kentucky to return home to New York City for a Sweet 16 appearance, Nowell replied, "It hasn't hit me yet and I kind of don't want it to because I don't want to lose the hunger that I have and passion I play with."

"This is about my team," he continued. "We accomplished this. I didn't accomplish this by myself. Everybody played huge for us, and the coaching staff did great, and I'm just proud of everybody in the locker room."

Johnson, a third-team All-American, had 13 points, four rebounds and three assists, yet found difficulty finding his touch until the second half. That's when Nowell stepped in to help out his star teammate.

"I just have the right guys around me," Johnson said. "Quis challenged me during the game, Ish knocked down the big 3, and it just shows how much we loved each other and how much freedom we have and how much confidence we have in each other."



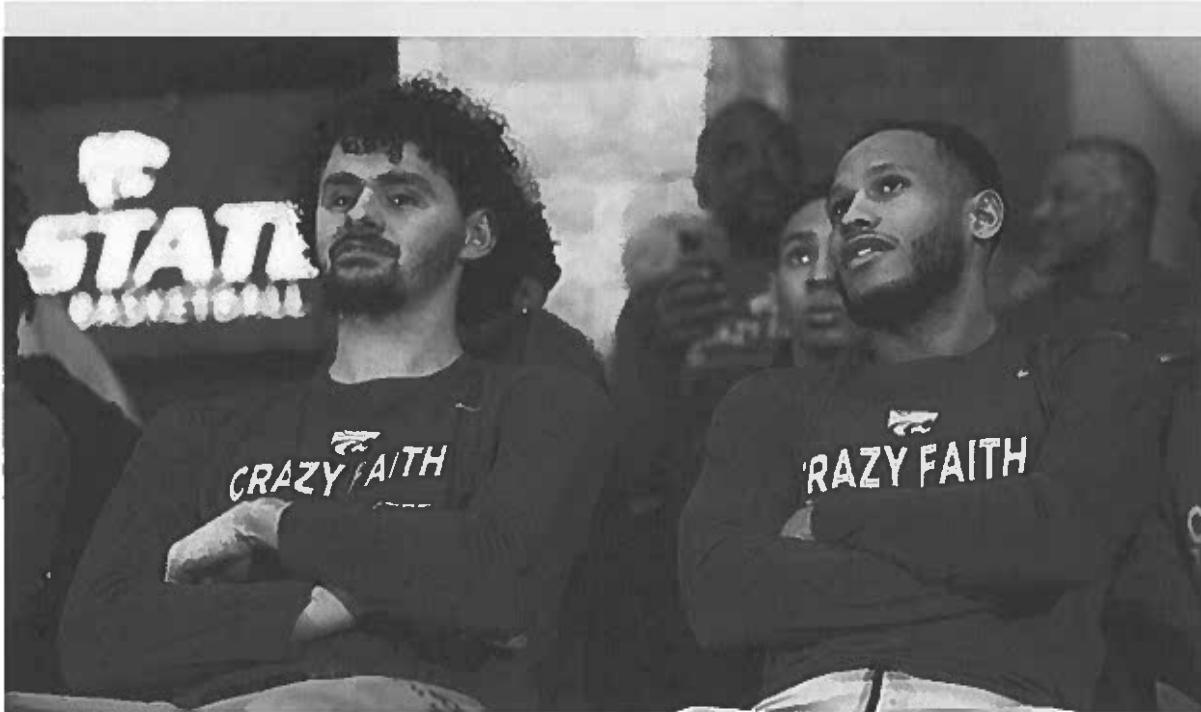
That confidence spread throughout. Nae'Qwan Tomlin scored 12 key points and added six rebounds and four blocks. Desi Sills played through injury and delivered 12 points as well. It seemed K-State was clicking at exactly all the right moments.

"We were the toughest team out there," Nowell said. "It was a 40-minute battle, but we just ran to the fight."

And almost immediately, the Wildcats flew back to Manhattan Regional Airport, thick with K-State fans awaiting their arrival.

A sign at the airport terminal read: "KEEP ON DANCING."

These incredible Wildcats, behind their energetic first-year head coach and electric point guard, don't plan to stop dancing anytime soon.



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

'CRAZY FAITH' Leads Cats Back to Big Dance

March 13, 2023

By D. Scott Fritchen

Afterward, after Kansas State coaches and players see "KANSAS STATE" flash upon the NCAA Tournament bracket shortly before 6 p.m. on Sunday, and after the initial applause lifts inside the Shamrock Zone at Bramlage Coliseum, and after Jerome Tang holds a news conference, the first-year K-State head coach says that the coaches and players are going to take an hour. The coaches and players are going to take an hour by themselves. And the coaches and players are going to celebrate.

They are going to celebrate because it matters. They are going to celebrate because they have CRAZY FAITH. They are going to celebrate because, as Tang puts it, these things don't happen every day, and these things must be cherished.

K-State is a 3-seed in the 2023 NCAA Tournament and will face 14th-seed Montana State at 8:40 p.m., CT on Friday in Greensboro, North Carolina. It is the second highest seed by a Wildcat team since seeding began in 1979 and the highest since the 2010 squad was a No. 2 seed.

Yes, after one crazy year full of faith, K-State is in the NCAA Tournament.



K-State Men's Basketball
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Have crazy faith

#KStateMBB x #MarchMadness



8:49 PM · Mar 12, 2023 · 9,588 Views

"We can't ever take this for granted," Tang says, "because it's hard to do. It's really, really hard to do. It's a blessing. We're very thankful to God for this opportunity."

Tang sits in the Big 12 Terrace that overlooks Bramlage Coliseum while the crowd dissipates from a private Selection Show gathering in the Shamrock Zone. Tang and his players wear purple T-shirts that bear a gray Powercat across the center and the words "CRAZY FAITH" written in big gray block letters. Curiously, the number "12" is also printed underneath.

The 12? It stands for 1 and 2. It stands for Markquis Nowell and Ismael Massoud, the only two returning players from last year's K-State roster. It's a shout out to this beginning, how it all started. It's a testament to CRAZY FAITH that anything can be accomplished.

"We have 'CRAZY FAITH' on our shirts because it took what some people call 'crazy,' and what other people call 'faith, and we call it 'CRAZY FAITH,'" Tang says. "I'm just very, very thankful."

K-State finished the regular season ranked No. 12 and with a 23-9 record. It will face a 25-win Montana State team that won the Big Sky Tournament Championship. The Bobcats have won eight consecutive games since Feb. 11, including an 85-78 win over Northern Arizona to capture back-to-back Big Sky titles and has two straight seasons with 25 wins for the first time since 1927-29.

But before K-State begins preparations for the Bobcats, the Wildcats have something to do. They're going to go to Tang's house for a coach-player celebration to digest the

moment and enjoy the moment before heading into this new season, which will begin in Greensboro, North Carolina.



Tang has been a part of 10 NCAA Tournaments, five Sweet 16s, and helped capture the 2021 NCAA Championship as assistant/associate head coach at Baylor. He knows. You just don't let these moments slip. You savor every step. And each step has its place. And in the NCAA Tournament, that place is typically awash in blue carpets and NCAA logos.

"You go to that first practice where you get to run onto the blue carpet and you see the NCAA logos," Tang said. "There's nothing like it."

There's been nothing quite like this season in K-State history, either.

"There definitely was a vision," senior transfer and All-Big 12 First Team selection Keyontae Johnson says. "(Tang) told me day one he wasn't trying to rebuild this program. He wanted to win right away and that's why I wanted to come in."

Who could've known that K-State would make it this far? Who could've known that the preseason last-place team in the Big 12 Conference would rise to as high as No. 5 in the AP Top 25 and finish the regular season at No. 12 with a school record-tying seven Top 25 victories? Who would've thought that this team would finish third in the Big 12? Or have two All-Big 12 First Team selections in Nowell and Johnson? Or have the Big 12 Coach of the Year?

Already, K-State has accomplished so much. Some might believe that the NCAA Tournament is the icing on the cake. Truth is, the cake is still baking.

"We're not done yet," Nowell says.

The journey began before the first glint of sunlight touched native grassland of the Flint Hills, and the journey paused inside the T-Mobile Center in Kansas City, Missouri, at the Big 12 Media Day on October 18, then the journey steered its way back to the Little Apple beneath a setting sun before an evening practice.



For several hours at the Big 12 Media Day, Tang, Nowell, Johnson and Nae'Qwan Tomlin sat and politely discussed themselves, their teammates, and their grand opportunity for anyone willing to listen. Mostly, they sat alone.

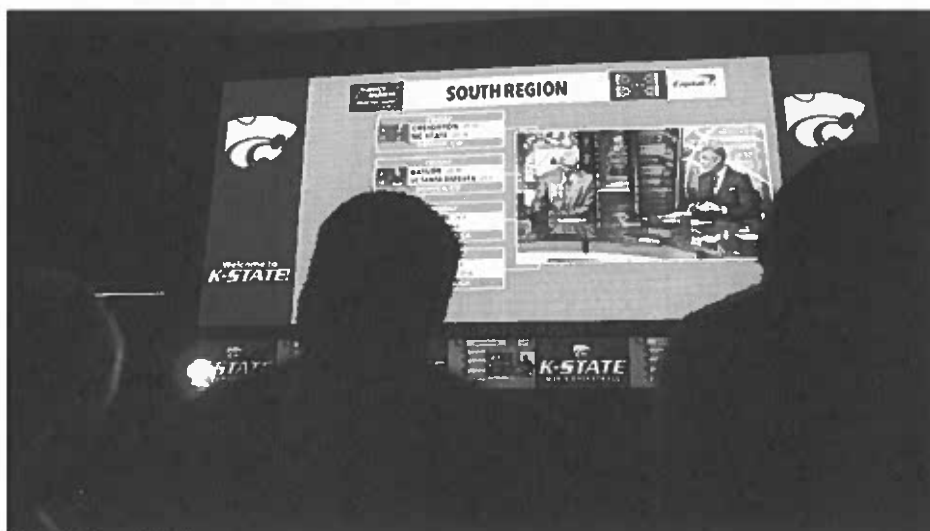
But, alas, this had the potential makings of an underdog story unlike any other in K-State basketball history, or Big 12 history, or college basketball history — how the Wildcats were picked 10th in the Big 12 Conference preseason poll. They were a disregarded team the most powerful conference in America, a group of let's-get-after-it workers with lunch pails and blue collars, and who carried an insatiable desire to prove themselves right — that they not only could survive but thrive in 2022-23.

And how would the season twist and turn — a boundless journey into the unknown? And what would become of this team — these players so unabashed about their goals and desires and so seemingly driven to make the most of every day? And how would it end — the Wildcats and this quest to reach the NCAA Tournament?

Less than 24 hours after K-State was picked 10th in the league's preseason poll, printed copies of the poll swept their way into the locker room. The preseason projections served as a screensaver across a flatscreen TV, and the projections were taped above lockers — an unsettling reminder that the Wildcats would embark upon their journey absent of outside support, yet locked arm in arm for a classic us-against-the-world tussle.

And now the Big 12 and the wins and the losses are complete and a new season begins.

"I want them to enjoy it, just to soak it all in, and understand that it's not six games (to the championship), but we're playing one game," Tang says. "We have to play one game six times. Let's just focus on one game."



The stories swirl in March Madness. For Nowell, a fifth-year senior, who transferred from Little Rock prior to last season, it's about finally getting a chance to compete in a NCAA Tournament.

"It's a blessing to see that my faith and hard work have paid off and I get to spend it with the guys I love the most in my final season," Nowell says. "It's just a blessing. I'm going to take it one game at a time. There's nothing different there. Playing on the road in the Big 12 is how I'm going to handle it. March is different. I'm going to embrace it and have fun."

Johnson's story is well chronicled. It's perhaps the feel-good story of the year in college hoops. He'll no doubt be asked to recount his story again and again in Greensboro. And he'll politely recount it all again.

"I always thank God for giving me this opportunity," Johnson says. "It means a lot just knowing all the hard work and everything I've been through, and fighting adversity, and having the guys trust in me. We all stuck together and figured it out to get to the tournament. Being ranked this high is just a blessing.

"I'm just trying to finish it out and get a trophy."

During the news conference, somebody asks Tang, "What's the most gratifying part of this season so far?" Tang pauses for a moment and furrows his brow in deep thought.

"I mean, you see the smiles on the faces and just knowing — Markquis and I went to lunch in the summer, and I told him, 'I'll do everything I possibly can to put a team around you that will give you a chance to play in the NCAA Tournament,'" Tang recalls. "I felt that Ish and he deserved that. He said that it didn't matter if we had seven players or 13 — he has that Kemba Walker thing about him — and he's like, 'I'm going to take anyone around me and we're going to do this thing.' That's really gratifying.

"When you recruit guys, you tell them these are things we want to accomplish and we think we can do this with you, and these guys believed in us and came, and you see it come to pass."

Yes, it's come to pass. K-State, after a miraculous season, is in the NCAA Tournament. Preparation will soon begin. But not for at least an hour. Not until Tang and his coaches and players have a chance to be by themselves and enjoy this moment together.

"Right now, I'm just happy for us," Tang says. "I just want to take some time to be excited about us and be thankful. Then we'll flip the page."

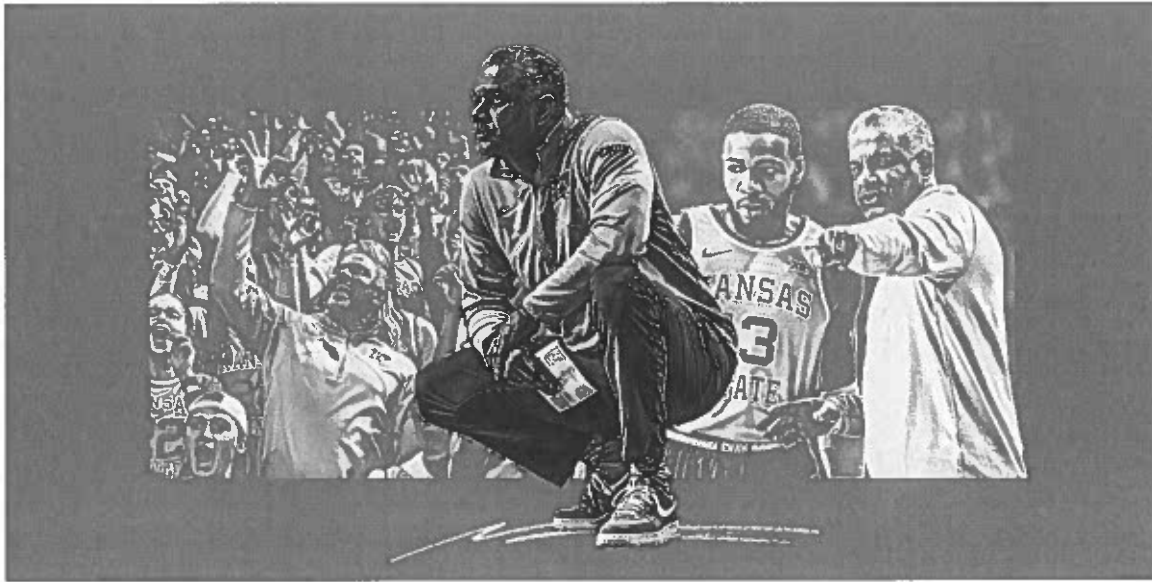
Thankfully, a whole new chapter to this story begins to unfold on Friday.

It's because these Wildcats have CRAZY FAITH.

We hope you enjoy K-State Sports Extra. We would like to hear your comments and any story ideas for future emails, so fire them our way. Contact D. Scott Fritchen or K-State Associate AD for Communications Ryan Lackey. For past stories, visit www.k-statesports.com/sportsextra .

<https://theathletic.com/4140297/2023/01/31/kansas-state-basketball-jerome-tang-markquis-nowell/?redirected=1>

How Jerome Tang and Kansas State basketball have made believers of us all



CJ Moore Jan 31, 2023

MANHATTAN, Kan. — It's midway through Kansas State's practice on Friday morning, and it's been sloppy. The Wildcats are 25 minutes behind schedule, because they keep messing up the little details that will be key to beating Florida on Saturday. They've been late on double teams. The man on the ball keeps getting the angle of his feet wrong. The help-the-helper isn't getting positioned in the right spot. Finally, coach Jerome Tang has seen enough and calls his team together.

"Don't confuse boring with a lack of importance," he says.

The message smacks fifth-year senior point guard Markquis Nowell right in the face. "That's the human nature," he says to himself. He walks over to assistant coach Jareem Dowling.

"I love this dude," he says. "I wish I could play for him for five years. How does he come up with that?"

Since Tang took the job 10 months ago, it sure seems as if he has done no wrong and always comes up with the right thing to say. The Wildcats, ranked seventh in the AP Top 25, are the best story in men's college basketball. They were picked to finish last in the Big 12 but began this week in a three-way tie for first.

Tang is a rock star. His charisma is on all the time. It's hard not to like a guy who, after beating his school's rival, in the midst of a court storm and with the students chanting "F— KU," climbs up on a table, starts leading a "K-S-U" chant and then finds the perfect thing to say to actually get those young folks to consider a change in attitude.

"It is amazing what you can accomplish when you do it out of the motive of love and joy and passion," he told the students after beating Kansas in overtime Jan. 17. "I told y'all you get one court storm. From here on out, expect to win."

They may just obey considering what is happening in Manhattan. No one saw this coming. When Tang showed up and said he wanted to "elevate the standard," simply being competitive in the Big 12 would have accomplished as much.

"I wasn't telling Coach Tang this," Dowling says, "but I was hoping to get to the NIT."

Even Tang admits this wasn't what he imagined. The former longtime Baylor assistant had his expectations. He thought he had an NCAA Tournament team. But the top 10? It took five years at Baylor to even get ranked.

Of course, Tang and Baylor coach Scott Drew didn't have the luxury of starting that program with a player like Nowell. Visit Manhattan, and it quickly becomes clear there are two men steering this ship. In the 5-foot-8 point guard, Tang found his vessel.

Nowell was as big a part of recruiting the team as any of the coaches. Back in the spring, he was one of two players on the roster. He helped host seven players the Wildcats eventually signed, including his co-star Keyontae Johnson.

Johnson, the former Florida star who sat out for nearly two years after collapsing on the floor minutes into a game at Florida State on Dec. 12, 2020, was looking for someone who believed he could be the All-SEC caliber player he'd been in Gainesville. On his visit to K-State, he had deep talks with Nowell about their goals and aspirations. Johnson felt like he had doubters because of how long he'd been out with his heart issue. Nowell was always counted out because of his height.

Nowell made Johnson a believer that they could do something special together. His incredible self-belief is magnetic. "When I say confidence level is through the roof; it's over the roof," assistant coach Rodney Perry says. "He believes he can do anything."

Tang's whole thing is always focusing on the short term. Win every day. But Nowell started to see the big picture before anyone else. Back in November during a run to the championship at the Cayman Islands Classic, he started breaking huddles with "Best team in the country!" and then would tell his teammates, "Let's go play like it."

"I remember thinking to myself, 'ehhh, we're not the best team in the country,'" Tang says, "but I liked him saying it."

Two weeks ago when Kansas State was on the verge of upsetting the Jayhawks, Tang found himself delivering a similar message: *We're the best team in the country. Let's go get this thing.*

"We're not the most talented team in the country," he says, "but on any night, we could beat anybody in America."



Jerome Tang addresses the crowd after Kansas State upset Kansas at home Jan. 17. (Scott Sewell / USA Today)

As soon as Kansas State got ranked for the first time this season, it found itself on the wrong side of an 11-0 run in the first half against Oklahoma State a day later. The ESPN camera panned to the K-State bench, and a demonstrative Tang was delivering a plea to his assistants.



Derek Young

@DerekYoungKSO · Follow



After Oklahoma State went on 11-0 run in first half to take 28-23 lead, K-State HC Jerome Tang has an animated chat with staff about approach and demeanor but also makes sure to point finger at himself. Accountable leader. Team and staff responded.



12:34 PM · Jan 11, 2023



Read the full conversation on Twitter

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1613242979082199054>

What was he saying?

"We didn't have smiles on our faces," Perry says. "We didn't look like we were having fun, because he's all about making sure that you have fun too. He was talking to us about how we looked. He said, 'I'm the first one. I'm guilty of it too, but I'm going to change it right now and I want you guys to change it too.'"

"We weren't playing very well, and he was right. We all had a look like, *what are we doing?*"

The hard part is getting there, but the hardest part might be staying. The Wildcats proved in early January that they were capable of beating anybody by storming through the state of Texas. In a four-day span, they had the eye-opener of all eye-openers in a 116-103 win at No. 6 Texas and then followed that up with an emotional 97-95 win at No. 19 Baylor.

In the days that followed, Tang found himself trying to mentally navigate what sudden success brings.

"We've achieved more than anybody thinks. You relax, right?" he says. "Or do you go the other extreme, and say, 'Man, we can win this whole thing?' And then you tense up and get tight. It's like winning is no longer a celebration; it's a relief. I'm trying to enjoy it, expect to win and try not to be afraid to lose. And sometimes I live in the 'afraid to lose' too much."

Tang is a newbie to sitting in the head chair, but he's already lived going from the bottom to the top at Baylor. The greatest lesson he learned in Waco is making sure everyone feels involved and success is shared.

When the Wildcats broke into the top 25 on Jan. 9, Tang came in the next day and told his team to give themselves two claps for getting ranked. He printed the polls on card stock and gave a copy to every staffer and then did the same a week later when they made it into the top 10.

Tang also sent a bouquet of flowers to the coaches' wives with this note: "Thank you for allowing us to do what we do. We couldn't have the success we've had without you. Congratulations on the #11 ranking!"

"He's so inclusive, man," Dowling says. "It's hard not to want to help and not push the thing forward. He loves you so much that when you're not around him, and you're not doing the right thing, you feel like you're cheating him. Because he don't cheat you. He's transparent. He loves you. You never have to guess what he's thinking. You know what he's thinking, because he's telling it to you."

Dowling wanted to harness that power, so he came up with an idea. In the preseason, he set up weekly individual meetings for each player with Tang in his office. (In-season, they meet every other week.) Tang took the opportunity to get to know them. He didn't want it to be about basketball. He brought a notebook to every meeting. He wanted to know their backgrounds. He wanted to know about their families. He'd ask what he could pray for them about. Those meetings broke down a barrier that usually exists between player and coach. If someone has something on their mind, they're encouraged to come talk to him.

The payoff is what's happened with senior Ismael Massoud. Massoud, the only other holdover from the previous regime, was a fringe rotation player before Christmas. He had four DNPs, and Tang had his reasons. In the preseason during conditioning week — which they call Shark Week — the players had to collectively make time in 30 suicide sprints. As they neared the end, the Wildcats had four players dive across the line trying to make it. Massoud was one of the players a split second late, but he didn't dive.

"I remember thinking, 'That dude will never play for me,'" Tang says.

When Massoud returned from Christmas break, he told Tang that he felt like he wasn't being given any leeway. If he had three or four good days in a row, as soon as he showed a glimpse of being soft, it knocked him all the way back down. Tang acknowledged that Massoud had a point.

"I have to be willing to listen to them," he says.

Massoud played 21 minutes in the next game, an 82-76 win against then-No. 24 West Virginia, which was KSU's first win over a ranked opponent. In Big 12 play, he's been a regular in the rotation and is making a league-best 57.1 percent of his 3-pointers.

"After going home, a lot of people would have just blamed the coach," Massoud says. "It would have been easy to think he doesn't want to play me and stuff like that. I had to look in the mirror and tell myself that I have to give him a reason that he can't not play me."

Massoud rewarded his coach's faith by diving on a loose ball with three seconds left to secure the win against Kansas.

"That wasn't about him," Tang says. "That was about him caring about his teammates. During Shark Week, that was him caring about himself. And so that kind of growth, that's got to carry some weight, right? That's got to mean something to me as a coach."

That night, Nowell and Massoud sat in their apartment together and marveled at how far they'd come.

"We really just beat Kansas," Nowell said, like he needed to hear himself say it out loud to really make sure it was true.

"It's surreal to see where we started and where we've come," Massoud says. "It was just us two. Now we're playing for seeding. It's not even to make the tournament; it's playing for seeding."

Last week as the Kansas State coaches reviewed the film, they noticed that Nae'Qwan Tomlin was not playing as hard as he usually does. Tomlin is so new to basketball that his inexperience is kind of like a badge of honor. On Friday night, Tang introduced his players to alumni back in town during a ceremony in the lobby of the basketball office, and he told his players to share one fun fact about themselves. "A fun fact about me," Tomlin told the crowd, "I've been playing basketball for 4 1/2 years."

Tomlin is the wildcard on this team. When he's good, he can take the Wildcats to a magic level. There are few players in basketball — not just college — who can move as quickly as he can at his size (6-foot-10, 210 pounds). How to get the best out of Tomlin is a continual journey, because he's improving so fast that who knows what he'll be capable of in a year or even next week. But on the tape against Iowa State, it's clear he's holding back. So as the coaches reviewed the film with Tomlin, they showed the spots when he wasn't running as hard as he usually does and asked why.

Tomlin pointed out he wasn't touching the ball, and he was right. For the first nine minutes, 30 seconds, he didn't get one touch.

"That's our bad," Tang says.

Tang is constantly seeking tiny details that bring the best out of every player. He tells the story of former Baylor star Perry Jones. The Baylor coaches used to run a lob play for Jones early in every game, thinking that would get him going. But one day they started studying the numbers and realized that when Jones made a 3 he averaged 21 points per game, and if he didn't make a 3, his average dropped to 11. Through

studying Tomlin's film, Tang figured out early on that he shot a better percentage based on the angle he'd come off a screen. He's also found that Tomlin is better when he simply gets his number called early.

"He just wants to touch it and dribble," Tang says.

Every game, Tang and Perry script a plan and pick out a group of plays that they think will work against that opponent. They operate like a football team in this way. They have 230 sets in the playbook, but for the Florida game, for instance, they pulled out 25 plays that would work best against the Gators.



Fifth-year point guard Markquis Nowell makes the Wildcats go. (Chris Jones / USA Today)

In the days ahead of the game, they rep those plays, and on Friday after practice, Perry quizzes Nowell on where he goes with the ball in each set, then reminds him how important it is to get everyone involved.

Nowell, who has the second-best assist rate in the country, looks back at him like, *you serious?*

Perry gets out his cell phone and points to it. Nowell knows exactly what he's referencing. Perry is one of the co-founders of MOKAN Elite, the Nike-sponsored grassroots program in Kansas City that has won three Peach Jams and has a long list of pros that includes Trae Young. On the couch in Perry's office sits a pillow with a picture of all the pros he's coached on it. When Perry joined K-State's staff on Aug. 1, Nowell became a regular visitor — "I gravitated to him because he's like a basketball genius," he says — and nine days in before leaving for break, Nowell fired off a text message:

"Hey Coach. I want to be the best. I want you to push me to be a pro just like you did your other pros."

Every day they watch at least 30 minutes of film together, and Perry is constantly reminding Nowell the importance of the point guard position and the standard to which he wanted to be held.

"Now if something's changed," he says, pointing to his phone on Friday afternoon, "you need to let me know."

The next day Kansas State has the keys to beat Florida, but it also has a list of items that need to be addressed to set it back on the right path. For the team, that's rebounding and defense. For Nowell, that's making everyone feel involved.

On the first two plays of the day, Nowell finds Tomlin, who runs hard all day.

Everything else seems to play out exactly as the coaches envisioned. For two days they preached bringing a double team when the ball was in the air on the way to Florida star big man Colin Castleton. On Friday,

the double was late almost every time against the scout team. By Saturday morning's shootaround, the Wildcats had it down. In the game, Castleton is flustered early by the double teams and it takes more than 13 minutes for him to get his first bucket. The other key to stopping the big fella is a third defender getting in front of the basket with his butt to the baseline, ready to deal with cutters. On Friday, that help defender kept turning the wrong way. On Saturday, the Wildcats execute this almost perfectly. Castleton finishes with 13 points but did not score on a post-up.

Defense is probably the biggest concern going into the Florida game, considering K-State has had the eighth-best defense in conference play and had allowed Iowa State to reach 80 points for only the second time in Big 12 games. At halftime, Florida has scored only 16 points, and the first thing Tang writes on the board is "7 kills," meaning K-State had three stops in a row seven different times.

"Defense was on point," he says.

Rebounding is the other key. "Hit and go get it," Tang demanded during his pregame speech. Out of the 44 rebounds up for grabs when Florida misses a shot, Kansas State grabs 38. The Wildcats also have 11 offensive boards. Both accomplishments are met with two claps afterward.

Nowell is the star of the day. The plan was to pick on Florida's drop coverage ball-screen defense, and he navigates it beautifully. He nearly racks up the first triple-double in program history, finishing with 13 points, nine rebounds and eight assists in a 64-50 win.

It's not all that surprising anymore considering the ridiculous lines Nowell has put up, which included a historic four-game run earlier this month.



Jared Berson
@JaredBerson · Follow



Kansas State's Markquis Nowell's run continues...in his last 4 games:

- 27.8 PPG
- 10 APG
- 51% FG
- 50% 3-pt FG
- 90% FT

Others with 25 points & 10 assists per game on 50% shooting over a 4-game span, last decade:

Ja Morant
Trae Young
Denzel Valentine

8:29 PM · Jan 10, 2023



Nowell lost his North Star shortly after that. Since it felt like every shot was going in, he started throwing up a few heat checks, like at Iowa State when he stole the ball and pulled up for 3 instead of going in for a layup. That type of shot and the logo 3s are what Tang calls vitamins: You get one a game.

"His stubbornness makes him great," Tang says. "There's certain things you say, dang, don't do that. But he has this great faith and belief in himself that he'll do it again and be successful at it. And so as a coach,

you hate kids to do everything you tell them to do and kids to do nothing you tell them to do, right? Sometimes they gotta do their thing. And he's learning how to balance that, and we as a staff are learning how to coach it."

Nowell is in awe of the man who has made him grow in ways he never imagined and made him completely change how he sees the game and leadership. In New York City, where Nowell grew up, it was all about being the loudest guy in the room. You barked orders. You showed you meant business. "To see that you can also be a leader by motivating and loving and caring for one another has changed my perspective," Nowell says. "We want to win bad for him, because he's a really good person."

On Saturday night after congratulating his team on another win, Tang goes around the locker room and hugs every player. He starts with Nowell, holding on extra long and delivering a message.

Next up is the rematch with Kansas, Tuesday night at Allen Fieldhouse.

"I love you, man," he whispers into his point guard's ear. "Let's go make history."

(Illustration: Eamonn Dalton / The Athletic; Photos: Peter G. Aiken / Getty Images)



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

Making Presence Felt in Short Order

March 7, 2023

By D. Scott Fritchen

Eric Stonestreet remembers pushing open the front doors to the Ice Family Basketball Training Center in early fall. First-year Kansas State basketball head coach Jerome Tang had invited Stonestreet to speak to his team. The Wildcats were newly assembled. Many players had been on campus for less than two months. But Stonestreet, a K-State graduate and two-time Emmy Award-winning actor, loved Tang's infectious energy, and wanted to send the new head coach, his coaching staff, and his team off into the season with a message to carry with them.

"My message was that my dream started in Manhattan, Kansas, and yours can, too," Stonestreet recalls.

Tang and K-State basketball have been a dream come true in 2022-23.

"Going to a game is an event," Stonestreet says. "Coach Tang is a treasure in Manhattan, Kansas, and Kansas State University is lucky to have him."

The 56-year-old Tang, formerly a 19-year assistant/associate head coach at Baylor, earned his first Division I head coaching job at K-State last March. He had two returning players and spent the summer finding 13 more. In October, Big 12 coaches picked K-State to finish 10th in the league.

Three months later, Tang had K-State ranked No. 5 in the AP Top 25 poll. The Wildcats finished their regular season at 23-8 overall and tied for third at 11-7 in the nation's

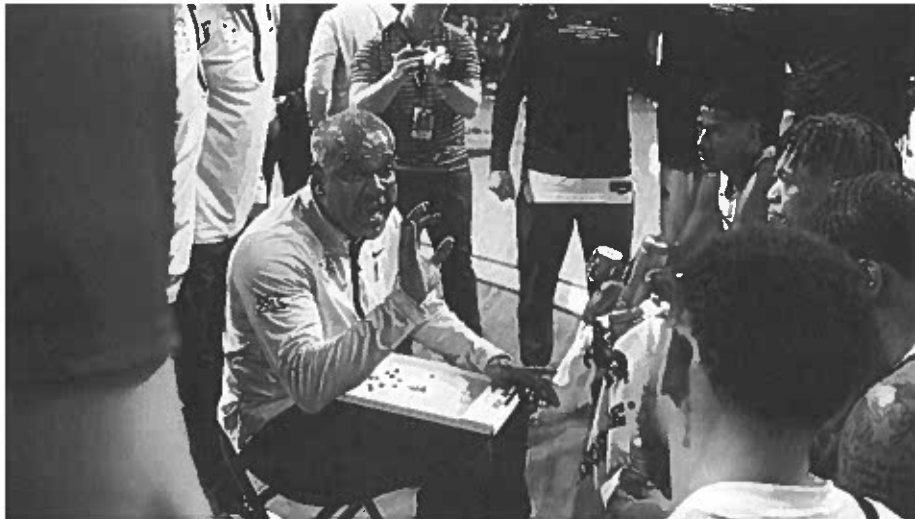
toughest conference in America. The Wildcats, who finished the regular season ranked No. 12 in the AP Poll, head toward the Big 12 Championship on Thursday as a likely top-four seed in the NCAA Tournament.

"We've surpassed the expectations that I had going in, and not just with what took place on the court, just the chemistry that they have off the court, and the way they really care about each other, and their care factor and willingness to be coached, and wanting to be coached," Tang says. "It's surpassed it."

The nation has taken notice of K-State — and Tang — during his first season.

"I like doing firsts," Tang says. "That's one of the things we prided ourselves on at Baylor was to 'be the first.' You ask players if they remember their first dunk, and they all remember their first dunk."

"I like firsts."



Tang, in his first year as a Division I head coach, was named Big 12 Conference Coach of the Year by a vote of the league's head coaches on Sunday.

"It's tremendous and well deserved," K-State athletics director Gene Taylor says. "When I called him, I said, 'The coolest thing about it is it's coming from your colleagues and the fact that they think you're one of the best in the conference this year is a big compliment.'"

"I absolutely agree with them 100%. I'm really happy for him."

Tang sits inside the team meeting room on Monday. He wears a purple ballcap with a white Powercat and a black quarter-zip with another Powercat. Underneath the Powercat reads "ELEVATE" — that now-treasured word that Tang championed during his introductory news conference on March 24, 2022.

Asked to comment on his Big 12 Coach of the Year honor, Tang credits God for the opportunity. He thanks his coaching staff and support staff for his honor. He thanks his

players, including All-Big 12 First Team selections Markquis Nowell and Keyontae Johnson. He thanks the wives who cook meals and allow the coaches to spend time in the office. He says that there are simply too many people to thank. Lastly, he thanks Baylor head coach Scott Drew, who allowed Tang to grow as a coach.

"It's an honor that your peers would vote you (as coach of the year)," Tang says. "I mean, those guys know what we go through day in and day out with a team just being a coach, so that's an honor."

Taylor, who has served as K-State athletics director since 2017, calls the achievements by Tang, his coaching staff, and players, "remarkable."

"I don't think anybody would've expected us and where we were mid-summer to be able to (get to this position)," Taylor says. "I think (Tang) thought we could get to the NCAA Tournament, but I don't know that he thought we could be as good as we've been. Credit him and the coaches and players. He's so humble. He says it's a team effort. That's just who he is."

"He's been amazing."



The Big 12 Coach of the Year honor came three days after CBS Sports' Jon Rothstein and College Hoops Today named Tang as its National Coach of the Year. He beat out Bill Self (Kansas), Shaka Smart (Marquette), Kelvin Sampson (Houston) and Mike Cronin (UCLA) for the top honor.

More accolades could certainly follow in the coming weeks.

"He's extremely hard working, high character, very loyal, very passionate, and he treats people the right way," Drew says. "He always sees the good. He has high expectations."

Lamar Hurd knows. Hurd, 39, currently provides basketball analysis and insight on all Portland Trail Blazers' broadcasts on Root Sports. He was starting point guard at Oregon State, shared the team's MVP award, and won the 2006 Pac-10 medal, which is awarded

annually to one male and one female student-athlete who best exemplifies excellence on and off the playing field.

Hurd was also a star under Tang when Tang cut his teeth as head coach at Heritage Christian Academy in Cleveland, Texas, between 1993-2003. Tang took a birth-through-high school private school of 145 total students from obscurity to four TAPPS Division A state championships and a top-25 national ranking — an absolutely incredible feat.

Upon Tang's hiring at K-State, Hurd predicted good times would follow for the Wildcats. But...

"I just didn't know it would happen this fast," Hurd says. "I don't feel comfortable writing off anything with him. If you'd asked me before the season if I thought he'd be Big 12 Coach of the Year and Kansas State would finish third, I wouldn't have said 'no.' I can't say no with Coach Tang because I just know the affect he has on things that he is a part of. I've seen too much of it. Maybe if I hadn't seen as much I'd be more willing to definitively proclaim that it would be too crazy this year or in five years, but I've seen too much of this stuff.

"I fully expect they will win a championship while he is there. If you trace it back, there's been a consistent building process that's led to the top of the mountain. I don't think it'll be any different at Kansas State."



Tang has famously made his presence felt — and he's bringing everybody to the mountain top with him.

K-State enjoyed eight consecutive sellouts to end its home schedule, capped by an 85-69 victory over Oklahoma last Wednesday that made for one of the most remarkable K-State Senior Nights in recent history. More than once, Tang's postgame celebrations with the K-State student section at Bramlage Coliseum have started off ESPN's SportsCenter and the love affair has touched every corner of the Little Apple. One day, Tang is reading to children at an elementary school, the next he is attending a Boys & Girls Club event, and the next he is sharing a couch with students to discuss a variety of topics as a part of a K-State Sports video production.

"Coach Tang is a difference-maker, and he has re-defined the K-State culture on campus and in the Manhattan community," K-State President Richard Linton says. "His players, our students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members love his passion. He puts the K-State family and our people first — always. We are fortunate to have him on our team."

Tang knows no other way.

"I've had a blast," Tang says. "I've said all along basketball just happens to be what I do. I've been gifted. My gift is ministry. Whether that's standing behind a pulpit delivering a message or just being out and touching peoples' lives and making somebody's day better, that's part of my gift. My passion just happens to be basketball. God happened to put me in a position where I could use my passion on a platform that brings Him honor and glory, and in turn makes other peoples' day a little bit better."

"This community has been wonderful in how they've received me and my family. It's just fun to be around the kids and their excitement and joy. Our young people, our communities, deserve to have someone who really appreciates them and enjoys being around them."

Nowell has experienced the joy. The senior point guard and fellow returning player junior Ishmael Massoud helped recruit their current teammates to Manhattan. Things can move fast during college basketball season.

The joy that Nowell feels when he's around Tang is boundless.

"Coach Tang has 'Crazy Faith,' as he calls it, in all his players, and you don't see that often," Nowell says. "For him to have that crazy faith in us, it just gives us confidence that we need to go out there and perform. It's just a blessing to have a coach like that coaching you, and you get to see him every day. We always learn something new from him on the court or off the court."

"He's one of the biggest blessings that I could have and K-State could have."



The very fingerprint of the immigrant from San Fernando, Trinidad, who migrated with his parents to St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands until age 10, who took Heritage Christian Academy to unfathomable heights, then who joined Baylor and earned his college degree in 2007 while helping rebuild the program in Waco, Texas, now rests everywhere in Manhattan.

"It's what he's been able to do not only from a basketball perspective but from beyond the court," Taylor says. "It's just his involvement with the community and engaging the community and the students and the energy in the building — all of that has been a major impact on our program."

Kim Tang, Jerome's older sister, is among his biggest supporters.

"I've seen this coming since Jerome was coaching the boys in Cleveland, Texas," she says. "We were just waiting for the opportunity to come for him, and it did. From a child, Jerome has always been very sweet and loving. He's really honest. He's not going to lie. He's giving. He just has that magnet that draws people to him. There's nothing he would've give you.

"My heart — I'm so proud."

Stonestreet is proud as well.

"I've been impressed with Coach Tang since the moment he was hired," Stonestreet says. "He called me and welcomed me any time to come visit the program. He said he wanted me around anytime because he wanted to show his kids that success starts in Manhattan, Kansas. He welcomed me and gave me a few minutes with everybody.

"My message was that my dream started right here in Manhattan, Kansas, and yours can, too. I said to control what you can control. I tried in my career to out-prepare everyone and to be ready for whatever came along my plate more than anyone else. You can't control what you can't control.

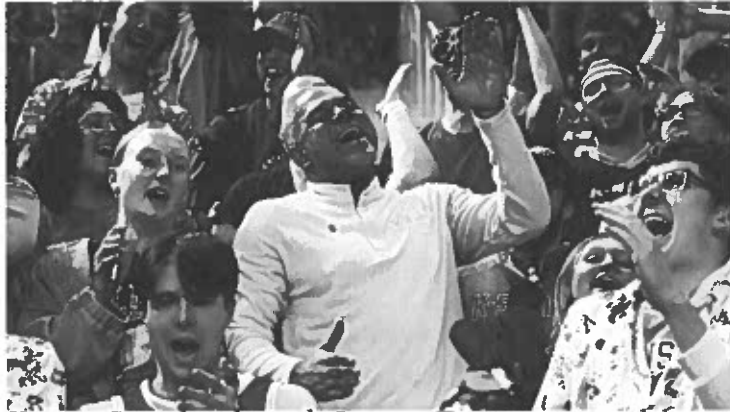
"It was a pleasure to get to talk with the team."

This season, Tang and his team have had everyone talking.

We hope you enjoy K-State Sports Extra. We would like to hear your comments and any story ideas for future emails, so fire them our way. Contact D. Scott Fritchen or K-State Associate AD for Communications Ryan Lackey. For past stories, visit www.k-statesports.com/sportsextra .

Jerome Tang's victory dances in crowd have quickly become a beloved K-State tradition

BY KELLIS ROBINETT FEBRUARY 23, 2023 6:30 AM



Kansas State head coach Jerome Tang, center, celebrates his team's 75-65 win over Baylor with fans on Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023, in Manhattan, Kan. COLIN E. BRALEY AP

MANHATTAN

Jeremiah Belin is always one of the first Kansas State students to arrive at Bramlage Coliseum when the Wildcats play home basketball games. He shows up hours early, he sprints to his seat when the arena doors open and he typically watches games from the front row.

Snagging a primo spot is important to him, because he wants to be close to the action and help his favorite team win by cheering as loudly as his vocal cords will allow.

Lately, though, another reason has motivated the Hawaiian-shirt-wearing sophomore to keep sitting at the front of K-State's student section — the chance to dance next to Jerome Tang after a victory.

"It's a good feeling," Belin said, "to have him standing right there and dancing beside you."

Tang's postgame victory celebration has taken on a life of its own. It started out as an impromptu dance in front of the K-State student section as fans swayed back and forth to the pep band's rendition of "Wabash Cannonball" following a December victory over Nebraska. Quickly, it's turned into a full-blown tradition.

The new ritual sends Tang hopping into the stands after every home win to dance and celebrate right along with his team's biggest supporters.

We have seen Tang dance with students in the front row, we have seen him high-five fans at the top of the arena and we have even seen him scurry into the middle of the K-State pep band and pretend like he was playing the clarinet.

"It made me feel like he actually cares," said Hannah Seck, a graduate student who plays clarinet for the K-State band. "It's one thing for us to be here and to play for them every game and for them to say thank you to us, but for him to come up into the band and dance like he does with the students all the time was special. Sometimes we're just kind of stuck in the corner here, so it really made us feel at home when he wanted to be with us."

Tang's celebrations have become such a hit in Manhattan that camera crews race to keep up with him after wins in hopes of recording his every move.



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Man of the people

[#KStateMBB](#)



8:39 PM · Feb 21, 2023



<https://twitter.com/i/status/1628223014902046720>

Following K-State's most recent home victory, a convincing 75-65 win over No. 9 Baylor, Tang celebrated by jumping onto a courtside table and wildly pumping his fists in front of the K-State student section. Then he hopped into the crowd and began dancing right next to Belin.

Turns out, showing up early paid off.

"It was super exciting," Belin said. "He has done it a few rows in front of me and a few rows behind me at other games. This time he was right there next to me. The fact that he wants to be a part of the student section every single game, it's beautiful. It really is. You can tell he just wants to be part of this family."

DANCE, DANCE EVOLUTION

Ask Tang if he has ever celebrated like this at any other point in his coaching career and he reacts like Idris Elba devouring hot wings.

His response is an emphatic no.

But he wishes he could say yes. Before taking over at K-State last March as a first-time head coach at the college level he spent time working in the high school ranks and as an assistant with

Baylor. During those years, he never coached in front of a rabid fan base that wanted to celebrate with him after wins.

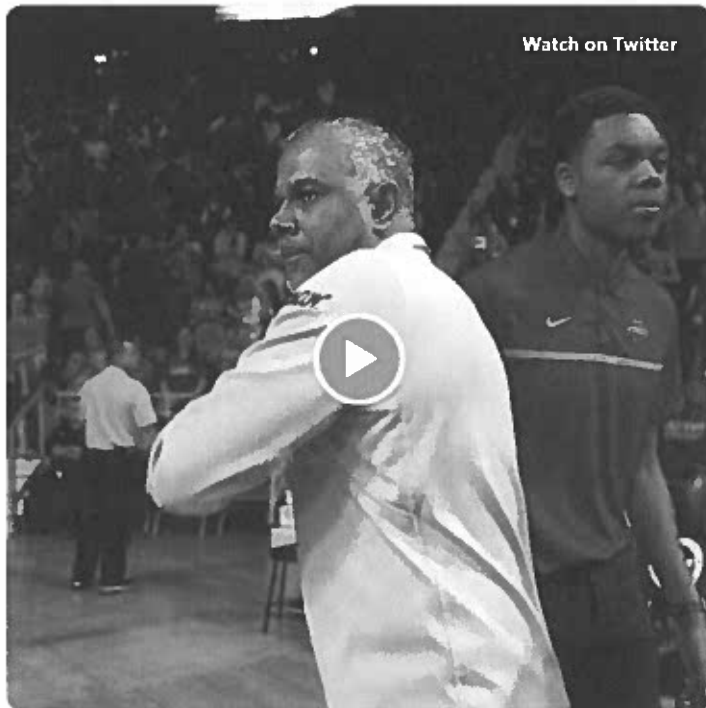
Now that fans are showing up in big numbers to watch the Wildcats he wanted to show them love right back.

That started by asking K-State players to take a victory lap around Bramlage and mingle with fans after wins. Then it ballooned into him dancing with strangers. It might not be long before he starts crowd surfing.



Can't keep him away

@CoachJTang x @KState_Students



4:28 PM · Feb 18, 2023



<https://twitter.com/i/status/1627072613737725953>

"When I learned the tradition of the 'Wabash Cannonball' and why we do it and I saw the fire and all of that I thought it was just really cool," Tang said. "Then, to see how much the students enjoyed it, I was like, 'I'm going to do this, too.'"

It has become a stress release for him.

"I want to enjoy this," Tang said. "Winning basketball games is hard. If we lose, I'm going to get fired and I'm never going to get a job again. So if I'm going to do this I'm going to do it my way. And my way is to have fun and enjoy winning and to do it with our students. They make such a huge difference.

"If we spend a little bit of time with them, that makes them want to come back and cheer our guys on. And that gives us this home-court advantage. I'm going to keep doing it."

The first time Tang danced along to the “Wabash Cannonball” was when K-State defeated Nebraska in a semi-home game at T-Mobile Center in Kansas City. It was his first experience coaching in front of a juiced arena and he was pumped up when he delivered a win to the friendly crowd. So he went to midcourt, pointed at the student section and swayed back and forth all by himself.

K-State fans liked the celebration and video of his dance moves made the rounds on social media.



Kellis Robinett ✓
@KellisRobinett Follow



Jerome Tang was pumped after tonight's win!



8:11 PM · Dec 17, 2022



<https://twitter.com/i/status/1604298250764394496>

“He never did anything like that at Baylor,” Bears coach Scott Drew said. “But I always knew he had rhythm.”

Still, Tang thought he could do better. He also felt a bit awkward dancing solo. So as the wins kept coming he tried to do more with his new postgame tradition. Why not go into the student section? Why not jump on a scorer’s table? Why not mingle with the band?

His goal is to dance in every corner of the Octagon of Doom before his time comes to an end with the Wildcats.

“I want every section to know that I appreciate them,” Tang said. “So I have tried to rotate that. A few games back I saw the band and I said, ‘The next time we win at home, I’m going to go celebrate with the band because of all the hard work they put in and how much I appreciate them being there.’”

Where will he end up dancing next?

That's a question many K-State fans will be asking themselves when they show up for next week's final home game of the season against Oklahoma.

HAVING FUN ON THE BASKETBALL JOB

One thing is for sure: Tang is going to keep dancing.

Dikembe Mutombo wagged his finger at opposing players whenever he blocked a shot. Stone Cold Steve Austin banged aluminum cans together and guzzled beer whenever he won a wrestling match. This is Tang's signature celebration.

Few expected K-State to be ranked in the top 25 or in contention for a high seed in the NCAA Tournament this season. In fact, the Wildcats were picked to finish last in the preseason Big 12 coaches poll. So now that they are ranked 14th, have won 21 games and are a lock for March Madness, their head coach is going to keep on living his best life.

He might even kick up his celebrations a notch for senior day.



A man and his band

@coachjtang x @KStatePride



11:20 AM · Feb 8, 2023

Seck, the clarinet player he danced near earlier this season, says the band will gladly provide an instrument for him to play after any future game.

"Anything he wants," she said. "He is doing this for all the right reasons. You can tell he wants to stay here for a long time and build Kansas State up. I love it."

Tang jokes that he might bring his entire coaching staff into the stands at some point for a group celebration.

In any case, he likes to think his postgame celebrations have helped K-State this season.

“When I was a high school coach I did not enjoy wins as much as I should have,” Tang said. “Even when we beat a team by 40 the goal was to hold them under a certain number of points, and if they scored over that I would make our guys run after games. It wasn’t fun. I was always looking for us to be a little bit better.”

Over the years, I have learned that you have got to enjoy this thing because it’s hard. Winning is hard. I have really resolved myself to make sure that we enjoy our wins and we enjoy this whole journey and not just push, push, push all the time.”

His fans like that approach.

They will remain ready to dance with him after every home win.

“I feel like any good coach has got to be involved with his fans, but he takes it to another level,” Belin said. “It makes him stand out.”

How Keyontae Johnson and Markquis Nowell found stardom together as K-State teammates BY

KELLIS ROBINETT MARCH 14, 2023 6:30 AM



Kansas State basketball players Keyontae Johnson and Markquis Nowell share the court at Bramlage Coliseum. (Photo: Lathe Cobb/K-State Sports)

MANHATTAN

Keyontae Johnson and Markquis Nowell have only been teammates for a short time, but it doesn't seem that way when they are making dazzling plays for the Kansas State Wildcats.

Watch Johnson and Nowell in any game and they appear so in sync that it's easy to assume they grew up playing the sport together in the same neighborhood.

They fit like a pair of jigsaw pieces in a puzzle.

Nowell is a 5-foot-8 senior point guard from New York who drains three-pointers from long range and sends out assists at a higher rate than all but two players nationally. He transferred to K-State for two seasons after starting out at Arkansas-Little Rock. Johnson is a 6-foot-6 senior from Norfolk, Virginia who scores from everywhere and grabs rebounds at an impressive rate. He began his career at Florida and then took a detour to K-State for his final season of college hoops following a well-publicized health scare with the Gators.

Somehow, those differing backgrounds, body types and talents put them on converging paths to stardom.

Both of them made the All-Big 12 first team this season, becoming the first K-State duo to accomplish the feat since 2019. Both of them have hit game-winning shots for the Wildcats. And nothing makes the fans at Bramlage Coliseum scream louder than when they connect for a lob dunk.

Not many people envisioned these two players leading the Wildcats to one of their best seasons in recent memory. But maybe they would have if the long conversation that Johnson and Nowell shared during Johnson's recruiting visit last summer been aired live on national TV.

"We sat in his car and talked for 30 or 40 minutes," Johnson said. "We just talked about his vision. I was trying to see what he wanted to use this year as and how he wanted to improve. He was telling me everything like win Big 12 Player of the Year and average 10 assists, all that stuff that makes you a great point guard."

They didn't get into exact details, but it was then during that conversation that the seeds for things like 23 wins, a third-place finish in the Big 12 standings and a No. 3 seed in the NCAA Tournament were born.

A dynamic duo was about to form.

"Because of the type of people they are, I felt like they would be great teammates," K-State coach Jerome Tang said. "Away from basketball, they both have caring hearts and everyone around them can see it. With Keyontae, when we did our research on him, everyone talked about how terrific of a human being he was and how his teammates loved him.

"Being the star the way he is and the talent he has, for all your teammates to like you and enjoy being around you means you don't think of yourself too highly. Markquis is the same way. He understood he needed help here and was willing to work to get him here during the recruiting process. They are both just great human beings."

Big things were on the horizon ... if K-State could convince Johnson to commit.

Nowell knew how important Johnson could be to the Wildcats, so he turned into a recruiter to get him on the roster. Nowell hosted Johnson during his trip to Manhattan. Rather than show him around Aggieville or other popular spots in town he took Johnson to Tang's house for dinner and then kept the focus on basketball.

When they were done talking in Nowell's car, they went straight to the gym.

It was obvious they had chemistry almost immediately.

"I knew right away," Nowell said. "I saw his highlights and I knew him from the start of his career. I just knew if we had him we could be something special. I talked to him about my goals and wanting to win right away and wanting to go to the NBA. He had similar dreams and visions, so we clicked right away."

They both felt like Johnson could be the final cog in a winning K-State machine and Johnson pledged his future to the Wildcats.

"He could shoot and he was a fast point guard," Johnson said. "I was just thinking, if I come to this team that is somebody I can pass to and know he was going to score. I could trust him."

Their relationship grew like a bamboo tree as soon as they officially became teammates.

"We both have a high basketball IQ and we have a great feel for the game," Nowell said. "He is a professional scorer and I like to pass and assist and get my teammates the ball. After a couple days of practices I could see his game. I could tell that he was good. I just tried to feed off that and make all my teammates better."

K-State became a NCAA Tournament contender the second Johnson and Nowell became teammates, even though the Wildcats were picked to finish last in the Big 12.

With Nowell (16.8 points, 7.6 assists, 3.5 rebounds) making shots from deep and facilitating like a quarterback, the Wildcats had one of the best guards in the country. With Johnson (17.7 points, 7 rebounds) scoring at an incredibly consistent rate, the Wildcats also had one of the best forwards in the nation.

Together, they delivered some truly extraordinary performances. Who can forget the time they combined for 64 points during a 116-103 victory over Texas? Fans will always remember when they followed that up with a combined 56 points in a win over Baylor. Their lob dunks in the final minute against Oklahoma State and Kansas have become immortal highlights.

They have done great things together even though they have only been teammates for less for a few months. It almost feels like they spoke this season into existence when they mapped out their future together less than a calendar year ago.

Kansas State's Markquis Nowell again shows how smallest player can have biggest game

BY BLAIR KERKHOFF MARCH 19, 2023 7:13 PM



Kansas State's Markquis Nowell celebrates with fans after the Wildcats secured a spot in the Sweet 16 on Sunday with a win over Kentucky. TRAVIS HEYING The Wichita Eagle

GREENSBORO, N.C.

There are outstanding-player awards and all-tourney teams for the Final Four and each of the regionals, but not for the first two rounds of the NCAA Tournament.

Pity, because Kansas State point guard Markquis Nowell could have added to his hardware.

Nowell's 27 points and nine assists Sunday in K-State's 75-69 victory over Kentucky followed his 17-point, 14-assist total in the Wildcats' first-round win against Montana State.

K-State heads to the East Region Sweet 16 on Thursday in Nowell's New York City hometown and faces Michigan State at Madison Square Garden.

The smallest player on the floor — Nowell stands about 5-foot-7 and joked over the weekend that the best thing about his size is getting to the floor faster when he falls — has been dominant in the tourney's early stages.

And delightful to watch. Consider a stretch over the final 3 1/2 minutes of Sunday's first half.

K-State was hanging with Kentucky when Nowell went behind the back for an assist pass to Keyontae Johnson for a slam. After a steal, Nowell bounced a pass through his legs for a trailing Johnson, who was fouled on the shot and made both free throws.

"They've trusted me all season to make plays for them," Nowell said. "We grew that chemistry during the offseason, so I kind of know where my guys are supposed to be."

The final play of the first half provided the perfect example. Nowell drove around two defenders and lofted a no-look pass to Nae'Quan Nowell, who was dashing along the baseline. The lob and slam beat the buzzer to give Kansas State a three-point halftime lead.

And at least twice during Sunday's game, Nowell delivered no-look assists.

Kentucky ripped off 11 straight points early in the second half and looked to take control, but Nowell brought his Cats back and knocked down K-State's first three-pointer in 14 attempts to tie the game at 39.

From there, neither team could gain an edge — and Nowell was largely the reason why, from a K-State perspective. His scoring increased with another pair of three-pointers and drives to the bucket. Nowell finished with 23 points in the second half.

"He is one helluva player," Tomlin said. "He puts in the time, works on his game every day and it shows."

Tomlin, who like Nowell is from New York, said he didn't personally know his future teammate when the two were growing up. But "I knew of him," Tomlin added. "They called him Mr. New York City for a reason."

Kentucky coach John Calipari called Nowell the "little kid" during the postgame news conference.

Nowell was interested in another Kentucky coach, assistant Tyler Ulis, who was an undersized All-America and Bob Cousy Award winner for the Wildcats from 2014-16. Ulis, who went on to play for the NBA's Phoenix Suns, was listed at 5-8 and drew the admiration of a young Nowell.

"I watch a ton of film, watch the greats, and I studied Tyler Ulis when I was in high school," Nowell said. "I take parts of people's games, implement them into my game, shake it all up in a box and see what I come up with."

On Sunday, Nowell came up with a second remarkable NCAA Tournament performance, and now there's at least one more chance to show how a small player can come up big.



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

Through Ups and Downs, Marcus is Always There

February 27, 2023

By D. Scott Fritchen

The making of Markquis Nowell begins at age 6. Markquis, older brother Marcus, and their mother Kisha Morales live in a tiny apartment in Brooklyn, New York. Eleven-year-old Marcus lay on a twin-sized bed. Markquis lay on the other twin bed inside their bedroom.

"What do you want to be?" Marcus asks.

Markquis replies, "An NBA player."

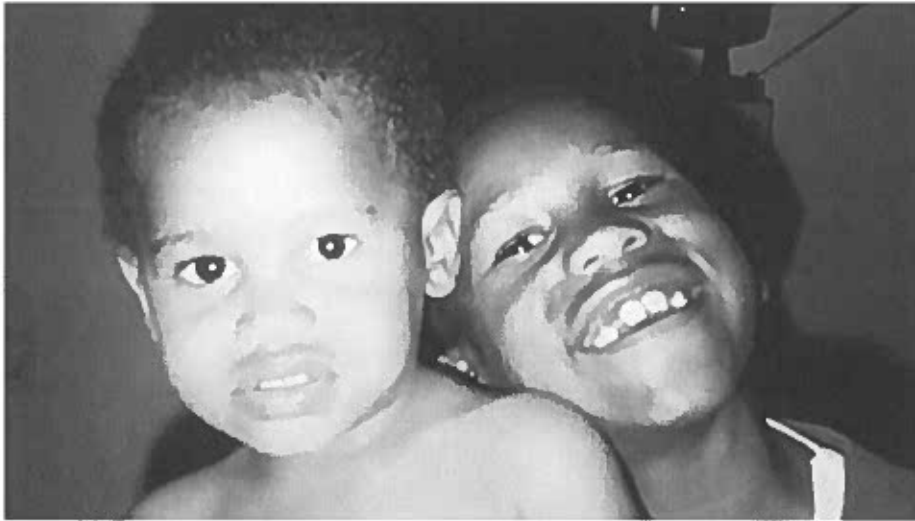
This is a story about brothers. It's a story about growth. It's a story about heart over height and early-morning workouts on the playgrounds, and free throws – thousands of free throws – as the lights in New York City turn on, and darkness attempts to halt the practice. It's a story about the vow that Marcus made that day on the twin beds, and the ups and downs to come, and the tears and celebrations, and the love that two brothers share as one brother steals the NCAA spotlight and the other tells the NCAA to shine it brighter.

For virtually every step along the way in Markquis' career, there's Marcus not too far away, helping his younger brother along. There's a story to tell through the eyes of the brother, who has been with Markquis through the ups and downs, and who pauses to collect himself — the throat tightens when recounting certain details — and who wouldn't trade Markquis for Jeff Bezos' money.

Markquis' story will pause shortly before 7 p.m. Wednesday. That's when he will be recognized on Senior Night before No. 14 Kansas State faces Oklahoma at sellout Bramlage Coliseum. He'll be showered with ear-popping cheers of 11,000 fans, and he'll hug his family, and he'll hold a framed No. 1 jersey high above his head on the basketball court and in the arena and at the university that has never quite had another player like Markquis. Crazy to think it'll mark Markquis' final time playing inside the Octagon of Doom. Perhaps somewhat even crazier? To think that 5-foot-8, 160-pound Markquis even made it this far.

"Markquis," Marcus says, "was overlooked from a very young age."

But before any of that, before the pomp and circumstance, before the cheers, and Markquis' final home game in a season that has enjoyed so many bright beginnings, there's a fundamental question: Will heart overcome height?



No, height will win. That's what the coaches said, anyway. It wasn't hard to spot Markquis' name in youth team tryouts. His name was typically affixed with an asterisk, and before you ask why, remember that he wasn't supposed to get to this point, sweeping inside the lane, dropping deep 3s from Topeka, finding Keyontae Johnson for the game-winning dunk against No. 2 Kansas. No, none of this was supposed to happen. At least that's what the youth coaches believed: He was too short.

And, anyway, Markquis had to learn at a very young age to outwork everyone, because this dream of being a major college basketball player, of being a force, wouldn't come easy, and would be doubly hard because he was always the shortest guy on the court.

His mom was 5-foot-1, his dad was 5-foot-9 with the right pair of shoes on, and Marcus was 6-foot, and Markquis so many times told his older brother, "If I could switch one thing with you, it'd be your height."

"Everybody isn't going to be blessed with height," Marcus says. "When Markquis was 7, 8, 9, 10 years old, playing high school division, he never played like he was small. We knew the asterisk was going to be there. But we didn't want them to focus on his height.

"We wanted them to focus on his heart."

And, oh, how Markquis yearned to prove the doubters wrong. He was a bulldog. He was fierce. He brought that New York City toughness and that New York City fire. At age 7, he was schooling players in a 14-and-under league. A few years later, he was running with the pack in the Showboat Classic, the Kingdome Classic and the Tri-State Classic. Certainly his playmaking ability, flare, and lightening quick moves would wow the crowd, and any prospective coaches observing from the sidelines. He wanted to be the next Kemba Walker.

But some coaches weren't convinced.

Height, it appeared, was gonna win.

• • •

The heart will win, and here's why: Nobody played with more heart. All young Markquis needed was a chance. At each level, the doubters often turned into gushing admirers. When it came time to select a high school, Marcus sought out a school that wouldn't put Markquis in the easiest positions. After all, what would Markquis learn, Marcus figured, by averaging 30 points a night? Marcus took Markquis to St. Anthony's so he could play under Hall-of-Famer Bob Hurley, one of the finest high school basketball coaches in history. Didn't work out.

"I'll never forget I picked Markquis up from school in Jersey City and we took the hour-long train ride together," Marcus says, "and I just told him, 'We just have to work harder.'"

They found a home at Bishop Loughlin High School in Brooklyn. Markquis averaged 19.9 points, 8.1 assists as a junior in 2016-17 and helped the Lions to a No. 8 final ranking in Class AA.

"Markquis had heart and became a name within the city," Marcus says. "He did everything. We decided we wanted to get national at that point. I wanted him at The Patrick School, where Kyrie Irving went. I've known Kyrie since high school growing up. Markquis had a rapport with Kyrie. I wanted him to be in a situation where there might be a guard better than him. I wanted a coach who'd challenge him and teach him life."

Markquis averaged 10.9 points during an injury-plagued senior season. He missed all of January due to injury, but returned to play down the stretch. He averaged 12.6 points and scored 22 points in one game. He was ranked the No. 9 prospect in New Jersey by 247Sports.

Yes, the heart will win. Or so Markquis and Marcus thought. On the day that Division I schools could begin recruiting prospective athletes, Marcus and Markquis sat by the phone as Markquis' friends were posting their Division I scholarship offers on social media. High-major offers, all of them.

"I kept saying, 'Quis, they're going to call you, they're going to call you,'" Marcus says. "Finally, Markquis looked at me and said, 'Marcus, why aren't they calling me?'"

Height was winning again.

And this is it. This is when Marcus begins to lose it, hot tears on the other end of the phone, at that face that Markquis made, the one of hopelessness, when everything spun out of his control. Markquis had learned to control so much on the court, yet was helpless when it came to switching the minds of Division I coaches.

"I felt bad as an older brother because Markquis had worked so hard and he wasn't being rewarded," Marcus says. "He gives it his all. I said, 'Quis, don't worry, man. If we got to go mid-major, let's play mid-major for two years, let's show the world what we're capable of, and then we're going to go high-major and kill it.'"

Ultimately, Markquis received offers from Minnesota, Georgetown, Rutgers, Seton Hall, VCU and Western Kentucky. But by then it was too late.

They were at Arkansas-Little Rock.



Markquis was all heart. He succeeded. He flourished. In his final 42 games at Little Rock, he scored 687 points, averaging 16.7 points and shooting 40% from the floor, including 38% from 3-point range.

He averaged double-digit points in all three seasons at Little Rock, including 17.5 points per game as a sophomore in 2019-20, in which he earned Lou Henson All-America and First Team All-Sun Belt honors while helping the Trojans to a 21-win season.

Marcus e-mailed Division I coaches across the country. He knew of K-State assistant coach Shane Southwell from his days at Rice High School. He phoned Southwell. Georgetown head coach Patrick Ewing replied as well. Ewing said that he was considering Markquis but couldn't guarantee anything. Southwell believed that Markquis could backup point guard Nijel Pack at K-State.

Marcus told Markquis, "Let's let them think you're a backup, get our foot in the door, and we'll prove that you're not a backup guard, and that you're a star guard."

What did Markquis do? Here's what he did: He averaged 12.4 points on 38.6% shooting, including 30.7% on 3-pointers, to go along with 5.0 assists, 3.4 rebounds and 2.2 steals per game last season. He had 19 double-digit scoring game and reached 20 points three times. And he was selected All-Big 12 Honorable Mention by a vote of the league's coaches and earned a spot on the Big 12 All-Defensive Team.

"When Bruce Weber departed, I said, 'Honestly, there are only two things that'll keep us here,'" Marcus says. "I didn't want Markquis' senior year to be sabotaged by someone who didn't know him and his style and I wanted someone who fit Markquis' personality. I knew who our program was considering. I told Markquis, 'If these coaches come here, this is the one I want. We get Jerome Tang, we stay, and no questions asked.'"

Markquis stayed in Manhattan and worked on his game throughout the summer. Marcus told him not to return home. Markquis joined Ishmael Massoud as the only returning players for the Wildcats this season. Markquis helped recruit the Wildcats' roster prior to this season. He was the leader. He was the man. When Big 12 coaches picked K-State to finish last in the league, Markquis went back to his Manhattan apartment.

He decorated his walls with the NCAA Tournament logo.



"We needed a slogan, something that allowed us to stick out," Marcus says.

"Heart over Height" was born.

"When we yell, 'Heart over Height!' we want them to overlook the obvious and look at everything else that's attached to Markquis aside from his height," Marcus says.

There's plenty attached to Markquis' name now.

Nowell ranks second at K-State and third in the Big 12 with 17.0 points per game. He ranks third in Division I basketball with 7.6 assists per game and 220 total assists. He ranks 11th nationally in free throws (156), eighth in steals (67), 15th in steals per game (2.31), 17th in free-throw percentage (89.1%) and 19th in minutes played per game

(36:22). He is one of three Division I players to reach 1,500 career points, 500 assists and 200 steals.

His 220 assists topped the school record set by Steve Henson in 1987-88.

"None of this surprises me at all," Marcus says. "Just allow him to play, teach him along the way, and he's going to win games. Markquis still has moments today where it's like, 'Quis!' but Markquis has so many plays that win us games. I'm glad that Jerome Tang understands. He's a players' coach and he understands who Markquis is and sometimes you're going to have to live and die by Markquis' mistakes but sometimes it's going to correlate to wins.

"I know he's prepared hard for this."

Against No. 24 West Virginia (December 31) and No. 6 Texas (January 3), Markquis combined for 59 points, 19 assists, 10 steals and shot 52% from the floor. Steph Curry was the only Division I player to match or surpass that in the last 25 seasons.

Between No. 6 Texas and No. 19 Baylor (January 7), Markquis averaged 34.0 points on 54.8% shooting, including 58.8% on 3-pointers, to go along with 11.4 assists per game. Markquis had a career-high 36 points and nine assists against the Longhorns. He had 32 points and a career-high 14 assists against the Bears, marking the first 30 point/10 assist game in K-State history and just the second in Division I in the last 10 seasons. Trae Young did so in 2017.

Markquis became just the third Division I player to average 30 points and 10 assists in a three-game stretch over the past 25 seasons — and the only one to do it against three ranked opponents.

He was named ESPN National Player of the Week and Oscar Robertson National Player of the Week. He was named to *The Sporting News* Midseason All-American Team. He's a top-10 candidate for the Bob Cousy Point Guard Award, and he's up for the Wooden Award, Naismith Award, and Oscar Robertson Trophy.

"Markquis taught me as a brother not to cut corners," Marcus says. "I was always the person, I grew up off survival instincts, so I was always trying to cut a corner just to get by, and Markquis literally will always drill into my head, 'Bro, don't cut corners. If it takes you the long way, it's the right way.' Markquis doesn't cut a corner. I know that the universe repays you in a way when you dish out that type of consistency and effort and attention to detail.

"I always knew the universe would repay Markquis in a good way."

Markquis has 14 career points/assists double-doubles, including a school-record nine at K-State. He is the only K-State player with three games of at least 20 points and 10 assists.

After becoming the first player in K-State history to record 10 assists and zero turnovers against No. 9 Baylor last Tuesday, he had a game-high 22 points, five rebounds, eight assists and four steals at Oklahoma State on Saturday.

He could become the first K-State player in history to average 17.0 points and 8.0 assists in a season.

Markquis has a willing mentor in Kyrie Irving.

"Me, Markquis and Kyrie are really, really close friends to this day," Marcus says. "As we got older, Markquis developed a relationship with Kyrie outside of my relationship with Kyrie. Kyrie gives him pointers to this day. They talk. Kyrie tunes into K-State games and gives Markquis pointers to better his game."



K-State is 22-7 overall and 10-6 in the Big 12 Conference and owns a top-10 NET ranking and has nine Quad-1 wins — one of just seven Division I teams to have at least nine Quad-1 victories this season.

There's still games left to play — the Big 12 Championship runs March 8-11 at the T-Mobile Center in Kansas City, Missouri (and should be incredible) with the NCAA Tournament to follow (with K-State a projected top-4 seed) — yet everything will pause for a few moments shortly before 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Senior Night celebration.

The emotions will run, but cannot hang on, not with a chance to close out the home season with one last victory. It's another chance for K-State, and Markquis, to shine.

"Markquis doesn't play the game for Markquis, he plays it for K-State," Marcus says. "There are people before him and after him who might have played the game for the first and last name that they were born with, but not Markquis. He wants to play for K-State. He wants K-State to be great. I hope fans always, always remember that Markquis bleeds purple and he's EMAW to his last dying breath."

The EMAW is expected to remain strong in March.

"The NCAA Tournament, man, that's one of the biggest dreams I had for us," Marcus says. "I had three dreams for Markquis. Two of them came true. I wanted Markquis to play Duke at Cameron. That didn't happen and that's OK. Then I wanted Markquis to

play for a nationally-ranked team. That has happened. And I wanted to see my brother play in the NCAA Tournament because that's where all the dreams are made.

"We're brothers. That's my dog. That's my heart."

At the end of the day, it is important to know this: Heart always wins out in the end. Markquis is all heart. Height has been a non-factor for some time now. Markquis simply doesn't play like he's 5-foot-8. He plays larger than life and typically does so on the biggest of stages. The coaches, the ones who doubted Markquis long ago, will share their Markquis moments with friends while watching him compete in the NCAA Tournament. Coaches put an asterisk by Markquis name these day: It's because he's often the No. 1 scout on one of the top 20 teams in the nation.

Yes, the story will pause shortly before 7 p.m. Wednesday. And that's when Marcus believes he'll tear up again. There have been many teary moments during this journey. This will be a key moment in the making of Markquis.

"You'll see me tearing up because this is a full-circle moment," Marcus says. "I cried when he graduated from K-State specifically because I remember that phone call with K-State, and to see him play his last game at Bramlage knowing what he's given to the game and always wanted to give to K-State, I just hope K-State remembers Markquis for focusing on the name on the front of the jersey."

Marcus pauses.

"If we can take anything from Markquis' story, it's that you might not have the easiest road in life, you might not have all the intangibles, and everything might be playing against you in order to get to your destination, but take it from Markquis, if you approach every day and work hard and give it your all to what you want in life, it'll eventually work out for your good. Be a good person and good things will happen to you."

Yes sir, Wednesday night will be emotional. The hearts will be beating hard, mightily hard, over this grand moment. Marcus and Markquis, together, standing on the basketball court where dreams have come true.

They've made it.

We hope you enjoy K-State Sports Extra. We would like to hear your comments and any story ideas for future emails, so fire them our way. Contact D. Scott Fritchen or K-State Associate AD for Communications Ryan Lackey. For past stories, visit www.k-statesports.com/sportsextra.



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

Graduating One Day, Schooling Opponents the Next

December 12, 2022

By D. Scott Fritchen

He sauntered through Bramlage Coliseum on Saturday in gown and tassel and with a smile and diploma in hand, then he returned less than 24 hours later with a basketball in hand and with an eye to dominate. The newly-graduated Markquis Nowell continues to cover every box like filling out a scantron. Yet the 5-foot-8, 160 pound Kansas State point guard still has more to learn — about himself and about this Wildcats' team, which has sailed to a 9-1 record with a date against Nebraska on Saturday at T-Mobile Center in Kansas City, Missouri.

"It's funny because I never have a good game at T-Mobile Center," Nowell says. "I'll be happy to be in that arena because I know that's the place for the Big 12 Tournament, so any chance I get to be there one extra time is always good."

"I'm going to try to get real comfortable and acquainted with that arena so by the Big 12 Tournament I'll play really good."

The T-Mobile Center is where Nowell attended Big 12 Basketball Media Days back in October, back when coaches picked K-State to finish 10th out of 10 teams in the league. The T-Mobile Center is where Nowell posed with new teammates Keyontae Johnson and Nae'Qwan Tomlin, their confident smiles etched upon ESPN cameras. The T-Mobile Center is where Nowell pledged his belief in first-year K-State head coach Jerome Tang, who with a 98-50 win over Incarnate Word on Sunday in Manhattan became the only first-year coach in school history to start a season with a 9-1 record.



Nowell, of course, joined junior forward Ismael Massoud as the only returning K-State players from a year ago. They spent hot summer days shooting and bonding with Tang and the new coaching staff. It's paying off.

"Things have changed drastically," Nowell says. "You see a lot of changes in the energy and in the new coaching staff, but my mindset never changes. My mindset is to win. From the start of last year to the start of this year, my mindset has always been to win for K-State, win for the coaching staff, embrace the culture here and win a Big 12 Championship.

"That's always been my mindset."

Nowell stands in the corridor outside of the men's home locker room at Bramlage about half an hour after the win over Incarnate Word. He wears a purple K-State parka over a purple Nike full-zip track jacket. "KANSAS STATE WILDCATS" is written in bold white print down the left leg of black sweatpants.

It was another day at the office for Nowell, who had 10 points, eight assists, five rebounds and one steal in 23 minutes.

Numbers on this particular day just don't mean as much as the blessings waiting for him on the basketball court at Bramlage — his father, mother, and brother traveled from Harlem, New York, to share in Nowell's grand moment of walking to accept his diploma, and watched him play in Bramlage for the first time in his two seasons with the Wildcats.

Marcus Nowell looks at his son as he heads out of the tunnel.

"Love," Marcus says. "It's full of love. Markquis has been through a lot of different obstacles in his life. This has been the most enjoyable time here at this school. It's love."

The family poses for a photo at Bramlage for the second time in 24 hours.

Click. Click. Click.

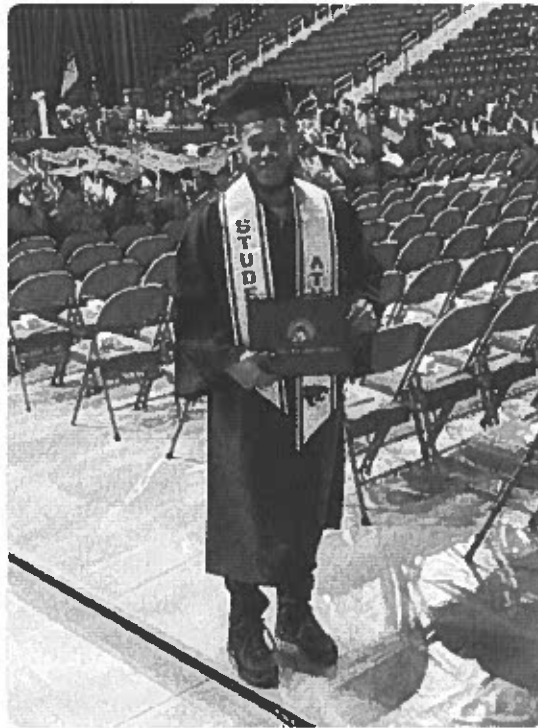
Nowell has made plenty of memories during his time in Manhattan, and this assuredly rests among the greatest of them all.

"When I got inside Bramlage for graduation, I started getting jittery and anxious," Nowell says. "You know, it was just a good moment, a surreal moment, because where I come from, you're not expected to graduate and you're not expected to do big things. I'm just proud to make my parents happy."



Markquis Nowell
@MarkquisNowell

Graduated From The Best School On Earth! Proud To Be A Wildcat 🐾❤️ #EMAW



4:08 PM · Dec 10, 2022

Marcus couldn't be prouder. He sits in a stocking cap and watery eyes.

"He's the third person in my whole family to graduate," Marcus says. "It was super special for me. I can't even explain the emotions going through me right now to watch him get a diploma. Then he's back here playing a game the next day, and that's just Markquis. There are no distractions. He comes out here and he works hard and he has a plan before a plan. He's been doing this since he was 7 so this is normal."

Father and son used to visit different basketball parks around Harlem to work on Markquis' skills. Markquis would make 25 straight 3-pointers. He was 10 years old.

"If he didn't make 25, we'd go back to zero and start over again," Marcus says. "I told him in order to play Division I basketball he had to shoot the ball. He was undersized. The first thing I told him was to shoot the basketball. They had this stigma with New York City

point guards that they couldn't shoot. I wanted Markquis to erase that stigma immediately.

"Yes, sun up to sun down we used to dribble the ball and shoot 3s."



Nowell's personal motto is "Heart Over Height" and his Twitter handle @MrNewYorkCityy tells the tale of his journey and self-confidence. And yes, it's difficult to nail down the last time K-State had such a unique player. Maybe Denis Clemente? And like Clemente, Nowell has more than personality, he's a sparkplug ready to fire at any moment, and he calls himself "an entertainer." Nowell is a ball of muscle, who launches 50-pound medicine balls 20 feet into the air (there are witnesses) and has cat-like quickness and handles and vision and can glide baseline, switch hands underneath the rim, hang and toss the ball high off the glass, then jog down the court as the ball trickled in. He's king of the no-look pass. There's simply no off switch — if there is, nobody has been able to locate it yet.

He's a 5-foot-8, 160-pound senior leader who's steadily and smoothly shifted things into another gear during his second season in Manhattan, who's graduated from learning one system as a junior to darned near, might we say, almost mastering this system under Tang, emitting confidence with each step along the hardwood and inside the same arena where he sat in cap and gown less than 24 hours before, reaching a major personal milestone — receiving a college degree — while schooling the opposition one day later.

"I feel like I'm definitely pushing new levels," Nowell says. "It's a different atmosphere and a different team. I'm one of the few guys who stayed. I've been put into a leadership role that I'm trying to embrace and take over and I'm really trying to do my job in that role. Each and every day I'm just finding a different way to get better and a new way to lead.

"It's just leading to success."



At a time when competition is about to ramp up with Saturday's date against Nebraska at T-Mobile Arena — and with the Big 12 Conference opener against West Virginia looming on the final day of 2022 — it's impossible not to pause at the November and December calendar pages and appreciate the climb, how Nowell followed a 12-point, 12-assist performance against Rhode Island with a 29-point, 11-assist effort against Nevada, becoming the first player since Steve Henson in 1989 to go for 25 and 11 in a game, and the first player in school history to record back-to-back points and assists double-doubles.

Or how Mr. New York City scorched Abilene Christian for 15 points, a season-high six rebounds, a season high-tying 12 assists, and three steals last Tuesday. Or how he has demonstrated consistency this season (he entered Sunday ranked second in Division I with 8.2 assists) and consistency in his five seasons (he is the only active Division I player with 1,000 points, 500 assist and 200 steals in a career). Or how he already has stepped into K-State lore (he's the fastest in school history to reach 200 assists).

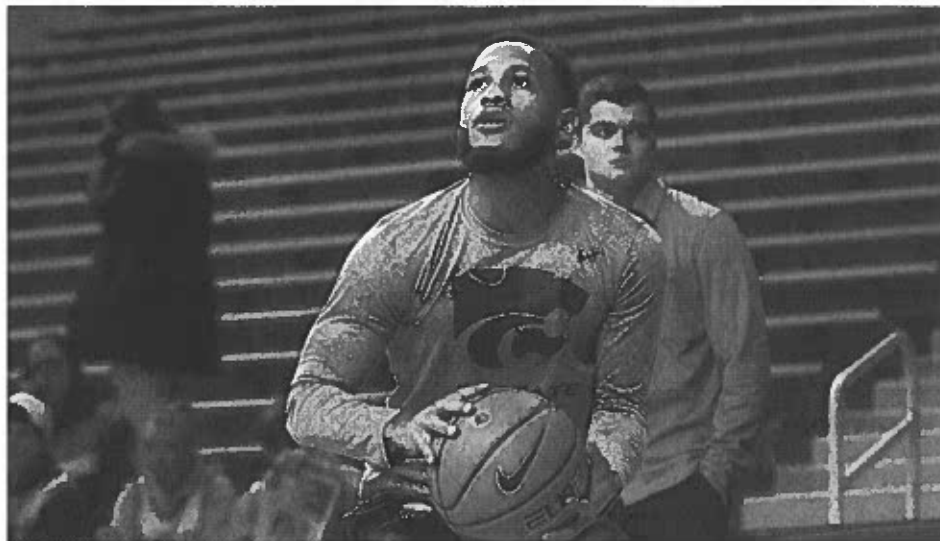
"That's special," Nowell says. "All the hard work that I've put in each and every day is paying off. I'm just really humbled by it. I give all the honor and glory to God because without Him none of this would be possible. I'm just going to continue to put one foot in front of the other and see what the future holds."

And there will more for Nowell to conquer, but at the moment, appreciate the young man in his element. Nowell shows up 120 minutes prior to tipoff to get up shots — form shots, free throws and 3-pointers. Lots of 3-pointers. It's a sight to behold, how he tickles the net before teammates take the court. It's the extra work that he talks about that might help him to reach another new level.

"I'm a big routine guy," he says. "I love routines. Early last year I came up with a routine that I was going to work out 45 minutes before anybody got here and that stuck with me. I started having good games. It just never left. That's one of the routines I'm really strict on. I really like doing it."

"Every time I step into Bramlage, it feels like home. I put in a lot of work here. We do a lot of activities here, so whenever I'm here, I'm comfortable.

"It's just like being home."



You might remember the story, how Mr. New York City began his time at K-State as a sixth man a year ago, then started in place of injured Nijel Pack (concussion), and emerged as the most comfortable player on the floor, with 11 points, eight rebounds and 11 assists against Marquette, nearly becoming the first player in school history to record a triple-double in points, rebounds and assists. Through the first nine games last season, he led the team in double-digit scoring games, assists and steals, and ranked second in scoring, field goals and 3-pointers.

And this, too, how Nowell starred at point guard at Bishop Loughlin High School in Brooklyn and then at The Patrick School in Hillsdale, New Jersey — alma mater of Michael Kidd-Gilchrist (Dallas Mavericks) and Kyrie Irving (Brooklyn Nets). Then he began his college career averaging 14.4 points per game and ranked eighth all-time with 139 3-pointers at Arkansas Little-Rock. He also was their best free-throw shooter (85.7%) in history. He earned Lou Henson All-American and first team All-Sun Belt honors in 2019-20.

He knew former K-State player and assistant coach Shane Southwell, a NYC native, for years. When Nowell entered the transfer portal, K-State was a virtual no-brainer.

Which brings us to now.

And Marcus is blown away.

"I mean, everybody here is like family," Marcus says. "Anybody who wants to bring their kid to K-State, I recommend it, because you're going to be embraced with love from this family. And I love it."

Markquis Nowell Has Put Kansas State—and Himself—on the Map

The 5'8" guard has exploded in January to help the Wildcats get off to a stunning 4–0 start in the Big 12.

KEVIN SWEENEY JAN 11, 2023

KANSAS STATE WILDCATS

Trae Young. Ja Morant. Markquis Nowell?

The first two guards on that list are NBA All-Stars who put up record-setting numbers in their short college careers. The third is a fifth-year senior point guard on the team picked last in the Big 12 in the preseason, a generously listed 5'8" floor general who had zero Division I offers during his senior year of high school. But after the week Nowell just had for Kansas State, he now belongs in the same sentence as two of the best players on the planet. In two ranked wins over Texas and Baylor last week, Nowell scored more than 65 points and dished out more than 20 assists. The only two other D-I men's players in the last 10 years to accomplish that in a two-game stretch are Young and Morant.

In a week, Nowell went from afterthought to National Player of the Week. Mr. New York City (as he calls himself on his Twitter and Instagram handles) has become the star of the Little Apple and helped engineer a remarkable turnaround for 15–1 Kansas State under first-year coach Jerome Tang.

Nowell is the prototypical New York City point guard. He's small but incredibly tough, with a flair for the dramatic and a skill set fine-tuned in outdoor pickup games. A Harlem native, Nowell grew up playing on famous courts in Rucker Park and Dyckman Park, wowing fans with deep shooting range, no-look passes and a tight handle.



<https://youtu.be/UgrPlzodyOk>

"I just learned the grittiness, the flashiness," Nowell says. "When I throw passes, I feel like I'm in Rucker or Dyckman Park. Every arena I'm in, it feels like a playground to me."

But early recruiting interest from D-I programs faded away, and Nowell finished an injury-plagued senior season at The Patrick School in New Jersey with no committable offers. Eventually, he got one from Little Rock assistant coach Alfred Jordan (a Harlem native himself), so New York City's quintessential floor general moved the nearly 1,300 miles to central Arkansas to take his D-I opportunity.

Nowell contributed right away as a freshman on a team that lost 21 games but then blossomed into a star as a sophomore, averaging more than 17 points on a team that won the Sun Belt regular-season title before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the sport that March. He opted out midway through his third season at Little Rock, then hit the transfer portal that spring and landed in Manhattan—just not the one he grew up in. Kansas State gave Nowell a chance to play at the highest level despite his diminutive stature. In fact, this year he's the only scholarship player in high-major men's basketball listed at 5'8" or shorter.

While Nowell had a solid first season for the Wildcats in 2021–22, team success didn't follow. KSU finished ninth in the Big 12, and coach Bruce Weber was dismissed following the season. K-State quickly hired Tang, a longtime assistant under Scott Drew at Baylor, but that didn't stop a mass roster exodus. The headline departure was Nowell's backcourt running mate, Nijel Pack, who eventually committed to Miami and famously signed a two-year, \$800,000 NIL deal with LifeWallet and Miami booster John Ruiz. Nowell, however, stayed the course, one of just two Wildcats to remain in Manhattan and commit to playing for Tang.

"I take pride in sticking things out through the hard times and through the good times," Nowell says. "I knew there would be opportunity for me and the way I play [under Tang]."



Nowell and the Wildcats are off to a 15–1 start and ranked 11th nationally. Chris Jones/USA TODAY Sports

Nowell had also fallen in love with his new home, even though no one would confuse this Manhattan for the streets of Harlem. He embraced what he called a "family atmosphere" that welcomed him to K-State with open arms. And as one of two scholarship players on the roster when Tang got the job, Nowell had a big role in helping pitch recruits on why they should join the Kansas State family. Tang would bring Nowell and Ismael Massoud to dinners with visiting prospects to try to seal the deal.

"They were able to tell the story of what it was like to live in Manhattan, Kansas, and what the fan base and community was like," Tang said Monday.

Nowell didn't like doing it at first, but believes he has "a knack" for recruiting to the place he called "the best school on Earth." And slowly, a hodgepodge roster loaded with transfers came together.

"In the beginning, you know, I had my doubts," Nowell says. "We went from having two players to having four players to five players, and then we just started adding on."

The biggest addition didn't come until August, when Florida transfer Keyontae Johnson committed to the Wildcats. Johnson hadn't played in nearly two years after collapsing on the court in December 2020 due to a heart condition, but has returned to his star form since joining Kansas State, averaging 18.4 points and 7.0 rebounds per game. In an unlikely turn, Johnson and Nowell have formed perhaps the sport's best duo, keying K-State's remarkable turnaround. An illustration of their chemistry: this incredible alley-oop pass from Nowell to Johnson that served as the exclamation point for a win over Oklahoma State on Tuesday.



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Hey @SportsCenter... it's us again... we have something
AWESOME to show you!

#KStateMBB x @Keyontae



8:09 PM · Jan 10, 2023



<https://twitter.com/i/status/1612995050677407744>

KSU's coming-out party came last week, and it was simultaneous with Nowell's. Navigating a weak nonconference schedule was one thing, as was an upset home victory over West Virginia to open league play. But Nowell's 36 points and nine assists lifted Kansas State to a record-setting 116-103 win over then No. 6 Texas, and the guard continued his star turn with 32 points and 14 assists in a road win at then No. 19 Baylor. He then followed that up with 20 points and seven assists in the win over Oklahoma State. And, perhaps most remarkably, Nowell's impact goes well beyond what he does statistically. In addition to helping seal the deal when recruiting most of this roster, Tang said Nowell now leads by sharing notes on mental preparation with the team in a players-only group chat. He also leads on the floor and has become an extension of his coach in the process.

"It makes coaching so much easier when you don't have to coach [your point guard] all the time and you can coach the other four guys out there," Tang said Saturday. "It's all a credit to him and his heart."

Nowell has had quite the month, graduating from Kansas State in December, turning 23 a couple of weeks later and now exploding onto the scene in early January in his final year of college basketball. The shortest player in high-major hoops is playing like one of the best guards in the country, and, based on box plus-minus, is having the second-best season by a player listed under 6 feet tall in the last 15 years, trailing only Ty Lawson. Not bad for a guy nobody wanted out of high school, right?

"I'm not the biggest guy out there, nor do I want to be the biggest guy out there," Nowell says. "I will always be that kid who never had anything, who wanted to be seen and who wanted to go to a high-major program. I still work like I'm that person."



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

A Grand Return to the Court

November 8, 2022

By D. Scott Fritchen

He made a statement without saying a word. This was the beginning of the Keyontae Johnson journey at Kansas State. He wore his white No. 11 jersey, a tattoo "WRITE YOUR OWN STORY" emblazoned upon his left biceps, and he sauntered onto the court prior to tipoff at Bramlage Coliseum with a story to tell, all right, and he wrote beautifully through his actions. Every step told a tale, how the 6-foot-6, 230-pound native of Norfolk, Virginia, the 2020-21 Preseason SEC Player of the Year, was back on a basketball court — this one at Bramlage Coliseum in Manhattan — a spot he wouldn't have thought about several years ago, before the medical issue that sidelined him for two years.

Yes, this was his story to tell, a tale about mini-conquests, about one step at a time, about fighting back tears when things appeared bleak, and a tale about gratefulness, a teary made-for-a-movie epic in which he stars as the ultimate hero of second chances, because there he was at Florida that day on December 12, 2020 against Florida State, the day that everything changed, the day that he cannot remember, the day that college basketball will never forget.

"It's just a blessing, really," Johnson says, finally, after K-State's season-opening 93-59 win over UTRGV on Monday. Johnson scores a team high-tying 14 points on 4-of-8 shooting, including 3-for-5 on 3-pointers, to go along with two rebounds and four assists in 24 minutes.

"I thank God every day," he continues. "Without Him, I wouldn't be here. He gave me a second chance at life. Every day, before I get on the court, I just thank Him, and keep

praying for a healthy season. It means a lot for people to recognize me and it just shows the work I've put in and how (much) I've overcome over the years.

"Without Him, I wouldn't be here."



Yes, the tattoo directs him to compose a story, and Johnson's story is just beginning in Manhattan, and it might twist, and it might turn, but it won't wilt like wheat in winter, and it might only grow more immense as he takes further root in the Flint Hills.

His first shot was a wide-open 3-pointer and the crowd thundered in approval exactly 6 minutes into the game and he smiled at the ball as he swished through the net — "The smile came from the crowd. The crowd was into it. It felt really good to get my shot," he says — and he smiles again in the postgame interview room. Second shot? 3-pointer. This one arrived from the left side of the court in stride less than three minutes later. Once he showed that he could shoot from outside, he hit Tykei Greene with an alley-oop dunk. Then he caught a baseline alley-oop of his own from Markquis Nowell, sending it down strong with two hands, his elbows above the rim. Moments later, he drained his third 3-pointer, catching the ball in rhythm from Greene in the far corner opposite the UTRGV bench.

That gave Johnson 11 points in his first 13 minutes in a K-State jersey.

"It's great, man," Nowell says. "Just seeing a guy who's worked over and over and over again to be in the shape that he's in now, and to be able to still have his scoring ability after two years, it's just great to be alongside him. He's so versatile and has a high basketball IQ. I love playing with him."

It's sometimes hard to sort everything out until perspective sets in, until time passes, and sometimes that time period is an hour and sometimes it's a day and sometimes it's a week or a month or a year, but here's something we know: We probably haven't been treated to a better 11-points-in-13-minutes stretch by a player in a while.



He shot 4-for-7 from the floor, including 3-for-4 on 3-pointers, to go along with two rebounds and three assists in his first half of basketball in nearly two years.

Late in the game, Johnson took three long baseline strides, got hacked across the arms as he was in midair, then sank his first pair of free throws as a Wildcat. A moment later, he skied high along the opposite baseline, got double-teamed, and had the ball knocked away. This time, as play stopped, he tossed the ball into the basket, and walked to the K-State huddle slightly shaking his head. And oh, how good it must feel to be frustrated over basketball again, to have the opportunity to be frustrated again, just as it must feel so exhilarating to smile victoriously after his first win, a win of any kind, and this win in a Wildcats jersey.

"I'm really excited," Johnson says. "Just coming in, I had a big expectation for the team. Coach Tang told me he's not trying to rebuild and that's what I like. On my visit, talking with Markquis we had the same goal. We want to get a lot of wins together this year."

We can see why Johnson was one of Tang's top targets when he arrived as head coach. Since Johnson announced that he would join K-State as a graduate transfer on August 20, excitement has steadily built. Johnson was the object of a 20-minute sitdown interview with a national TV basketball personality at Big 12 Media Days at T-Mobile Arena in Kansas City, Missouri, and has been the object of more national media requests by the time the second half rolled around Monday night.

Everybody wants a moment of his time. Among the vast landscape of college basketball, he is a national story, and he'll continue to be as such, as his comeback from his on-court medical ailment seemed murky nearly two years ago.

Johnson played the most minutes of any player in the Wildcats' closed scrimmage, didn't play as much in the exhibition game against Washburn, and emerged Monday in the starting lineup ready to ball.



By the time his journey nears its end, the 22-year-old could be in the running for All-Big 12 accolades and he'll own this: He'll be the year's greatest comeback story in college basketball.

"I don't want to put a ceiling on him or put a floor on him," K-State head coach Jerome Tang says. "He's a really good basketball player and he's really talented and every moment that he gets to play is a special opportunity. He's just one of those guys that can go get it. He can get hot and go get it."

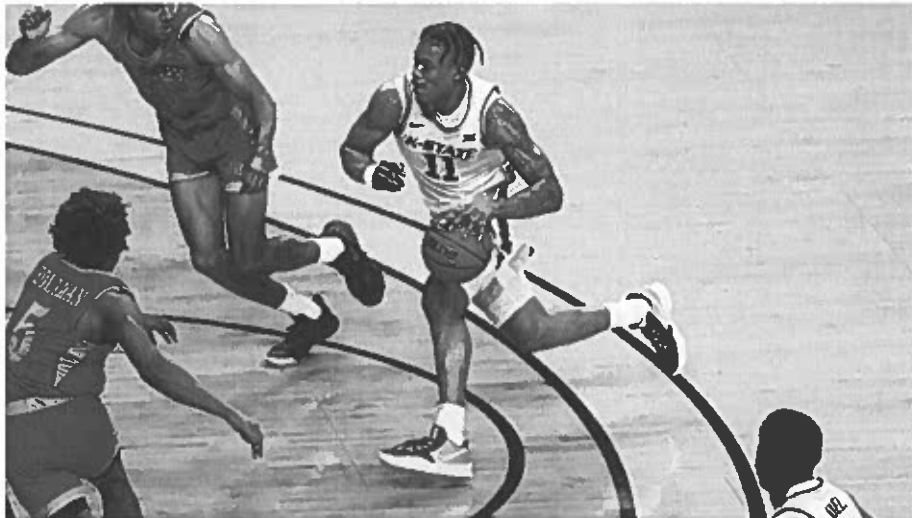
Johnson went to Florida as the No. 70-rated player in the country by ESPN, a four-star recruit with many, many buckets ahead of him, who had 24 scholarship offers, including UConn, Kansas, Ohio State and Texas Tech after averaging 18 points while leading powerhouse Oak Hill (Va.) Academy to a 44-2 record his senior season.

Johnson earned 2019-20 First Team All-SEC honors with 14.0 points, 7.1 rebounds and 1.6 assists as a sophomore. The 2020-21 Preseason SEC Player of the Year was averaging 16.0 points, 4.5 rebounds and 1.3 assists at the time before he went down with his medical issue against Florida State that prevented him from completing his junior season. He made an honorary start on Senior Night against No. 7 Kentucky on March 5, 2022 and received the opening tip before exiting the court to a standing ovation.

He came to K-State after graduating from Florida, where he scored 789 points to go along with 468 rebounds, 99 assists and 80 steals in 71 games with 55 career starts over three seasons. There's a reason why Johnson was projected as a late-first to early-second round pick in the 2021 NBA Draft.

"Johnson is a tough and physical wing who has the frame of an NFL linebacker," NBADraftRoom.com wrote. "He's an energy guy who plays with passion and heart. He's a very good defender and rebounder and the type of guy everyone loves to have on the team. He doesn't need the ball in his hands a lot and doesn't stop playing if he's not scoring."

Johnson doesn't run, rather he appears to float, and he carries that "it" factor that the great ones possess, and yes, K-State had its own "Shark Week," which was when he really came alive, and now we're seeing the beginning of Jaws, where the water is calm, hardly a ripple, before the music begins and things escalate quickly, because he'll strike at any time, from anywhere, and the only question becomes how quickly. There will be a time, too, when the rest of the Big 12 hears the music, a low, slow, syrupy drawl, gradually intensifying as he begins to prowl, heading toward the surface, carrying an appetite for Bears or Jayhawks or Red Raiders.



For now, it's opening night of college basketball season, it's time to raise the curtain, roll the opening credits, and start things from the beginning: an opening shot of Bramlage Coliseum, a raucous purple-clad student section, the lights, the pep band blaring wildly, and banners, and cheerleaders, and a shiny hardwood floor, and a Powercat at center court, and bright white nets.

Johnson emerges from a huddle donned in his white No. 11 jersey, a tattoo that beams "WRITE YOUR OWN STORY" and he has several eye-popping moments on the basketball court, and he'll have many, many more as the days wear on. He smiles because he is here. He smiles because of his instant love with the K-State student section. He smiles because he is having fun and enjoying life.

On a night of victory, he is truly a victor.

"Keyontae Johnson played a basketball game, a real game, for the first time in two years," Tang says. "We have to be really excited about that."

The story is just getting started.

We hope you enjoy K-State Sports Extra. We would like to hear your comments and any story ideas for future emails, so fire them our way. Contact D. Scott Fritchen or K-State Associate AD for Communications Ryan Lackey. For past stories, visit www.k-statesports.com/sportsextra.



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

Turning a Dark Day into a Celebration

December 19, 2022

By D. Scott Fritchen

Last Monday was Keyontae Johnson's birthday, the second anniversary of his "rebirth," and there aren't too many things more special than a good birthday. And this birthday was good, an unforgivable video message from his mother, a 30-second pat on the back from Dick Vitale, and there was head coach Jerome Tang and his coaching staff and his teammates, and they filled the locker room and sang "HAPPY BIRRRRTH-DAY! HAPP-EEEE BIRTH-DAYYYY! HAPPY BIRRRRTH-DAY TO YOU!" — reminders everywhere that December 12, the day that it all seemed to end, became the start of the greatest comeback story in college basketball this season.

"It's a Rebirth Day," Johnson says, "from the day I collapsed."

And he smiles. And it's great to see him smile.

Everyone remembers. Two years ago, Johnson, the former Florida star, came out of timeout and the 2020-21 SEC Preseason Player of the Year collapsed face-first onto the court at Florida State.

Johnson is a centerpiece of mini-conquests, about one step at a time, about fighting back tears when things appeared bleak, and about gratefulness, a teary made-for-a-movie epic in which he stars as the ultimate hero of second chances, because there he was December 12, 2020, the day that everything changed, the day that he cannot remember, the day that college basketball will never forget.



K-State Men's Basketball
@KStateMBB

...

Happy Rebirthday @Keyontae 🎂 We're thankful for every day with you

#KStateMBB x EMAW



"I feel like the entire world saw what happened to Keyontae that day," says K-State forward Nae'Qwan Tomlin, Johnson's roommate. "For him to be here with us now, it's miracle. It's very special. And that's my roommate. That's my guy."

Last Monday, K-State associate head coach Ulric Maligi told Johnson that he had some clips that he wanted them to study in his office at Ice Family Basketball Center. Johnson came to his office. Maligi told him that they should go down to the basketball court to better demonstrate the clips. Maligi got Johnson to go into the locker room. Surprise! Tang began the birthday celebration for the Wildcats star. They ate lemon cake. They watched a video narrated by Johnson's mother, Sharnika, which also featured a message by Vitale. There wasn't a dry eye in the room.

"It's mommy," Sharnika said. "I've always told you since you were a little boy that you were special, and you were God's child. On December 12, 2022, I want to say that God has his hands on you. Key, I'm so proud of who you are, so proud of your determination to reach your goals, so proud of how you continue to push forward through adversity, how focused and driven you are. You really inspire me. I'm so proud you know who God

is and that you know that God is the head and the leader of your life. Son, I challenge you to continue to push forward, to continue to stay hungry and humble, and to continue to do what God has you on this earth to do. Remember, to whom much is given much is required.

“Key, I am so proud of you. Never give up and never stop chasing your dreams.”



Johnson is chasing his dreams. It began with K-State's season-opening 93-59 win over UTRGV.

"I thank God every day," Johnson said afterward. "Without Him, I wouldn't be here. He gave me a second chance at life. Every day, before I get on the court, I just thank Him, and keep praying for a healthy season. It means a lot for people to recognize me, and it just shows the work I've put in and how much I've overcome over the years.

"Without Him, I wouldn't be here."

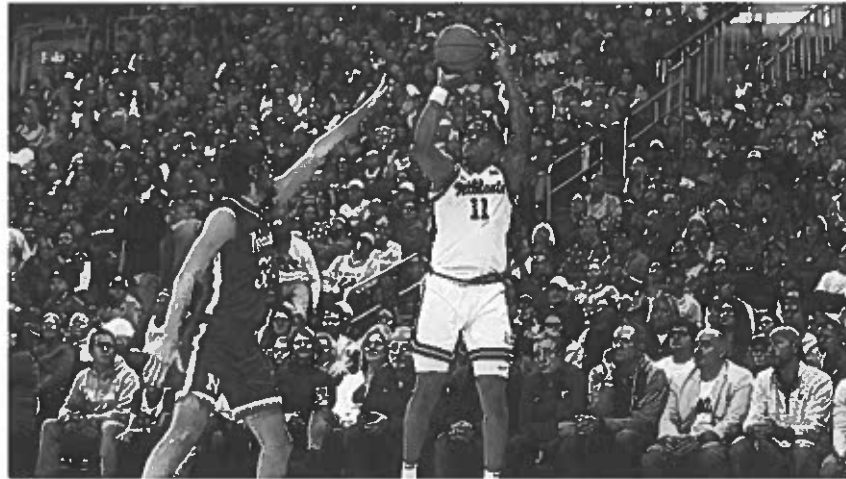
Basketball dreams seemed so far away on December 12, 2020. Yes, images from the video shown to the team at the "Rebirth" celebration showed comebacks and victories. Here's what the video didn't show: That a doctor, no, an angel, came down from out of the stands, and instructed medical staff to shock Johnson's heart with a defibrillator.

"If she had never run onto the court, I probably wouldn't be here right now," Johnson said at Big 12 Media Day.

It was so scary, all of it, and the images on one Rebirth video on Johnson's Twitter page showed teammates at Florida crying on the court that fateful day — crisp reminders that

this was no dream, no nightmare, but an ugly collision with reality, and a reinforcement that defibrillator's save lives.

One saved Johnson. And it's an occasion to be celebrated forever and ever — once Johnson has left K-State and has moved onto professional basketball, and once Johnson has children of his own and they wonder why their father has two birthdays, and once Johnson sits grandkids on his lap, and says, "I have a story to tell you," and the memories of December 12 might rewind to Tallahassee, when an angel saved him.



These days, Johnson is enjoying life. Saturday night against Nebraska, in front of a packed house at T-Mobile Center in Kansas City, Missouri, Johnson had a game-high 23 points and 11 rebounds along with two assists and a career-tying four steals in 34 minutes during the Wildcats' 71-56 win over the Huskers.

"The kid is a hell of a talent," Nebraska head coach Fred Hoiberg said. "He's a pro, man. A guy with a history of heart disease, it's great to see him out there doing what he loves and seeing him with the passion. I wish him nothing but the best. It's almost like a little club we have. My heart condition ended my career.

"He has a very bright future ahead of him."

Johnson ranks second in the Big 12 Conference in points (17.8), first in field-goal percentage (60.3%), eighth in free-throw percentage (76.5%), sixth in rebounds (6.8), 12th in steals (1.6), and fifth in minutes played (31.3).

He's not only contributing, but he's also the most well-rounded player in the Big 12. It's amazing to watch, really.

"He plays with a freedom," Tang says, "and he does it so effortlessly."

The tattoo upon Johnson's biceps reads, "WRITE YOUR OWN STORY." He's authoring quite a tale in Manhattan. He's a major reason why K-State is 10-1 for the first time in a decade and Tang is off to best start ever by a first-year K-State head coach.

"I'm very thankful that Keyontae is getting to play again," Tang says. "I'm very humbled that his family trusts our staff to be the staff that he plays for and with. I'm not his parents, but I understand that every time that he steps onto the court, there's a risk factor for every guy. Every time my kids get into a car, there's a risk factor.

"He willing to get into the car with us and say, 'Coach, I'm going to trust you.' The faith that he has, his own personal faith allows him to go out there and play."

On December 12, 2020, Johnson awakened in a room at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital. He heard his mother's voice. Then he went back to sleep. The heavy medicines caused him to slip in and out of consciousness. Then he awoke again and saw his mom. He saw his father walk into the room. He knew that they hadn't traveled to attend the game at Florida State. But now they were here.

"That's when I knew something was wrong," Johnson said at Big 12 Media Day.

His mother told him what happened.

She told him about the angel.

His life was saved.

And that's cause for celebration every day of the year.

We hope you enjoy K-State Sports Extra. We would like to hear your comments and any story ideas for future emails, so fire them our way. Contact D. Scott Fritchen or K-State Associate AD for Communications Ryan Lackey. For past stories, visit www.k-statesports.com/sportsextra .



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

A Special Day for Keytonae

January 30, 2023

By D. Scott Fritchen

Kansas State travels to play Kansas on Tuesday. It should be a riveting story, another riveting story in this tale of the Wildcats, who are enjoying the program's most success in 50 years and now embark upon this grand opportunity to defeat the Jayhawks in Allen Fieldhouse for the first time since 2006.

Every K-State game will be against Big 12 Conference opponents from here on out, until the NCAA Tournament, that is, which will be a story in itself.

But before K-State travels to Lawrence for the 7 p.m. tipoff (ESPN+), and before the Wildcats try to sweep the Sunflower Showdown for the first time since 1983, the story pauses on the court at Bramlage Coliseum.

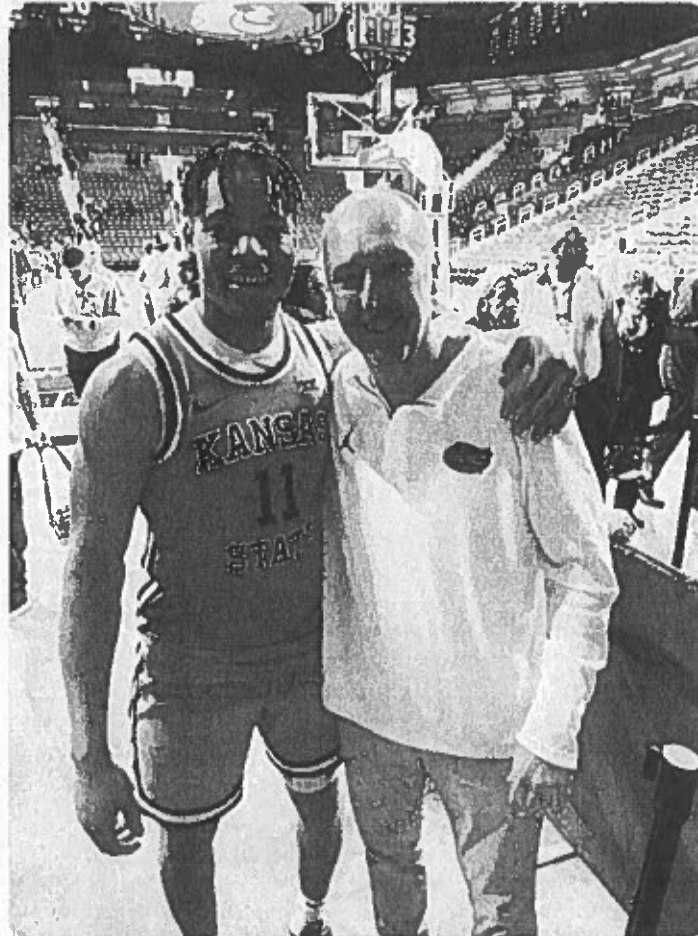
Keytonae Johnson hugs Florida trainer Dave "Duke" Werner in the post-game handshake line. K-State has just beaten Florida, 64-50, in the SEC/Big 12 Challenge. It's the final non-conference game of the season. It's the official end of one chapter albeit an incredibly special one for Johnson, who had the opportunity face his former team in a highly-anticipated matchup, the game that Johnson knew was coming when he chose to transfer to K-State, the contest that would mean so much.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime memory," Johnson says afterward. "You'll never get that moment back."



Nika Johnson
@NikaJohnson11

My Duke! @dukewatc We love you & will never be able to express how grateful we are but we will ALWAYS try!



10:56 PM · Jan 28, 2023 · 152.3K Views

The backdrop to the specialness of Saturday's has been well chronicled and the top storyline in college basketball on Saturday and is featured on ESPN's College GameDay. Afterward, the tickertape that runs across ESPN reads, "Keyontae Johnson scores 13 points against former team," the rest of the night.

But who knows the span of emotions that the 6-foot-6, 230-pound Johnson feels at that moment when he embraces Werner as they find each other at Bramlage Coliseum.

Werner was one of the people who saved Johnson's life that day in Tallahassee, Florida, on December 12, 2020.

"I ran out on the floor and just started using the training that I have to try and take care of the situation," Werner says on ESPN's College GameDay. "As soon as we got back into the tunnel, we started with CPR. If the proper medical personnel wasn't there, I think it could've turned out in a different way."

On Saturday, trainer and player reunite under the lights of Johnson's new home, Bramlage Coliseum.

"Just seeing Duke on the bench and talking to him after the game brightened my day," says Johnson, who after the game also poses for photos with some of his former Florida teammates.

"There's nothing that could prepare him for seeing Duke again," K-State head coach Jerome Tang says. "That was pretty special, that embrace at the end of the game."



Johnson finishes with 13 points and 11 rebounds for his third consecutive double-double, including his fifth this season. He ranks third in the Big 12 in points (18.0), field goal percentage (53.1%) and rebounds (7.7) this season. He's a surefire All-Big 12 candidate and listed as a top-50 pick in the 2023 NBA Draft by BleacherReport.com.

Now Johnson and the Wildcats prepare for the remainder of the grueling Big 12 season, which begins with three consecutive top-20 matchups against Kansas, Texas and TCU. It'll be a drama-filled final 10 league games, and there's really no telling which team will emerge as league champion in the nation's top basketball conference.

"We'll come in and go to practice and watch film and just go 1-0 and go to KU," Johnson says. "We're going to give it our all. We want to go out there and compete and play the basketball we know how to play."

Yes, K-State, 18-3 overall and 6-1 in the Big 12, does an excellent job of playing its basketball. The Wildcats are off to their best start to a Big 12 season in more than a decade. They are undefeated at home. They can beat top-10 teams on the road. They can play stellar offense one night and play suffocating defense the next. The nation agrees: This team is fun to watch.

But the story pauses for a moment as Johnson finds Werner in the handshake line. There are emotions, so many emotions, and so much to process from the past 25 months, yet one thing is certain: Johnson is grateful for every day.

Some days are just a little bit more meaningful than others.

Such is the case against Florida on Saturday.

"Today," Johnson says, "was a special day."

We hope you enjoy K-State Sports Extra. We would like to hear your comments and any story ideas for future emails, so fire them our way. Contact D. Scott Fritchen or K-State Associate AD for Communications Ryan Lackey. For past stories, visit www.k-statesports.com/sportsextra.

Kansas State basketball star Keyontae Johnson signs new NIL deal filled with heart

BY KELLIS ROBINETT FEBRUARY 07, 2023 12:20 PM



Kansas State forward Keyontae Johnson drives during the first half of an NCAA college basketball game against Texas-Rio Grande Valley Monday, Nov. 7, 2022, in Manhattan, Kan. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel) CHARLIE RIEDEL AP

Keyontae Johnson's comeback story with the Kansas State men's basketball team has been both inspiring and marketable.

The 6-foot-6 senior forward has signed several NIL deals during his lone season with the Wildcats, allowing him to do things like endorse food from McDonald's on his social media accounts. But his latest NIL partnership is more meaningful to him than just money or exposure. It also helps a good cause that he can relate to, perhaps as well as any athlete on the planet.

On Tuesday, Johnson announced that he has partnered with Heartfelt, a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to saving lives from preventable health situations such as Sudden Cardiac Arrest through early detection, education and increased public awareness.

The company has been around for 22 years and claims to have screened over 55,000 patients.



Keyontae
@Keyontae · Follow



I'm excited to announce that I have partnered with Heartfelt.

As a nonprofit, Heartfelt needs your financial help to offer these services.

To donate go to the link

heartfeltscreening.org/donate/



9:23 AM · Feb 7, 2023



<https://twitter.com/i/status/1622979449292554240>

A NIL partnership with Heartfelt makes sense for Johnson because he famously collapsed during a game at Florida State in December of 2020 when he was playing for the Florida Gators. Johnson fell on the court because of a heart inflammation, and no one knew if he would make it through the night, let alone dribble a basketball again. He survived the incident and eventually returned to the hardwood this season as a transfer with the Wildcats.

But it took him years of testing and rehab to make sure it was safe for him to continue playing the game he loves.

Had he undergone a Heartfelt screening earlier in his life, perhaps that incident could have been avoided. That is what he wants for others.

"A lot of you might have known that I collapsed in a game on Dec. 12, 2020," Johnson said in an advertisement to announce the NIL partnership. "But I'm beyond grateful that God gave me a second chance to play the game that I love. I'm not sure if you know, but Sudden

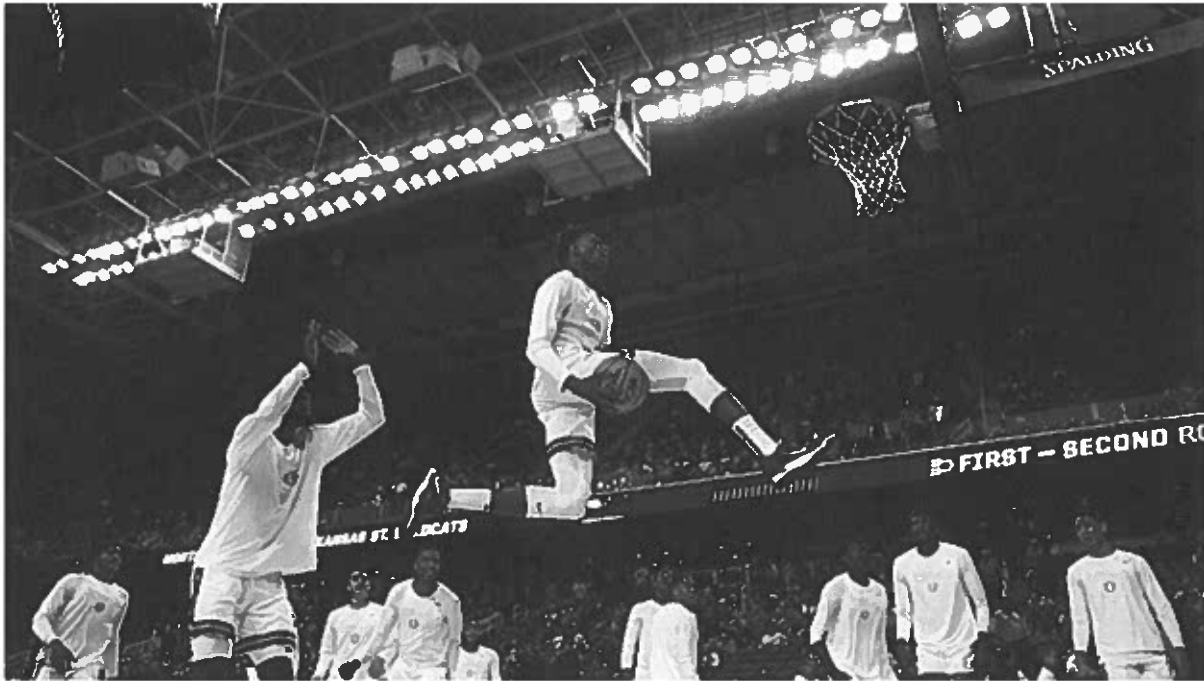
Cardiac Arrest is the No. 1 cause of death on a school campus and is the No. 1 killer of student-athletes.

"I'm excited to announce that I have partnered with Heartfelt. Heartfelt is an organization that's saved over 1,000 lives and helps individuals with early detection for heart issues. As a nonprofit, Heartfelt needs a financial offer to help with these services. Please donate and help spread the word."

It is unclear if Johnson will receive any money for his latest NIL partnership or if he chose to do it pro bono simply to promote a good cause.

Either way, it seems like a perfect match.

Johnson has been one of the best stories in college basketball this season. Since returning to action, he has averaged 18.1 points and 7.7 rebounds for the No. 12 Wildcats, who are having one of their best years in recent memory.



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

'Not Everybody Gets the Opportunity Like This'

March 18, 2023

By D. Scott Fritchen

There is so much to write about Nae'Qwan Tomlin that it stretches the brain. He's a 6-foot-10, 210-pound talent who Kansas State head coach Jerome Tang calls a "position-less player," which is dangerous because he can play power forward, small forward or shooting guard. He's a raw prodigy from Harlem, New York, a 22-year-old who still has no idea how good he can be, a junior college All-America product who added 16 pounds of muscle over the summer, and who has at least one more year with the Wildcats.

He's a young man who didn't play high school basketball and grew up playing streetball at legendary Rucker Park, which is located right across the street from his elementary school. He's played organized basketball for a total of four years. He's a young man who is inspired by his mother, who loves his younger brother and his younger sister, and who has plenty to play for in this game of life. He's a guy who arrived at K-State as the No. 7 prospect by 2022 JuCoRecruiting.com. Some believe he'll emerge as a considerable NBA prospect.

His story is far from finished.

"He's got as much talent as anybody I've ever coached," Tang says. "His upside is through the roof."

He's wide-eyed yet determined, he's eager yet patient, he throws down some of the nastiest dunks in K-State history yet leaves opposing coaches, players, and fans aghast

with his ability to hit the 3-pointer. He has length yet he's fluid, he can defend and sprint, and, when needed, he's comfortable handling the ball in transition.

And his transition to major college basketball this year continues even today.



"The adjustment to Division I basketball actually went pretty quick for Nae'Qwan, but then the adjustment to scouting reports kind of took a toll on him," Tang says. "He's working on how to work consistently, and that's going to help his game. We've seen him be really good and then really bad. We just need him to continue to develop the same old boring habits and build a consistent work ethic."

But Tomlin has made his presence felt for the Wildcats.

"Just having him this year is a huge piece of our success," senior point guard Markquis Nowell says. "I can't wait to see how much better he gets down the line."

And here he is in Greensboro, North Carolina, and he came up big in the second half of the Wildcats' 77-65 win over Montana State in the first round of the NCAA Tournament. He scored 13 points on 6-of-9 shooting in 20 minutes and has now scored in double figures in 18 games. He had a monster jam that shook the rim.

It's nothing new. And it's definitely something that Tomlin has dreamed about all his life.

"It's a dream come true because growing up in Harlem not everybody gets the opportunity like this," Tomlin says. "I just want to thank God."

He played through four fouls against Montana State. Fouls have been the Achilles heel for him this season. Everybody has a kryptonite. Afterward, Tang said that if Tomlin could cut down his fouls and play 30 minutes, the Wildcats could be really good. And that's a scary thought considering No. 3-seed K-State, 24-9, is the highest seed in Greensboro, and finished No. 15 in the final AP Top 25 poll, and will face Kentucky, 22-11, at 1:40 p.m. for the right to advance to the Sweet 16 in New York City — Tomlin's hometown.

"It's definitely some motivation to continue playing, to play in the Garden," Tomlin says, "but we want to take it one game at a time."



He's third on the team in averaging 10.2 points per game and is shooting 49.2% from the floor and has hit 18 3-pointers and averages 5.8 rebounds and ranks second on the team with 38 total steals and leads the team with 28 total blocks. He had his first-career double-double with 15 points and 10 rebounds against No. 2 Kansas. He had 17 points and a season high-tying 10 rebounds at Oklahoma.

He averaged 9.1 points on 50.4% shooting (64-of-127) with 5.7 rebounds in Big 12 play. He scored in double figures seven times against Big 12 teams.

And there's simply so much more he can do.

"Nae'Qwan is a big piece for us," Keyontae Johnson says. "He's a mismatch for other teams. He's only played four years, and this is his first year on the big stage and he's done a hell of a job. He has great upside and I can't wait to see what he's got in store for sure."

Tomlin still has at least one game left in his first season in Manhattan. But there's no doubting his upside going forward.

"Only the Good Lord knows where I can go from here," Tomlin says. "In the offseason, I definitely worked hard but the experience was new to me coming into this (Big 12) league. I always heard it was going to be the best conference in college basketball and I knew it was going to be super physical. That's something I wanted so I could prove myself. The coaching staff believed in me.

"I definitely want to get better next year."

And that's a scary thought, indeed.



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

Tomlin Takes Road Less Traveled to Major College Basketball

September 27, 2022

By D. Scott Fritchen

Two visitors enter the rear door of the Ice Family Basketball Facility on the Kansas State campus one late September afternoon, the dribbling of a single basketball echoing as they pull open heavy glass doors. Inside, upon the full-court hardwood floor, a tall young man donned in a purple sleeveless top and gray shorts pounds the basketball on the floor, floats and effortlessly drains a 16-foot jumpshot on the far end of the court. The ball drops into a purple automatic rebounder, which sends the ball sailing toward the young man. He drains another shot, steps back, dribbles, then hits another one.

There had been stories about these young men putting in work, but few had yet to fully witness it, and digest their limitless passion. The official start of practice was still five days away. First-year K-State head coach Jerome Tang, whose first basketball team features two returners — senior point guard Markquis Nowell and junior forward Ishmael Massoud — is primarily loaded with fresh-face talent. Many of them are long-bodied types who can dunk as soon as make a free throw. Yet this young man on the hardwood appears to be so dramatically tall and he's nailing long-range jumpers, and stepping back, and still hitting with such unabashed consistency, that it causes one visitor to pause at the sight to observe the prodigy in action.

"Who is that?" the visitor asks.

"Oh him? That is Nae'Qwan."

Moments later, Nae'Qwan Tomlin introduces himself inside the K-State theater room, a gold cross dangling from a gold chain, dark locks of hair standing at attention, making him appear even larger than his 6-foot-10, 210-pound frame. He extends his arm to shake hands. He has a 7-foot wingspan. His gray-and-white Nikes look like miniature skis.



Tomlin slides into a black chair inside a room with beige walls, and appears to be at home. He has kind eyes. A smile envelopes the face of the 21-year-old junior college transfer as he begins to talk. He arrived at K-State as the No. 7 prospect by 2022 JuCoRecruiting.com. Some believe he'll emerge as a considerable NBA prospect. He has a story to tell.

"When was the first time I picked up a basketball?" he says, repeating a question. "I wouldn't be able to say. I was young, though."

He pauses.

"Yeah, I'd say I was young."

He was 7 years old when he first saw LeBron James. It was James' fifth year with the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2007-08. Tomlin's mother, Aisha Ishmael, loved to watch NBA games on TV. Tomlin was instantly hooked. He admired King James' 6-foot-9 size, his strength inside the paint, his powerful dunks, and how he could basically shoot from anywhere, long rainbows raining from the sky.

Tomlin was born in Brooklyn, New York, and he and his mother moved to Harlem when he was 10. He attended PS 46 — Public School 46 — located directly across the street from Holcombe Rucker Park at 155th Street and Fredrick Douglass Boulevard, just east of the former Polo Grounds site. The most famous outdoor basketball mecca in America, Rucker Park hosted many greats through the years — Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Wilt Chamberlain, Dr. J, Connie Hawkins, Kenny Anderson and Chris Mullin, along with a multitude of playground stars — yet it also served as an after-school haven for Tomlin and his friends. They owned the court until the older boys showed up. Sometimes the older boys kicked them off the court. Sometimes, Tomlin hooped with the older boys.

One night, Tomlin saw Kevin Durant drop 66 points at Rucker. The living legend brought down the house.

"It was crazy," Tomlin says. "Back then, when I was in middle school, we used to go out there and shoot the ball from very far and yell, 'KD range!'"

Tomlin was 5-foot-9 as a freshman at Urban Assembly School. He grew to 6-foot-2 by his sophomore year, then to 6-foot-5 as a junior, and to 6-foot-7 as a senior. He first dunked a basketball at age 17. He preferred playing outdoors to playing inside gyms and he was self-admittingly mischievous — "I wanted to be outside and I unfortunately hung with the wrong crowd," he says — opting not to try out for the high school basketball team until his senior season. He proved his moxie on the playground. However, he wanted to play his final year with his friends, many of whom were on the high school basketball team. Tomlin made the final cut, but was deemed academically ineligible.

"I put a lot of stress on my mom," Tomlin says.

Aisha has two other children — Nyeem (currently 11) and Nalyna (just turned 7). Nyeem has Autism.

"My mom was dealing with my little brother and my baby sister at the time, and she was helping them with school, and taking my little brother to his speech classes and stuff like that, and then I was doing horrible in school, and outside and getting into trouble," he says. "I just really wanted to help my mom. I wanted her to feel proud."

Tomlin pauses while telling the story. He leans over, places his elbows on his knees, clasps his hands together, and stares at the dark carpet in the K-State team theater room.

"Your senior year, you have graduation rehearsal, you know, on how to walk on stage and stuff like that," he says, "and I couldn't go because I wasn't on track to graduate."

The day of graduation rehearsal found Tomlin inside a classroom, working harder than he ever had before in his life. After graduation rehearsal, the seniors had a barbeque. A friend tried to grab Tomlin to come along.

"I was embarrassed because I was supposed to be there, but because of the stuff I had been doing throughout high school, it wouldn't allow me to graduate," he says. "So, I said, 'No, I don't want to go to the barbeque.' I was embarrassed. I was doing a bunch of work. I handed everything in that day."

Hours later, Tomlin was outside with a couple friends when he received a phone call. The voice on the other end of the phone said, "You're able to walk."

"So I was going to take summer school, but at least I'd be able to walk and graduate," he continues. "It was crazy."

He phoned his mother. She cried.

"My mom," he says, "had to do a lot of last-minute shopping that day."

He pauses again. His jaw clenches.

"My mom," he says, "was my inspiration."



Tom "Tippy" McTernan is co-founder of Big Apple Sports, a program that steers AAU and streetball prodigies on the right track and helps introduce them to junior college programs that suit their needs. Steve Barnett, Tomlin's uncle, knew "Coach Tippy," who Tomlin calls "a legend." Barnett made the introductions. After Tomlin completed summer school, he attended Strength N Motion International in San Antonio, Texas. Strength N Motion International is committed to provide a structured program designed to teach the fundamental skills of basketball while focusing on growth and development. From there, Tomlin landed at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York — "That was my only option," he says — where he redshirted before embarking upon his first year of organized basketball.

In his first game, he scored 24 points and pulled down 12 rebounds and blocked six shots. He finished his first season averaging 13.3 points, 8.8 rebounds and 3.3 blocks, and led his team in virtually every statistical category, including shooting percentage (56.6%) and 3-point percentage (34.5%) while totaling 82 blocked shots.

"I was young, but my team believed in me to be that guy," he says. "It was difficult. It was still a learning process for me."

Tomlin moved onto Chipola College in Marianna, Florida, for his sophomore and junior seasons. He helped his team to a 53-11 record and back-to-back trips to the NJCAA National Tournament semifinals in Hutchinson. Last season, he averaged a team-high 13.8 points on 54.2% shooting, including 63.8% inside the 3-point arc, to go along with 5.9 rebounds, 1.4 assists, 1.2 steals and 1.1 blocks per game.

It was shortly after Tomlin's junior season that K-State officially came into his life.

New K-State assistant coach Jareem Dowling arrived from North Texas. He had seen Tomlin play. New K-State chief of staff Marco Borne, who arrived from Alcorn State, had seen Tomlin play in Florida. Tang and the K-State coaching staff studied video of Tomlin's performances. They were blown away. Tang and associate head coach Ulric Maligi visited Tomlin at Chipola. They spoke inside his dorm room. They spent hours talking and sharing personal stories. By the end of their chat, the player and coaches had tears in their eyes. Tomlin committed to K-State on May 2.

"When they visited me in my dorm, I knew I was coming to K-State," Tomlin says. "I just knew it, even before I visited the facilities. I just felt the bond. I liked Coach Tang's passion and what he saw in me. Me coming as a juco kid, a lot of people don't have high expectations of me, but he has high expectations, he and the whole coaching staff.

"I felt like because I'd told them my story, I knew them and they knew me, and when I came on my visit, it was 10 times better."



How excited is Tomlin to be a member of Tang's first team?

"Very excited," he replies. "This is going to be history."

Ask Tang about his players and Tomlin is habitually one of the first names that flows from his mouth. Tomlin can play power forward, small forward, and — a scary thought for opponents — he is currently also learning plays for the shooting guard position. He strives to emulate 6-foot-8, 190-pound Brandon Ingram, who is currently with the New Orleans Pelicans, and who was taken with the No. 2 overall pick in the 2016 NBA Draft by the Los Angeles Lakers. King James remains Tomlin's idol. One day, Tomlin would like to play for his hometown New York Knicks.

Since Tomlin's arrival in the Little Apple, he has dedicated himself toward constant improvement, developing proper practice habits, watching film, and is a mainstay in the weight room. And he contends that his growth spurt might not be finished.

"I'm only four years into really playing basketball and I'm still learning," he says. "I'm getting up 1,000 shots a day. I'm still learning and trying to learn fast, too. Four years (of

playing organized basketball) can't be an excuse. I want to look like I've been hooping my whole life."

Tomlin recently returned to Harlem. He went to Rucker Park, his childhood haven, right across the street from PS 46. The edges of the basketball court were damp and leaves of overhanging tree limbs were a dark green. He wore a black t-shirt, gray shorts, white socks, and gray shoes. He took three dribbles, spun the basketball, and shot a free throw. Swish. He backed up and shot again. Swish. A large black scoreboard stood in the middle of five rows of black bleachers that spanned the length of the basketball court. The court was beige and featured what appeared to be a gray leopard-print design. Big brick structures surrounded the black gates that turned the outdoor basketball mecca into a private sanctuary.

He shot again. Swish.

He figures himself to be one of the biggest surprises in the Big 12 Conference this season.

"Most definitely," he says. "They don't know who I am, but this year I'm going to show them and prove that I can come to the Big 12 and do something. I definitely want to win the Big 12 Championship and make a run in the NCAA Tournament."



It all goes back to the beginning of Tomlin's story — the boy who found his way. Now the 21-year-old stands on the cusp of playing major-college hoops with hopes of reaching the NBA. Not bad for a streetball prodigy who never played high school or AAU basketball.

"It's like, 'I'm really here,'" Tomlin says. "I came from not playing basketball and going to juco, and now I'm here. That's what I feel when I put on my jersey. I've thought about what it's going to be like seeing 13,500 people in the crowd, and it's like, that's crazy."

He pauses.

"I excited," he says, "to finally be a part of something like that."



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

A Winner From an Early Age

January 26, 2023

By D. Scott Fritchen

The story starts at Dickey Nutt Gymnasium in the Parker Park Community Center on Church Street in Jonesboro, Arkansas. The walls are white and Razorback red. This is where the dream begins, with Desi Sills growing up inside the gym, seeking his own path. He yearns to be the first of his four siblings to earn a college degree. He believes that basketball can get him there.

Sills is determined not to get into drugs or wind up in jail. He is different. He wants to help his mother, Shawna Neal Henry, and not see her struggle. He dreams of providing her with a better life someday. He is a young boy with hoop dreams.

He lives and breathes basketball. He gets closer to reaching his goal with each shot on that court inside the community center. People tell him that he's good at basketball. He listens. He works on his game even more. He is the pride of Jonesboro. It is a small town. He wants to see the world. He thanks God for his blessings. And he shoots baskets. Again and again and again.

"I wanted to be different," he says. "I just picked up a basketball at a young age, and I kept going with it."

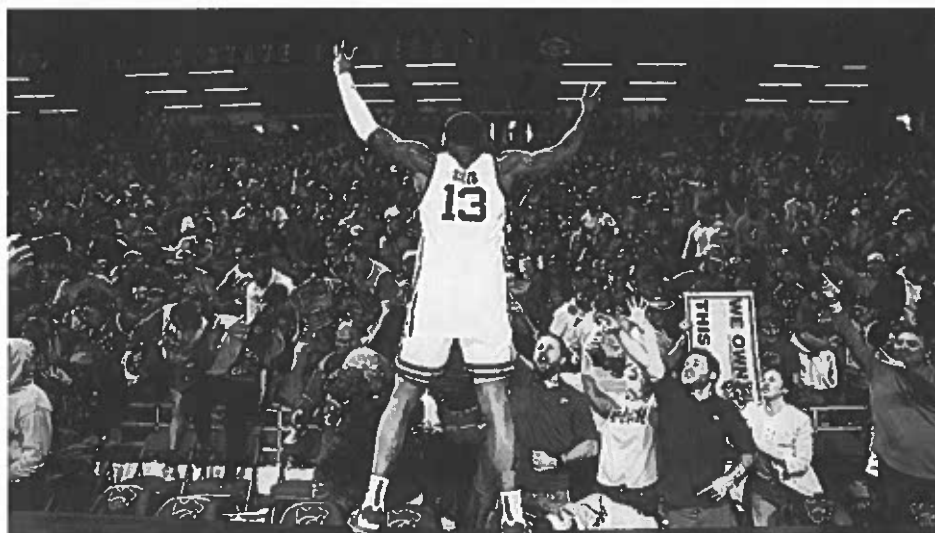
And oh, the places Sills will go, and, oh, the things he'll achieve along the way. He doesn't know it yet, of course, but one day he'll be the star at Jonesboro High School, and he'll help the Hurricanes to an 82-8 record with three consecutive Final Four

appearances in the Class 6A State Championships, including back-to-back championships in 2017 and 2018.

He'll emerge as the No. 3-rated player in the state of Arkansas by 247Sports and ESPN. He'll be a consensus top-50 pick among the nation's top point guards. As a junior, he'll lead Jonesboro to a 32-0 record, the first undefeated season in the state since 1954. As a senior, he'll guide the Hurricanes to a 26-5 record and another state title.

Among the notable players to come out of Jonesboro, he is at the very top.

"I've said this from the very beginning," K-State head coach Jerome Tang says. "Desi Sills is a winner."



He has the word "HUNGRY" on the wall in his Manhattan apartment. And that's about all you need to know about Sills. He is in the Ice Family Basketball Center shooting hundreds of shots a day. Right now, at this moment, he's either getting up shots, or preparing to get up shots. That's Sills, one of the top playmakers for No. 5 Kansas State, which at 17-3 is off to one of its best starts in history.

Sills is a 6-foot-2, 200-pound point guard who very well could be the top sixth-man in the Big 12 Conference. The 23-year-old Sills arrived in Manhattan after three years at Arkansas and one year at Arkansas State. He arrived at K-State with a total of 1,100 points, 50 double-digit scoring games, eight 20-point games, 326 rebounds, 227 assists and 135 steals during 3,081 minutes of action over 126 games with 74 starts at the Division I level.

He is making the most of his final year of eligibility. He had a season-high 24-point performance in the Wildcats' 83-82 overtime victory against No. 2 Kansas.

He has scored in double figures eight times. He had a 16-point effort in a 61-59 win over LSU in the Cayman Islands Classic Championship game, and 17 points, all in the second half, at Butler. Although Sills went scoreless in a 55-50 win over Wichita State, he had the play of the game with his block of Shammah Scott's breakaway layup with 1 minute, 42 seconds to play and the Wildcats trailing, 50-49.

So far, he ranks fourth on the team with 8.6 points on 45.7% (63-of-138) shooting to go along with 3.2 rebounds and 2.3 assists in 28 minutes per game.

"He's not even a sixth-man," senior point guard Markquis Nowell says. "He's a starter who comes off the bench, really. He brings so much energy and passion to the game that we need. He brings that spark that we need."

"We are glad to have Des."



His first appearance comes with 17:29 remaining in the first half of a 76-49 win over Washburn in an exhibition game. Sills tucks in his purple No. 13 jersey at the scorer's table and jogs onto the hardwood with a whole season — his last season — of college basketball in front of him.

In his first 97 seconds of action, Sills steals a pass, grabs a defensive rebound, make his first shot, and dishes out to Nowell for an open 3-pointer. It quickly becomes apparent that Sills has skills — he can control the court and facilitate plays and shoot outside and drive to the hoop and help teammates and cast a wide net defensively.

"He's been so impressive," Tang says.

He's been on campus for nine days.

Sills' actual introduction to K-State officially arrived on June 14. That's when he announced his commitment to the Wildcats on Twitter. Associate head coach Ulric Maligi and assistant coach Jareem Dowling phoned Sills and offered him a scholarship. Sills instantly committed. He said, "I don't need to see Manhattan, I just want to come and help us win."

"It took a long journey to get here," he says. "I'm beyond blessed."

Sills was delayed getting to Manhattan. He graduated with a degree in recreation and sports management from Arkansas State. He is working toward a master's degree in

conflict analysis and trauma studies. While Sills was completing his coursework, he was entrenched in meetings and workouts with the K-State coaching staff via Zoom. From 2-3 p.m., he lifted weights for strength coach Phil Baier on Zoom. From 5-6 p.m., he met with assistant coach Rodney Perry on the offensive schemes and learned the plays via Zoom. From 6-7 p.m., he met with Maligi on the defensive schemes.

"It's like I wasn't here, but I was here," Sills says. "I came in and guys were like, 'Dang Des, it looks like you haven't missed a beat.'"

Want to know why?

Because Sills is a winner.

We're sitting inside the Ice Family Basketball Center one day in early November. Desi Sills says the word "blessed" 11 times in 16 minutes.

"I'm blessed, and I keep saying I'm blessed," he says, "but it's for real."

Sills is one of the warmest and kindest and most humble guys you'll ever meet. That becomes apparent. It also becomes apparent that he's the consummate team player.



Fast-forward to the Kansas game. Sills was going off. He was scoring from all over. He drained one of the meanest step-back 3-pointers that you'll ever see. He was feeling it.

"He had 24 big points and that's what he does in big moments — he shows up," Nowell says. "You know you can always count on him to have your back in any situation."

"He was rolling," Tang says. "I asked him in a timeout, 'Des, what do you want me to run for you?' He said, 'Nothing. I'm going to defend and rebound.'"

Sills says, "I'm very unselfish and love to see my teammates succeed."

He continues.

"I just feel like I'm nothing without God, but my teammates found me early," Sills says. "They told me to believe in my work and trust my work and go out there and be the dog they know I am."

Sills recently had a meeting with Tang. He told Tang that he was like a father to him. And that's one of the highest compliments a coach can ever receive from a player. Sills says that his father was never really around. He found the perfect father figure in Tang, who aside from being a frontrunner for national coach of the year, is a man of faith and truly interested in turning young men into grown men.

"A man of faith, a leader, a father," Sills says. "Everything he does is amazing. He always prays before practice and after practice. When I wasn't here yet, he was praying for me, and I appreciate that a lot."



He loves Manhattan. And he loves Coach Tang.

"You get a feeling in your heart that it's genuine and real," Sills says. "You talk to Coach Tang and see how real he is, and he doesn't sugarcoat it. He's real with God and preaches about positivity and I don't know how he touched me, but he touched me, and it was really genuine."

The Sills story still has several more chapters to write before he plays his final game at Bramlage Coliseum on March 1. It's amazing, really, all the different ways he impacts the game. Each game spurs excitement. Each game is another step toward achieving more.

"To see my mother struggle and never give up," Sills says, "there's a reason I go hard each and every day."

We don't know how the Sills story will end. But we do know one thing about Sills.

"Desi Sills," Tang says, "is the ultimate winner."



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

The Ultimate Team Player

March 10, 2023

By D. Scott Fritchen

Desi Sills dreamed of this. No, he didn't dream of leaving the Big 12 Championship after the quarterfinal round in Kansas City. No, he didn't dream of the gloom that comes with discussing a defeat. But he did dream of being a member of a high-major Division I basketball team again that is destined for March Madness.

After a lengthy journey, Sills has found a home. He has a chance to live out his dream as Kansas State, 23-9, heads toward Selection Sunday.

"I just want to help my team win," Sills says.

And he has done exactly that during his senior season with the Wildcats. Sills is averaging 8.7 points — but it's about more than that. He's averaging 3.6 rebounds, 2.9 assists while averaging 29.4 minutes per game — but it's about more than that. He has played in 31 games and has started five of them while routinely coming off the bench — but it's about more than that as well.

Truth is, Sills is about as unselfish as it comes.

"He cares," K-State head coach Jerome Tang says. "He has a high-care factor."

Sills poured in 14 points and added two assists, one steal and a career-high four blocks in the Wildcats' 80-67 loss to TCU late Thursday night at T-Mobile Center.

The 6-foot-2, 200-pound guard, the pride of Jonesboro, Arkansas, has come so far since the days of leading the Jonesboro High School Hurricanes to an 82-8 record. He's come so far since playing at Arkansas (2018-21) and then Arkansas State (2021-22). He helped win 63

games at Arkansas and 18 at Arkansas State. He helped the Razorbacks to a 25-win season and an Elite Eight appearance in 2020-21.

Yes, Sills arrived at K-State with 1,100 points, 50 double-digit scoring games, eight 20-point games, 326 rebounds, 227 assists and 135 steals in his career.

"It took a long journey to get here," Sills says. "I'm beyond blessed."

And he feels at home.



He has the word "HUNGRY" affixed to a spot in his room.

His 157 career games ranks 23rd among active Division I players, but it took him a several years to find a home. He found one in Manhattan. And he's making the most of his final opportunity. He scored a season-high 24 points in the overtime win against No. 2 Kansas on January 17. He was clutch in the win over LSU in scoring 16 points off the bench on November 23. He scored 17 points at Butler on November 30. He also posted 15 points against Oklahoma on March 1, 14 against TCU on February 7, and 11 against both Oklahoma State on January 10 and Texas on February 4.

He missed the regular season finale at West Virginia due to a death in the family but showed no signs of rust against the Horned Frog on Thursday, shooting 2-of-5 from the floor, including 1-of-3 on 3-pointers, and hitting 9-of-10 free throws in 35 minutes.

He did a little bit of everything, including using his athleticism to block four shots.

"I have a 40-inch vertical, and I know how to time it right," Sills says. "I tell Markquis Nowell every time he comes through to get out of the way because I'm going to try and get it every time. I'm going to try to make an energy play, get the crowd going, and try to get the momentum going the other way."

He tried. He tried so hard. But March isn't always kind. It certainly wasn't for the Wildcats on Thursday. Keyontae Johnson scored 14 points and added seven rebounds and three assists, but he fouled out in the final 7 minutes. Nowell had 11 points and five assists and Nae'Qwan Tomlin had 10 points, nine rebounds and three steals. But it simply wasn't enough to overcome 20 turnovers by the Wildcats.



"We're going to execute where we need to get better and try to make a run in the NCAA Tournament," Sills says.

His veteran experience could be a valuable ally as the Wildcats embark upon the NCAA Tournament.

"We just have to stick together," he says. "We're going to keep working. It's not a one-man show or a two-man show. Everybody has to come and execute. We have two of the best players in the country and somebody has to help them.

"I'm willing to step up and everybody else has to step up."

What does it take to survive in March?

"Everybody knows you're trying to survive and advance," Sills says. "Nobody wants to go home. We want to win, and they want to win. It comes down to the toughest team."

And in the end, that's the important piece, really. He's a tough, experienced winner.

"You greatly appreciate him," Tang says. "The experience that he has, the experience of winning that he has, you can't put a value on it.

"He's just so valuable."

And he'll do whatever it takes. Because he's a winner.

"It's about staying consistent," Sills says. "My teammates believe in me. Whatever they need me to do, I'm going to do. If I need to score zero points, I don't care as long as we get the W. If I have to score 15 points, I'm willing to do that. I want to help my team and win at the end of the day."

Fortunately, there will be another day to come for Sills and the Wildcats.

https://www.kansascity.com/sports/college/big-12/kansas-state/article273343675.html#storylink=mainstage_card

K-State's Ismael Massoud delivered the shot of his life vs. Kentucky in NCAA Tournament

BY BLAIR KERKHOFF UPDATED MARCH 19, 2023 6:25 PM



K-State forward Ismael Massoud, right, defends Kentucky Wildcats guard Cason Wallace during Sunday's NCAA Tournament game at Greensboro Coliseum in Greensboro, N.C. BOB DONNAN USA TODAY Sports

GREENSBORO, N.C.

It was all Ismael Massoud could do to contain himself after hitting what he called the biggest shot of his career.

"I'm not going to lie, I had to suppress some emotion," Massoud said. "In that moment, it hit me a little bit but I had to stay focused on the game."

The deep three-pointer with 2:21 remaining gave Kansas State a two-point lead over Kentucky, and K-State didn't trail again in the NCAA Tournament second-round game.



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Massoud's splash, quickly followed by a Keyontae Johnson step-back three, started an 8-0 run that created the separation in Kansas State's 75-69 triumph that sends the Wildcats to an East Region Sweet 16 game in New York on Thursday.

Massoud doesn't start and he's not the team's top three-point shooter. But he's a good one at 39% and has made enough to earn such nicknames as "Swish-Ish," and "Big 12 Ish."

The Big 12 reference refers to his increased success in league play, when he made 41% from deep. Massoud, a 6-foot-9 forward, delivered one of the biggest baskets of the game with a three-pointer late in an overtime victory at Baylor.

"This one tops any other one," Massoud said.



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#CollegeHoops Clutch threes galore in the Greensboro Coliseum w/ Kansas State coming from behind to beat Kentucky

Markquis Nowell high arc+gets the ball back
Ismael Massoud, way too deep off the catch
Keyontae Johnson stepback three+rebound

#MarchMadness #KStateMBB #Big12hoops



5:35 PM · Mar 19, 2023



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Kansas State had struggled from deep most of the game. The Cats missed all 12 of their three-point attempts in the first half and ran the streak to 13 before Markquis Nowell buried a corner triple to help blunt Kentucky's early second-half momentum.

Nowell was the only K-State player with a made three when Massoud rose up for a shot taken just a step from his bench.

"I had confidence he was going to knock it down," Johnson said. "He's shown before he could do it. I'm grateful he got the moment and embraced it."

After the basket made it 64-62, Kentucky got a good look, a corner jumper by Chris Livingston that skipped across the rim. Kansas State's David N'guessan grabbed the rebound.

Then it was Johnson's turn. Also from in front the K-State bench, Johnson stepped back to make sure both feet were behind the three-point circle, and launched.

"It's a shot I always work on, and I trust my work," Johnson said. "I knew it was going in."

The lead was now 67-62 with 80 seconds remaining, and with the best guard on the floor, Nowell, running the show the game was in good hands. Nowell finished with 27 points and nine assists and was the only player in the game who didn't come off the floor.

After the game and the handshake line, Massoud's eyes watered as he posed for photos, hugged and celebrated with Kansas State fans.

Here was a player who spent his first two years at Wake Forest and had played on the Greensboro Coliseum floor, where a former Wake Forest player, Randolph Childress, captured 1997 ACC Tournament MVP for his remarkable play in helping the Demon Deacons win the title.



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.@IsmaelMassoud knew his game-changing three was going in the second it left his hands.

Now the NY native is going to play back home in the Sweet 16.



6:06 PM · Mar 19, 2023



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When Kansas State learned it would open the NCAA Tournament in Greensboro, Massoud texted Childress and said, “I hope I can have a Randolph Childress moment.”

“I don’t think my shot was as good as that,” Massoud said. “But I’ll take it.”



SPORTS EXTRA / Mar 16, 2023

Always Trying to Perfect His Craft

By: D. Scott Fritchen

A boy stands with his father on a red and green synthetic basketball court nestled on the corner of 1st Avenue and East 96th Street. The basketball court is surrounded by an old gate and is located across the street from Stanley Isaacs Playground and a couple blocks west of FDR Drive. The boy is 10. He is positioned underneath a basketball rim and shoots high-arching rainbows again and again and again amid the sounds of nearby New York City traffic. He must make 500 shots each day, one after another — "form" shots against an unrelenting sun.

There's a story behind it, of course. Hany Massoud caught Ismael running up and down the basketball court, shooting 3-pointers with two hands, thrusting the ball up as if heaving heavy pillows upon the top of a bunk bed, and he believed that his son needed a gentle push in the right direction. Over the course of a few weeks — no, a few months — Ismael, under his father's guidance, was determined to learn — no, perfect — the mechanics and discipline required to shoot a shot with proper form. Eventually, Ismael backed a few steps away from the rim, and then a little farther, and a little farther.

Although Hany spent countless hours practicing with his son, and some of Hany's favorite memories with his son came on the basketball court, Ismael's skills actually came from his mother, who played basketball at the University of Houston. Her sense of hard work, discipline, grit and focus rubbed off on Ismael and helped him to trust the process and not give up in the face of adversity.

Ismael yearned for his newfound shooting skills to someday shine through in a game.

And, boy, did opportunity knock.

SWISH. SWISH. SWISH.

The north corner of four-lane Lexington Avenue and East 96th Street backs against a wrought-iron fence that rises from a brick wall and encompasses a city block. Inside, sidewalks surround thick trees rising from landscaped squares. A seating area for picnics surrounds a flagpole. In the southwest corner of the park, a synthetic green basketball court worn from battle lies adjacent to East 95th.

Although the official name of this basketball haven nestled in East Harlem is Samuel Seabury Playground, Ismael refers to it as "Lexington Park."

It became Massoud's second home.

"He definitely got the basketball bug on that court," Hany says.

It wasn't the first time Massoud became enamored with competition. Truth is, young Massoud was an avid and talented skateboarder. One of Hany's proudest moments was watching Ismael perfect his kick-flip off three stairs. Eventually, Ismael competed in skateboarding tournaments across New York.

"We even moved to the beach in Rockaway, New York, thinking, 'OK, this is what he loves to do. He's very devoted,'" Hany says. "There wasn't a single trick that he tried that he didn't try to perfect. He'd spend hours doing the same trick over and over until he got it, whether it was jumping over stairs of down a ramp.

"When we moved to Harlem and he picked up a basketball, I knew at that moment he caught the basketball bug."

The bug carried Massoud into battles at Lexington Park, Rucker Park and Dyckman Park. The bug swept into The MacDuffie School in Granby, Massachusetts, where Massoud was regarded as one of the top 120 players and top 30 small forwards in the nation by *ESPN*. The bug accompanied Massoud to Wake Forest for two years, although he could've attended Harvard. Then Massoud pivoted to Kansas State, where he has turned into a 6-foot-9, 225-pound 3-point weapon for the Wildcats while also providing a solid defensive presence.

Some K-State fans call him "*SWISH MASSOUD*," while first-year K-State head coach ***Jerome Tang*** and teammates call him, "*BIG 12 ISH*." Massoud's 3-pointers light up the scoreboard and electrify home crowds at Bramlage Coliseum. His long-range touch has also silenced crowds in Ames, Austin, Fort Worth, Lawrence, Lubbock, Morgantown, Norman, Stillwater and Waco.

"I'm really happy that he's found this group that he really considers a second family and they've taken him in and given him a responsibility where he feels a part of it," Hany says. "Coach has trusted him with some important minutes."



Shortly after 8:30 p.m. Friday, Massoud, again, will strive to make every minute count as the third-seeded Wildcats, 23-9, face No. 14-seed Montana State, 25-9, at Greensboro Coliseum in Greensboro, North Carolina, in the opening round of the NCAA Tournament.

"I was talking with Ismael after K-State's selection and congratulated him," Hany says. "We reminisced a little bit. I said, 'I can't believe you're that kid from 96th Street.' He's going from 96th Street to playing in March Madness.

"How did that happen? It's a lot to take in."

Yes, it's a lot to digest, especially during the craziness of March, a seemingly ceaseless stream of blue carpets and arenas and basketball courts and Cinderellas and advances and exits and hellos and goodbyes.

That K-State made it to March is, really, not much short of a miracle.

Massoud and senior point guard **Markquis Nowell**, a third-team All-American, saw it all unfold before their very eyes this season at K-State.

Massoud first met Nowell when he was 15 years old. They lived in the same neighborhood. They were acquaintances, two aspiring standouts who watched each other play at Rucker and Dyckman. It's amazing how many players run the court there. Players can cycle through like a rolling tide while others are like immovable rocks in the sand. Massoud and Nowell were immovable rocks. Always there.

Fate brought them together at K-State prior to last season — Massoud arrived from Wake Forest and Nowell from Arkansas-Little Rock.

When Massoud entered the transfer portal, former K-State assistant coach Shane Southwell, a product of Rice High School in New York City, convinced Massoud to join him in Manhattan, Kansas. Although Massoud drew close to committing to Vanderbilt, and there were some other potential schools, Southwell, with his New York City connection, won the recruiting battle.

"It wasn't totally a hard sell," Hany says.

Unfortunately, Massoud and Nowell didn't see March Madness during their first season with the Wildcats. K-State, which incurred a few recent up-and-down campaigns, finished with a 14-17 record and a ninth-place finish in the Big 12 Conference.

Following the departure of head coach Bruce Weber last March — "We loved Coach Weber," Hany says — Massoud and Nowell faced a decision. Would they stay? Would they go? K-State athletics director Gene Taylor hired Tang, the 55-year-old longtime assistant/associate head coach at Baylor, which captured the 2021 NCAA Championship. Massoud and Nowell decided to remain in Manhattan.

The lone returners from the 2021-22 season, Massoud, a junior, and Nowell, a senior, spent the summer together as lead recruiters as Tang and his coaching staff set up shop in the Little Apple. Massoud and Nowell worked out together, shot baskets together and ate together. They wowed and convinced visiting recruits. The list of newcomers grew to five to seven to 10 to 13. Massoud and Nowell had this vision. They were going to fight. They would not give up.



"It took Markquis to believe in Ismael and for Ismael to believe in Markquis and for the coaching staff to believe in them," Hany says. "It really was a full team effort for them to be able to put together a team like this."

It started with two players.

"I'm really happy that Ismael stayed because he could've left and done other things," Hany says. "He knew when there's a coach coming in that there's a chance your minutes might go down a bit, but he knew he'd have a chance to be a part of this rebuild, and he was excited for the opportunity and to learn."

"As a father, that's something you want to hear, that it's not about what you get out of it, but just try to get better and learn. We're really happy that he got that chance. I'm happy that he followed his heart."

Heart. That's what this remarkable K-State season has been about. The Wildcats, picked to finish 10th in the Big 12, rose to No. 5 in the AP Top 25, and finished No. 15 in the AP Poll released Monday. The Wildcats, one of the feel-good stories of the college basketball season, feature two third-team All-Americans in Keyontae Johnson and Nowell, and the Big 12 Coach of the Year in Tang. It's amazing how some things work out with heart. With faith. With crazy faith.

Massoud sat next to Nowell at the Wildcats' gathering in the Shamrock Zone at Bramlage Coliseum for Sunday's Selection Show. They sat front and center. They wore purple t-shirts that read "CRAZY FAITH" and "12." The "1" and "2" stood for the first two players on this current squad — Massoud and Nowell. They popped from their chairs and erupted with their teammates when "KANSAS STATE" beamed across the TV screen. A third seed. Incredible.

"Things have just lined up perfectly this season," Hany says. "It's been incredible to watch."

Even now, Hany advises his son.

Together, they rewatch Ismael's minutes on the basketball court. They watch different plays, the offensive clips and defensive clips, because there's always something to learn. Hany pulls out selections from each game and sends them to his son. They watch each clip together over the phone. They analyze what went right and what went wrong.

"I watch every game multiple times," Hany says. "There's not a single game that I haven't watched multiple times with Ismael."

They hope that they might be able to discuss Friday's game — and a potential game on Sunday — for years to come.

If K-State defeats Montana State and then beats the winner of Providence/Kentucky, the Wildcats would advance to the Sweet 16 at Madison Square Garden in New York City. It's a lot to take in. But it's one shot at a time and one game at a time. Massoud will be ready when called upon to offer his shooting touch.

"I know he's put in the time," Hany says. "You always think it's going to go in."

It goes back to the days at 1st Avenue and East 96th Street, and it goes back to Lexington Park, and it goes back to form shooting, 500 shots each day, against an unrelenting sun. It goes back to the boy, who caught the bug, and who is on the cusp of the NCAA Tournament, one play at a time, one shot at a time, one game at a time in Greensboro.

If things go favorably for K-State, the team that began with Massoud and Nowell, could return to the Big Apple.

Madison Square Garden is 4.9 miles southeast of Lexington Avenue and East 96th Street — Massoud's childhood second home.

"Every kid wants to come back home and play the biggest game imaginable in your home city. What basketball kid doesn't dream of that?" Hany says. "Playing in one of the most historic places in the basketball world would be an experience you couldn't write up."

It's a lot to take in.

It's the magic of March.



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

The Quiet Confidence of Cam Carter

October 11, 2022

By D. Scott Fritchen

They yell at him to be more vocal. Cam Carter is a 6-foot-3, 190-pound point guard out of Donaldsonville, Louisiana. He was the second-ever signee for new Kansas State basketball head coach Jerome Tang. He transferred from Mississippi State after one season and has three years of eligibility remaining.

By all accounts, Carter is one of the most athletic players on Tang's first team. He drives the lane. He hangs in the air. He can either flip the ball off the glass or dish it off for two points. He hits midrange jump shots. And 3-pointers. He's unselfish. He's a baller.

And, well, he's too quiet.

"It's funny," he says, sliding into a chair in the K-State basketball theater at the Ice Family Basketball Center one day in early October. "Sometimes I'm out there on the court, and I'm here, but I'm not saying a lot. They kind of pick on me some days — 'I CAN'T HEAR YOU!' They want me to scream.

"They want to hear me scream the play or the defense. It can be mute, everybody quiet on the court, but if I'm not talking, they'll stop the play. Sometimes, I'll just scream.

"They want something to come out of my mouth."



Cam Carter was in the fourth grade. He bought the Jordan Military 4s. They were white, blue, and had a little gray. All of the boys at Lowery Elementary School wanted them. Because Carter had them. That's when Carter figured himself to be a leader. He also figured himself to be a friend to all. Whenever one of his friends was about to get into trouble for talking in class, Carter would tell the teacher that it was him. He'd take the blame. He'd accept the in-school-suspension.

"I thought it was a part of being a leader," he says. "I was willing to do it, knowing I was going to go home and get a whooping."

He was the neighborhood leader as well. Grandma Williams lived next door. She had the basketball goal. All of the kids came over. Carter was the best. He didn't talk much. Didn't need to. All he did was score the ball.

Sometimes, Grandma Williams would bring Carter inside. They'd talk.

"My grandma is a minister," he says. "She's big on praising God and she made sure we had God in our lives. That's why He's a big part of my life. I can say she introduced me to Him. God is the reason I'm here right now."

He chuckles.

"She's a great woman," he continues. "You all are going to hear her at the games. When she's at the games, she's going to be cheering and let everybody know she's there. We can be in a timeout, and she'll be cheering about the last play."

Cam Carter entered the transfer portal on April 13. His cellphone ringer woke him the next morning. It was Jerome Tang, who'd been hired by K-State on March 21. Tang said that he wanted to elevate the men's basketball program. Tang had two players on his roster — senior point guard Markquis Nowell and junior forward Ishmael Massoud. Tang needed to surround them with talent.

"Coach Tang woke me up and I tried to play it smooth like I was already awake," Carter says. "He introduced himself to me. I told him I had tutoring and would call in a little while."

I called him back. He told me a lot about himself. He told me that he wanted to get me on board. The main thing I heard was that he's a winner.



"He saw in me what nobody else saw in me."

Carter played in 27 of 34 games, including four starts, while helping Mississippi State to an 18-16 record, including an 8-10 mark in the Southeastern Conference, and a NIT appearance last season. He played the most games of any freshman, twice reaching double-digits in scoring with a season-high 15 points (3-for-6 on 3-pointers) in his first-career start at No. 25 Alabama.

However, he averaged 2.1 points, 0.8 rebounds and 0.9 assists while playing 8.4 minutes per game.

"We had a new coach and I could kind of feel that he wasn't interested in me," he says. "I prayed on it a lot. I slept on it. I was like, 'Man, I don't know what to do.' I talked to him, and he basically told me that I wasn't good enough and he was going to get better guys.

"I knew I was better and I was going to show it."

Now Carter was on the phone with Tang.

"Coach Tang was real, he was genuine, and he was just telling me, basically, that he liked my game," he says. "That right there, that's what helped me to make the move.

"I'm grimy on the court, really grimy. I get after you every day in practice, I'm going to bring it every day, and I'm going to make sure our team gets better."

Talent? Cam Carter knows talent. He was a four-star recruit. He played with five-star recruits M.J. Rice (Kansas) and Caleb Foster (Duke) at Oak Hill (Va.) Academy in 2020-21. He played under legendary Steve Smith, who retired in March 2022 with a 1,225-98 record, and who coached 29 NBA Draft picks, including Carmelo Anthony, Rajon Rondo, Jerry Stackhouse and Rod Strickland.



Carter was the 114th-rated player by 247Sports. He shot 50.4% from the floor, including 34.9% on 3-pointers, and averaged 4.2 rebounds, 4.3 assists and 2.0 steals while helping the Warriors to a 20-9 record and the quarterfinals of the GEICO High School National Championships.

He had four double-doubles and one triple-double. He earned the 2020-21 Coaches Award at Oak Hill, which is given to the player who gave himself each day to make the team better.

"It was fun because Coach Smith wanted the best out of me," Carter says. "No matter how well I did, he wanted more. There'd be times I'd be like, 'I'm really playing for Coach Smith?' I played at a level of competition I never thought I'd play at. Every game was like a dream come true almost. It was like it was fate."

Carter considers his decision to enter the transfer portal and leave Mississippi State one of the biggest of his life. He was sad. Then opportunity knocked — no rang — when he awakened to his cellphone the following morning.

"It brought my confidence level up to a 10," he says.



Carter believes joining Tang at K-State is fate. Carter, like Tang, follows the path of faith. And now he's in Manhattan, where he arrived in June, and he's balling with his new teammates, his new brothers, his friends, who he'd do anything for — including get in-school suspension for talking.

Except he doesn't talk. Not enough, anyway. It's a part of the growth process. He's used to doing his speaking on the basketball court.

"I'm a competitor," he says. "I always compete. I have confidence. If I thought somebody was better than me, I was going after him every day, no matter what. I was going to give it everything I had and I was going to take it from him.

"One-hundred percent I'm going to be an impact player. I'm going to bring everything I have every day, and be a better leader, and be more vocal, like Coach wants me to be."

He's excited to team up with Nowell on the hardwood.

"It's a dangerous combo for sure," he says. "I mean, Markquis's shooting ability is crazy. I've never seen it before. I know he can stretch the floor. I like to penetrate and he likes to shoot. I feel like we have that advantage. The ball in his hands, people have to come out to him, and he'll pass it back to me, and I'll drive and kick it back.

"We'll make some action happen."

K-State plays its exhibition game against Washburn on November 1 at Bramlage Coliseum. The team practiced inside Bramlage not too long ago. Carter says the arena is "crazy." He has seen the videos of K-State fans losing their minds in the stands at games. He is ready to make them cheer.

At the moment, silence fills the K-State basketball team theater, as Carter reflects upon his path to this point.

"What have I learned most about myself?" he says, pausing. "I've learned that I'm strong and God is with me — I know that for sure. I can get through anything."

When he steps onto the hardwood at Bramlage for the first time in his new uniform, he plans to make plenty of noise.

We hope you enjoy K-State Sports Extra. We would like to hear your comments and any story ideas for future emails, so fire them our way. Contact D. Scott Fritchen or K-State Associate AD for Communications Ryan Lackey. For past stories, visit www.k-statesports.com/sportsextra.



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

Just Getting Started

January 27, 2023

By D. Scott Fritchen

It's sometimes easy to forget that Cam Carter is a sophomore. He was on, man, during the first half at No. 12 Iowa State. He was on. First shot, he took three dribbles in front of the Iowa State bench for a midrange jumper — *swish*. Second shot, Markquis Nowell dribble drove and forced defensive help leaving Carter all alone in the corner for a 3-pointer — *swish*. Third shot, another pass from Nowell, this time on the run, and Carter maneuvered around the defense and kissed it off the backboard.

"Cam is a hooper," K-State head coach Jerome Tang says. He just likes to hoop."

Carter had 15 points on 5-of-5 shooting from the floor, and made all four of his free-throw attempts against the Cyclones. It marked his most points since he poured in a career-high 17 points at No. 6 Texas and his fifth double-digit scoring came at Kansas State.

"My shot was on," Carter says.

On a team that possesses six seniors, including Markquis Nowell and Keyontae Johnson, it's sometimes easy to forget that Carter, in essence, is still just getting started. The 6-foot-3, 190-pound guard from Donaldsonville, Louisiana, has started in all 20 games for the Wildcats, averaging 6.8 points, 3.0 rebounds and 1.5 assists.

He ranks third on the team in 3-pointers (21), fourth in assists (1.5), fifth in minutes (27.0) and steals (0.8). There's a plus-minus metric to demonstrate the effectiveness of a player on the court. Carter ranks fourth on the team at plus-109.



He'll get his chance to be the man. He'll get his chance.

You see, Tang saw something in Carter to make him his second-ever signee at K-State.

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"He saw in me what nobody else saw in me."



Talent? Carter knows talent. He was a four-star recruit. He played with five-star recruits M.J. Rice (Kansas) and Caleb Foster (Duke) at Oak Hill (Va.) Academy in 2020-21. He played under legendary Steve Smith, who retired in March 2022 with a 1,225-98 record, and who coached 29 NBA Draft picks, including Carmelo Anthony, Rajon Rondo, Jerry Stackhouse and Rod Strickland.

Carter was the 114th-rated player by 247Sports. He shot 50.4% from the floor, including 34.9% on 3-pointers, and averaged 4.2 rebounds, 4.3 assists and 2.0 steals while helping the Warriors to a 20-9 record and the quarterfinals of the GEICO High School National Championships.

He had four double-doubles and one triple-double. He earned the 2020-21 Coaches Award at Oak Hill, which is given to the player who gave himself each day to make the team better.

"I'm a competitor," he says. "I have confidence."

By all accounts, Carter is one of the most athletic players on Tang's first team. He drives the lane. He hangs in the air. He can either flip the ball off the glass or dish it off for two points. He hits midrange jump shots. And 3-pointers. He's unselfish. He's a baller.

He'll get his chance to shine again when No. 5 K-State (17-3, 6-1 Big 12) meets Florida (12-8, 5-3 SEC) in the SEC/Big 12 Challenge at 5 p.m. (ESPN) Saturday at Bramlage Coliseum.

He's a sophomore.

And he's just getting started.

We hope you enjoy K-State Sports Extra. We would like to hear your comments and any story ideas for future emails, so fire them our way. Contact D. Scott Fritchen or K-State Associate AD for Communications Ryan Lackey. For past stories, visit www.k-statesports.com/sportsextra.



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

The Growth of Confidence

December 7, 2022

By D. Scott Fritchen

We saw Kansas State trail. We saw K-State lead. And we saw David N'Guessan grow up before our eyes during the Wildcats' 81-64 win over Abilene Christian on Tuesday at Bramlage Coliseum.

N'Guessan had a career-high 16 points to go along with five rebounds — and that was in the first half alone. He finished with a game-high 23 points on 9-for-9 shooting from the floor in 33 minutes while slashing and moving and getting open and playing with the most confidence he's demonstrated all season for Coach Jerome Tang's team.

"I put in the work," N'Guessan said. "Coach said to keep doing it and my confidence would keep going up and I'd see the results. I'm just going to keep doing what I'm doing."

N'Guessan's previous season high was 12 points against Rhode Island on November 21.

On Tuesday, N'Guessan was on another level as the Wildcats improved to 8-1 and now prepare to face Incarnate Word on Sunday.

The 6-foot-9, 215-pound N'Guessan, a versatile junior transfer from Virginia Tech, was good from the start for a K-State team that was up and down for the first 20 minutes and led 35-34 at the half. N'Guessan scored four of the Wildcats' first eight points and blocked a shot by Abilene Christian guard Damien Daniels, which led to a fastbreak layup

by Desi Sills. Two possessions later, he caught a pass from Markquis Nowell in mid-air and flipped the ball into the hoop.

"Markquis finds me all the time," N'Guessan said. "My teammates are making it easy for me."



Moments later, N'Guessan made K-State's first 3-pointer. That gave him nine points in eight minutes of action. Then he caught another pass from Nowell for another layup.

"Me moving all the time helps the flow of the offense and it opens up bubbles for our team to attack," N'Guessan said. "Me standing in one spot allows the defender to stay on me the whole time. I just have to keep moving.

"Coach Tang talks to me about confidence all the time and my teammates help me with it as well. They just keep telling me to keep my head up even if I make a bad play. That really helps me."

N'Guessan tied his season-high 12 points with a free throw to pull K-State within 32-29 with 3 minutes, 17 seconds left. Then he gave K-State a 33-32 lead when he went up strong with his left hand off the glass. Less than a minute later, he made a pair of free throws. That gave him a career-high 16 points in 17 minutes in the first half.

"They were finding me every time for easy layups," N'Guessan said.

He wasn't finished.

He reached 20 points when he caught a long, high pass from Cam Carter and he laid the ball softly into the hoop to give K-State a 66-51 lead with 7:51 left in the second half. He scored his 21st and 22nd points on a short baseline jumper for a 68-55 lead.

With 4:26 remaining, he landed awkwardly on his left knee. He walked off a lump and made the first of two free throws. He showed no signs of slowing when he blocked a shot on the other end of the floor.

"He's a competitor," Nowell said. "He's fierce. He does all the little things to help this team win. That's why on nights like this he gets rewarded, because he sets screens, and rolls hard, and gets on the glass. Any opportunity we get to give him the ball we try to do so as much as possible."



N'Guessan dreamed of performances like this.

Born and raised in De Lier, The Netherlands, N'Guessan grew up playing hoops. He hit a growth spurt — he went from 6-foot-3 to 6-foot-9 between ages 15 and 17 — that played a part in his decision to come to America to play high school basketball and potentially refine his talents at the collegiate level. He graduated from Mt. Zion Prep in Lanham, Maryland, as one of the top 40 power forwards in the nation. In March 2020, he chose to make Virginia Tech his initial college home over offers from St. Joseph's, VCU and Washington State.

As a freshman during the abbreviated 2020-21 season, N'Guessan scored 13 points at Wake Forest and 10 points at Syracuse while playing in 21 of 22 games at Virginia Tech. Last season, he came off the bench in all 36 games and showed flashes of potential as the Hokies' top big man off the bench. He averaged 3.7 points and 2.7 rebounds while averaging 13.4 minutes per contest. He had a then-career-high 15 points on 7-of-7 shooting against Maine and added 10 points and a career-high nine rebounds against Cornell. He played in all four ACC Tournament games and saw nearly 10 minutes of action against Texas in the NCAA Tournament.

"At Virginia Tech, he played behind two all-conference guys," Tang said. "It wasn't that he was a bad player, but he was just behind two all-conference guys. In the limited minutes that he played, we saw him do some really good things, and we thought given more minutes he could do more of those things."

"He's a real mismatch playing the five because he's so fast that he can outrun fives down the court and sprint out of ball screens. He's starting to feel and they're developing confidence in each other. You have to credit the guards for throwing him the ball. I see David's game continuing to grow. I feel like he can shoot the 3 and he can make plays



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

Through The Move, The Friendship Remains

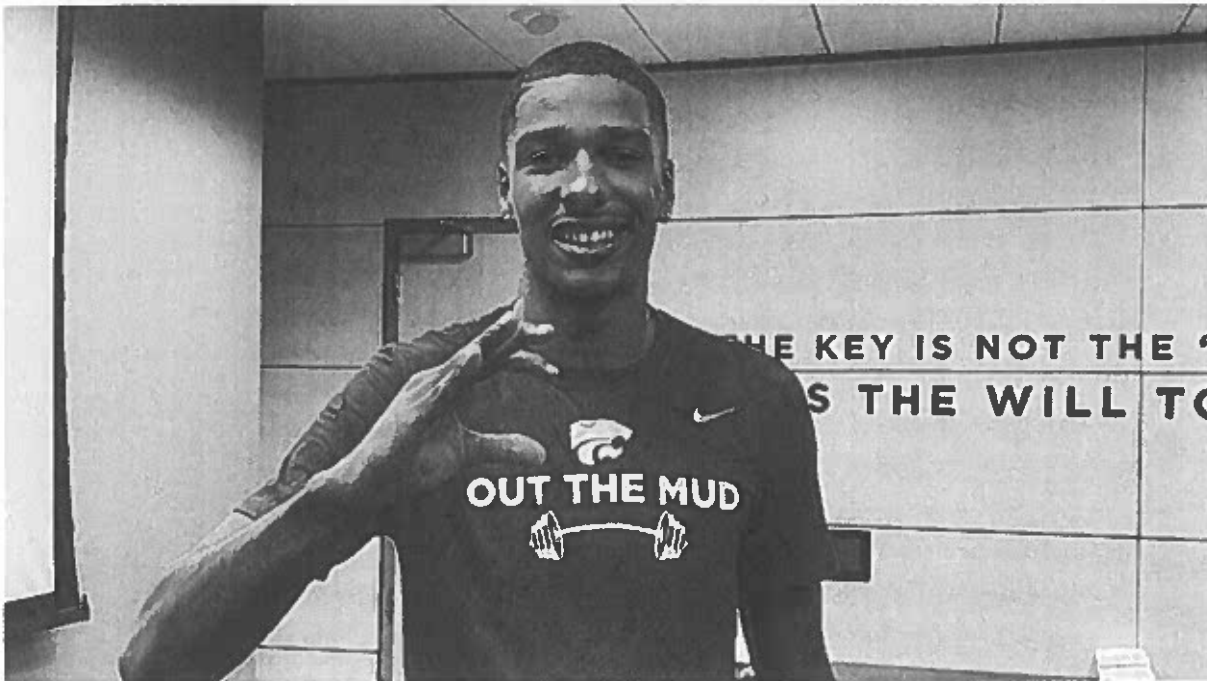
July 1, 2022

By D. Scott Fritchen

David N'Guessan (*pronounced Guh-SAHN*) traces back the days and realizes that he has been in Manhattan for exactly one week. Today, he got up some shots at 8 a.m., he hit the weight room one hour later, and he had an introductory meeting with a Kansas State on-campus advisor. Then he ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch and then played open gym with his new K-State teammates. After this interview, the 6-foot-9, 205-pound power forward is going to hit the weight room again.

"This new group of guys, they're super competitive just like me," N'Guessan says. "It gets super intense, but I like it. It's good. It's great. It's what makes you better."

N'Guessan was born and raised in De Lier, The Netherlands, and grew up playing hoops. He hit a growth spurt — he went from 6-foot-3 to 6-foot-9 between ages 15 and 17 — that played a part in his decision to come to America to play high school basketball and potentially refine his talents at the collegiate level. He graduated from Mt. Zion Prep in Lanham, Maryland, as one of the top 40 power forwards in the nation. In March 2020, he chose to make Virginia Tech his initial college home over offers from St. Joseph's, VCU and Washington State.



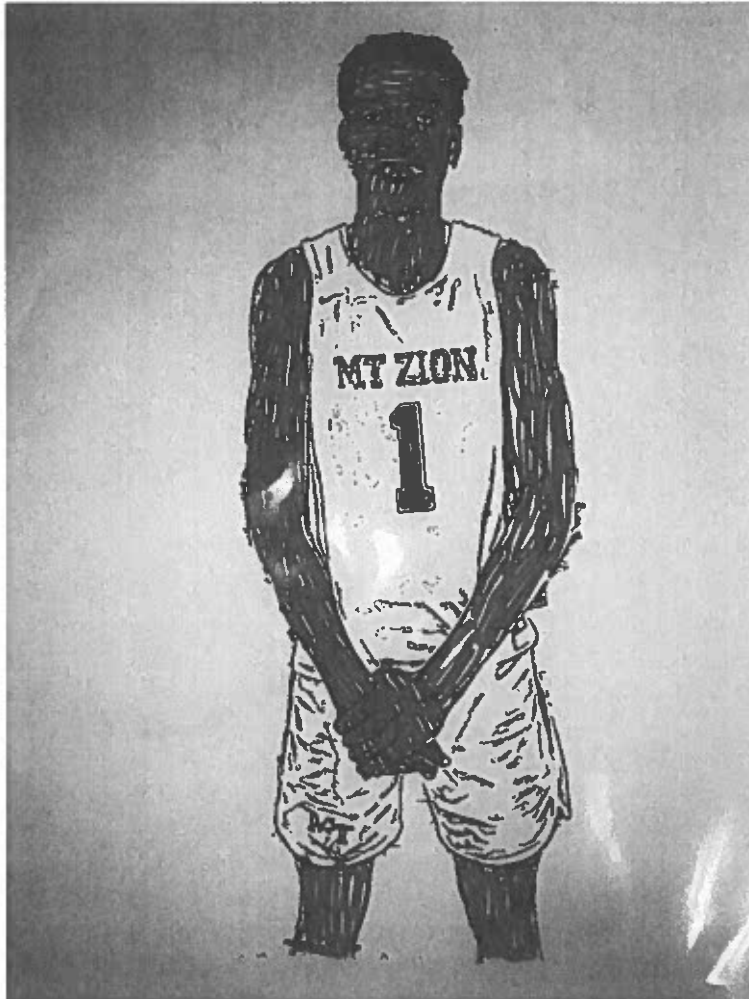
Today, N'Guessan wears a purple Nike Powercat t-shirt. Written in bold white lettering across the chest reads: "OUT THE MUD." And he wears a smile. And he is holding out the Wildcat symbol with his right hand for the first time in his K-State career for a photo. But the smile, yeah, the smile traces back to March 2020 — when N'Guessan committed to Virginia Tech. Dani Jo Hearl, then 12 years old, posted a video on social media on March 19, 2020, to congratulate N'Guessan on joining the Hokies family:

"Hi David, my name is Dani Hearl. I just wanted to introduce myself today. I'm the biggest Virginia Tech Hokies basketball fan there is. Congratulations to your commitment to Virginia Tech. David, I'll be your biggest fan. I'll be at every game. I can't wait to have your jersey hanging in my room. David, I colored a picture for you. I can't wait to meet you in person and give it to you. Congratulations again for becoming a Hokie. I'll talk to you soon. Go Hokies!"

Dani Jo was born on October 12, 2007, in Winston-Salem and was transferred to Brenner's Children's Hospital and diagnosed with Congenital Central Hypoventilation Syndrome, which means she lives off a ventilator when she's asleep. By age 4, she had undergone 10 surgeries and had been resuscitated 12 times. Later, she was diagnosed with Hirschsprung's disease and epilepsy. Today, she might have difficulty performing addition and subtraction in school, but she can name every ACC player currently on an NBA roster. She hangs jerseys of Virginia Tech players in her bedroom. She sits on the front row at Cassell Coliseum before games and stays an hour after each game to connect with players. That's how she formally met N'Guessan.

N'Guessan paid special attention to her. He remembered her video in which she congratulated him on becoming a Hokie.

"It touched my heart right away," he says. "It was very sweet and nice of her. She's very special. She and her family were at pretty much every game supporting us. She's definitely very special."



As a freshman during the abbreviated 2020-21 season, N'Guessan scored 13 points at Wake Forest and 10 points at Syracuse while playing in 21 of 22 games. Last season, he came off the bench in all 36 games and showed flashes of potential as the Hokies' top big man off the bench. He averaged 3.7 points and 2.7 rebounds while averaging 13.4 minutes per contest. He had a career-high 15 points on 7-of-7 shooting against Maine and added 10 points and a career-high nine rebounds against Cornell. He played in all four ACC Tournament games and saw nearly 10 minutes of action against Texas in the NCAA Tournament.

"David was always a kid who, no matter the game's outcome, he always walked back onto the court after the game," says Joey Hearl, Dani Jo's father and principal at Early College of Forsyth County in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. "He always made it a point to walk over and talk."

"David is a fine young man. He's a good basketball player but a great person. K-State fans will find that out soon enough. When he plays, his motor never stops, and he goes 100 miles-per-hour, and he's a guy the fans will really like. They'll quickly fall in love with his style of play."



N'Guessan entered the transfer portal right before the May 1 deadline. He says that "I'll cherish my time at Virginia Tech the rest of my life." His phone rang non-stop his first week on the market, as a bevy of Division I programs sought his talents. He visited K-State in late May. He issued his top eight possible selections (K-State, Maryland, Georgetown, St. Joseph's, George Washington, UMass and Rhode Island) and returned to The Netherlands to spend time with his family and formulate his decision.

"Definitely the people and the relationships I have with the coaches set K-State apart, but also the people that I trust that have known the coaching staff for a long time was big, too," N'Guessan says. "I didn't hear anything but great things about them. The Big 12 is obviously a big-time conference. The fans and crowd and everything I heard about K-State was pretty great.

"I heard it gets very loud in here and it's one of the best home court advantages in the country."

K-State head coach Jerome Tang announced the addition of N'Guessan on June 2. Less than one week later, Dani Jo delivered a video message to the Wildcats:



Heart Family
@HeartFamily

Dear @KStateMBB 🏀

I want to 🗣️ you about @DavidNGuessan1

He is a great 🏀 player and a great person.

He gives the best 🙌 and 😊 after the game !!

He is my friend and I ❤️ him. Please take good care of him for me.

❤️❤️ Dani Jo ❤️💕

PS: The N is silent in N'Guessan



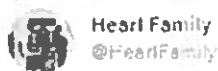
7:26 PM • Jun 9, 2022 • Twitter for iPhone

"This message is for Kansas State basketball. My name is Dani Jo. I want to tell you about David N'Guessan. David is a great guy. He's one of my buddies. I'm going to miss him at Virginia Tech. You guys are going to love him at Kansas State. David can play multiple positions on the court, is a good rebounder and shot blocker, and if you leave him open, he'll hit the 3-pointer on you. But the best thing about David is he's a great person. He gives the best high-fives and hugs after a game. Hopefully, one day Kansas State will play Virginia Tech. David, thank you for being my friend. I love you and I'm going to miss you. I'll talk to you later. Go Hokies and Go Wildcats!"

Less than 10 days later, Dani Jo posted a photo of her surrounded by various K-State t-shirts sent by the K-State men's basketball program — along with a hand-written card from Tang that read:

"Dani Jo... We are very excited to have David & will take great care of him... I am also very excited to have you as a Wildcat fan!!! I hope you enjoy the gear & I look forward to having you visit Manhappiness someday soon!!! In His Court, Coach Tang"

K-State Men's Basketball Retweeted



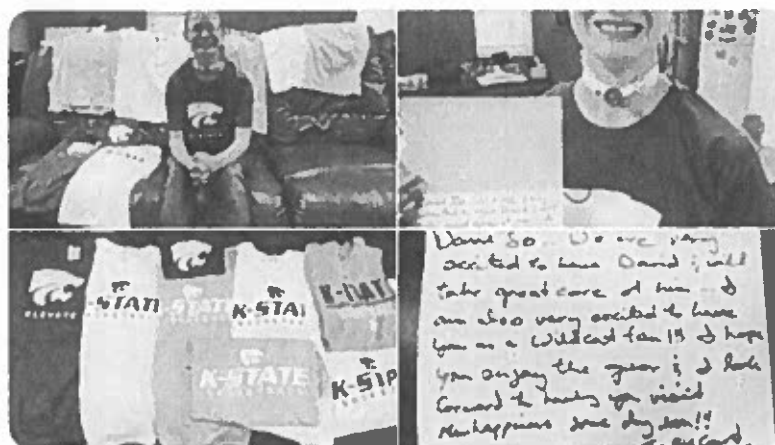
Mail Day 📬 from @KStateMBB 🏀

Thank you for the Wildcat gear. Please know you will be well represented in Mount Airy, NC !!

Thank you @CoachJTang for the card and gear ❤️

@DavidNGuessan1 is going to be just fine in Manhappiness 🙌❤️

EMAW ❤️❤️



12:40 PM • Jun 13, 2022 • Twitter for iPhone

Dani Jo re-reads Tang's note over the phone.

"Coach Tang is a nice guy," she says. "David, we've been friends for three years. He's a nice guy. I'm going to continue following him at Kansas State. I hope to see him soon."

N'Guessan smiles while recalling how their special friendship all began.

"She showed me a drawing that she made," he says. "She gave it to me after a game. The drawing made me feel proud and excited. Any time you can inspire someone else it's just an amazing feeling. I still have that drawing."

He pauses.

"I have to find a nice spot for it now."

It's near the top of his to-do list at his new college home.

K-State Sports Extra is going on vacation next week. Be on the lookout for our next story on Monday, July 11.

We hope you enjoy K-State Sports Extra. We would like to hear your comments and any story ideas for future emails, so fire them our way. Contact D. Scott Fritchen or K-State Associate AD for Communications Ryan Lackey. For past stories, visit www.k-statesports.com/sportsextra.



TODAY'S SPORTS EXTRA

Baybe Fights for Everything He Has

October 17, 2022

By D. Scott Fritchen

His name is Abayomi Iyiola, and the 6-foot-10, 220-pound sixth-year senior he might be one of the hidden treasures in the Big 12 Conference this season. But before the native of Ibadan, Nigeria, journeyed from college to college before reaching the Little Apple this summer, he attended Greenforest-McCalep (Ga.) Christian Academy – playing for Coach Ryan – and the AAU Georgia Stars.

And nobody could pronounce his name —Abayomi (*uh-BYE-uh-mee*) Iyiola (*ee-zhee-OH-luh*).

Coach Ryan said it was time to give him a nickname. He nicknamed him “Baybe.”

“I’m not going to lie to you, I hated the name at first,” Baybe says. “Coach Ryan made the name out of my first name — “*Bay*” — and then he put a “*b-e*” at the end. I have no idea where he got the “*e*” from. He said it like “*Bay-bay*.” I said, ‘What’s *Baybe*?’ He said, ‘That’s your name.’

“I said, ‘I don’t like it.’”

The Georgia Stars played in a AAU tournament in Virginia. Everybody yelled, “Baybe! Baybe! Get the rebound!” Then Baybe hit the game-winning shot, and everybody chanted, “Bay-bay! Bay-bay! Bay-bay!”

“Since then,” he say, “everybody has called me by my nickname.”

Baybe.

...

It was a five-mile walk to elementary school. There are many things that Baybe recalls about his childhood in Ibadan, Nigeria, and this is one of them. Baybe has four siblings — Semiu, Akim, Omolara and Opeyemi. His parents, Lasisi and Alirat did the best they could. But owning an automobile was somewhat rare in his district. And so Baybe walked five miles to and from school each day. School began at 7:30 a.m., so he sometimes left before daybreak — an hour hike to school. The teacher delivered whoopings for any student who arrived late. Baybe was always punctual.

“You didn’t want to get into trouble,” Baybe says.

Ibadan has a population of more than 3.5 million and is the third-largest city by population in Nigeria.

“It’s like you have to fight a war every day — not a real war, but you have to fight for everything,” he says. “It’s really tough. My parents had to work two or three jobs for us to be OK. I remember most of the time my father would work late nights so he could get enough money to give us to go to school the next morning.”



Baybe had soccer. Everybody played soccer. You started playing soccer soon after you could walk. And you continued it on throughout your life. Two of Baybe’s brothers — Semiu and Akim — played soccer in Nigeria. Baybe figured to be on a similar athletic path. Then he began to grow. And he grew some more. And some more. And a man finally told his father, “Perhaps your son should try playing basketball.” But Baybe refused. He did not want to play basketball.

“No, I’m not playing basketball,’ I told them,” Baybe says. “Except we called it ‘handball.’ I said, ‘I’m not playing handball.’ Then one day, my dad tricked me and took me to watch a basketball game. Then he tried to make me play the game.

"I love to challenge myself. So I did everything I could to learn the sport."

He was 12.

"And I just kept getting better and better and better," he says. "Now I'm getting better because you learn every single day. You get 1% better every single day."

...

Baybe stands inside the team theater room at the Ice Family Basketball Center on October 13. He wears a black hoodie with "ELEVATE" written in white lettering below a white Powercat logo. Mere hours have passed since the Big 12 Conference announced its preseason rankings for the 2022-23 men's basketball season.

K-State is picked 10th. The Big 12 poll flashes across a flatscreen by the men's basketball locker room.

The Wildcats host Washburn in an exhibition game on November 1 and then open their first season under head coach Jerome Tang against UTRGV on November 7 at Bramlage Coliseum.



"To be honest, I don't like the way they put us last," Baybe says. "That's the last thing I want to see — for us to be at the bottom of the list. We have something to fight for. We just have to make sure we prove the rankings wrong and use that as motivation in practice every day and just go hard."

"This is my last year, so I have to put everything I have out there every night and make sure we win the game."

...

Baybe was 15 when he left Nigeria. He had never before been on an airplane. He hugged his parents tight. His mother prayed over him.

"The first thing she told me at the airport was, 'You have to make us proud,'" he says. "I'm the first in my family to ever get on the plane and I'm the first in my family to ever come to the United States, and I'm the first in my family to ever graduate from college outside of the country.

"I promised that I'd make everyone in my family proud."

The airline running out of Ibadan Airport is called "Air Peace." And a certain peace rose from Baybe in knowing he was doing as God intended for his life. He arrived at Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport and stayed with an uncle for two nights before moving onto the campus of Greenforest-McCalep Christian Academy, about 20 miles west of Atlanta in nearby Decatur.

Baybe arrived as a wide-eyed 6-foot-7 talent with just three years of basketball experience under his belt. He helped Greenforest to a 57-7 record and back-to-back Class A Private School State Championships in 2016 and 2017 as a junior and senior. He averaged 9.7 points and 4.7 rebounds as a junior, and 10.2 points, 9.3 rebounds, 1.1 blocks, 1.0 assists and 1.0 steals as a senior.

"I took a lot of pride in representing Nigeria," he says. "When you go to another country, whatever you do, people won't say, 'Baybe did this.' They'll say, 'A Nigerian did this.' Everything I did and everything I do, I make sure I do the right things to put honor on my name and on my country. I always want to do the right thing and work hard."

Baybe decided to begin his college career at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida. He averaged 10.1 points on 51.9% shooting to go along with 6.2 rebounds and 0.7 blocks in 19.3 minutes per game en route to Atlantic Sun All-Freshman honors. As a sophomore, he averaged 10.8 points on 48.4% shooting with 7.6 rebounds, 1.2 blocks and 1.0 steals in 22.9 minutes while starting all 31 games. He had 19 points and five rebounds against No. 3 Duke.

Deciding to elevate his game, he transferred to Arkansas, where he sat out and redshirted the 2019-20 season in accordance with then-NCAA transfer rules. Then in the summer of 2020, he tore the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee and played in just one game during the 2020-2021 season following surgery and months of rehabilitation.

It became apparent that Baybe needed to transfer again in order to get back onto the court, as Arkansas' roster was loaded with talent and experience. Baybe landed at Hofstra and last December helped the Pride to an 89-81 win at No. 24 Arkansas. Baybe had 18 points and 14 rebounds against his former team. He averaged 7.1 points on 63.2% shooting with 7.1 rebounds and 0.6 blocks while playing in 28 games.

Overall, he has played in 92 games with 64 starts between Stetson, Arkansas and Hofstra, averaging 9.3 points and 6.9 rebounds in 20.3 minutes per game and has 16 career double-doubles.

Upon earning a degree in business from Hofstra, Baybe contemplated playing professional basketball.



"My mom told me, 'How about you try and get your master's degree before you start to play pro?'" Baybe says. "So I thought about it for two days and put my name in the transfer list. Then coaches began calling me. I spoke with Coach Tang. We just clicked. And here I am today.

"I chose K-State because of how Coach Tang talked to me. I'd been in school for a long time, so I knew what I wanted, and know what I want. Coach Tang told me the truth and that's what I wanted to hear. He said, 'We really need you to come here to play for us and you have to work hard. You give us what we want every day on the floor and you'll be able to compete and play the game that you love.' I'm so happy to finish my career with Coach Tang. I love him as a person and as a coach. I just love the way he does things."

Baybe hasn't returned to Nigeria. He won't return, not until he receives his master's degree in finance at K-State. He made a promise to his mother.

"I was supposed to go home this year, this summer, but my mom told me she'd like for me to come back home with my master's," he says. "So hopefully, next summer I'm going home with my master's. She can't wait to see that. I'll be the first person in my entire family to have a master's.

"Right now, for me to make them proud, is for me to get my master's and go play pro. I really want to help my family. I know they're at home. We don't have money. We don't have a lot of stuff. We're not starving, but things are hard. I just want to make them proud.

"Everything I do, I do it for them."

Highlights don't lie. Baybe can be a special talent. He's athletic. He can get to the rim in so many different ways. He can operate in traffic. He has post moves inside the paint. He can sense double teams and find the open player. He can kick the ball back out to a guard. He can rebound. He can block shots.

He'll look pretty good in purple and white.



"I'm so excited," he says. "The first thing I heard is that the fans are crazy each and every night. I go the football game, and man, I see the fans, and the fan base is so huge. I'm looking forward to seeing everybody every night."

"I want to win. I've seen Coach Tang to the NCAA Tournament many times. I just want to go to the tournament and I know Coach Tang has the experience to take us there. We have to be coachable. We just have to listen to him."

Just like he listened to his parents growing up.

"I listen to them so much," he says. "I listened to them and made sure I did something to please them. When they told me to do something, even before they told me to do something, I'd get it done. Even now, I get on the phone with my mom, if I called her right now, her first words would be, 'I'm so proud of you.' Every single day, every single day."

Baybe appreciates how he can talk with Tang as well.

"Coach has been great and invites us to his office, and asks how your family is doing," he says. "It's a quality I see in Coach Tang that I haven't experienced before. For a coach to invite you to his office, and ask anything that doesn't relate to basketball, it makes it — he wants the best for us on the basketball court and off the basketball court."

"I just want make sure that I make my last year of college basketball count and I just want to make sure at the end of the season we accomplished a lot of stuff."

He pauses.

"The only thing that rings in my head every morning when I wake up is, 'Win the championship.'"

What has he learned most about himself during his journey?

"I've learned a lot about myself," he says. "I've learned....that's a tough question. Can we come back to that question?"

And Baybe peers ahead.

Already, he's learned plenty.

• • •

The name "Abayomi" is Nigerian. Abayomi means, "My enemies tried to mock me but God didn't allow them." In Egyptian, Abayomi means, "Bringer of happiness."

"I believe my parents gave me my name for a reason," Baybe says. "I thank my parents forever because without them I'm not the man I am today. All their discipline and kind words, their prayer, it worked. It pushes me today. I want to take good care of them. I'm really blessed.

"Wherever I go, God always puts on the light for me. I'm thankful to be here, and thankful to play for Coach Tang, and thankful to be a part of K-State men's basketball, and for my life, and for my family here."

There will be a time when Baybe says goodbye to Manhattan. Asked whether he hopes to pursue the NBA or overseas professional basketball, he replies, "God knows best."

"Wherever I go, I have to work hard, but God has a plan for everything in life," he says. "It would be a dream come true."

His smile brightens up the room.

"Bay-bay! Bay-bay! Bay-bay!"

You can already hear the chants ring out across Bramlage Coliseum.

We hope you enjoy K-State Sports Extra. We would like to hear your comments and any story ideas for future emails, so fire them our way. Contact D. Scott Fritchen or K-State Associate AD for Communications Ryan Lackey. For past stories, visit www.k-statesports.com/sportsextra .

How Abayomi Iyiola affects winning for Kansas State

Derek Young•02/28/23



Abayomi Iyiola/Kansas State Athletics

A player can affect winning in many ways. Some guys are the stars and pour in 20 points every night, some average double-doubles, some shoot high percentages from the field, some close out games from the free throw line or some apply themselves on the defensive end of the floor. Kansas State has plenty of contributors.

One is **Abayomi Iyiola**. He was added in the offseason when **Jerome Tang** and K-State were still in search of a big. At the time of his addition, they had already secured **Nae'Qwan Tomlin**, **Jerrell Colbert** and **David N'Guessan** as well and **Ish Massoud** had chosen to remain at Kansas State.

Returning to a higher level of basketball was important to him. His first stop was at Stetson but he transferred to Arkansas for that chance before injuries sidetracked his trajectory and development in Fayetteville.

He was forced back to the mid-major level to re-start his basketball path. After some time at Hofstra, the new staff in Manhattan afforded him the opportunity to reach his goals of playing and contributing to an NCAA Tournament roster.

"It meant everything to me," Iyiola said. "I've always wanted to play at a high level. To come here was big. The first time I transferred, I was hurt and had to go back. Being here has been a dream come true."

He was actually the 10th scholarship player for the Wildcats. **Desi Sills** arrived in Manhattan later but had already committed. Those who had yet to pick K-State were **Keyontae Johnson**, **Anthony Thomas** and **Tykei Greene**.

While Iyiola's role, his minutes and his rotations have not been consistent, his impact and meaningfulness to the Kansas State roster has been for his coaches and teammates.

“On the court or off the court, when you see Baybe, you’re good,” Markquis Nowell noted. “He’s going to have your back through thick and thin.”

That unwavering support doesn’t wither away whether he is playing well and starring for the Wildcats en route to a 14-point, 8-rebound performance in an overtime win at home versus West Virginia or if he’s logging just a few minutes and mostly watching the action.

A powerful observation that KSO has made this year is that the photographer’s shot of the bench often have Iyiola joined by guys like Dorian Finister and Colbert flexing and regularly supporting their teammates. It would have been easy for him to become frustrated with minutes or a constant role.

He began the year as a starter with N’Guessan coming off the bench before the two swapped those titles. An injury to N’Guessan kept him off the floor for a month and thrust Iyiola into much more action and that was flipped again when the starter returned to the lineup.

Tang touched on that following the victory over the Mountaineers on New Year’s Eve.

“In this league you just can’t play with six or seven and we’re going to get to eight, you know, maybe nine at times when I see the foul trouble.”

Instead, Iyiola has powered his way through and not caused a stir. And he actually set the example for the rest of the K-State locker room not to pout, how to confront adversity, stay tough and find other ways to affect winning.

“I just want to win,” he explained. “My one goal was to come here and win. To win the Big 12, but most importantly, I want to go to the NCAA Tournament and compete.”

It may not be how he absolutely pictured it, and it probably doesn’t always look the way that he envisioned it, but he should know that his teammates and coaches alike know that he has as much to do with the success of Kansas State as anyone.

His presence alone is irreplaceable.

“That’s my brother,” Nowell shared. “He gives love every day. He gives his all on a day-to-day basis, whether he’s feeling it or not. He gives leadership. He gives maturity that a great team has to have. He’s a brother.”

“He’s a big part of us,” Tykei Greene answered. “He provides the toughness for us. He does everything for the team. Even on our bad nights, he’s getting into us and making sure we’re still doing everything we need to do. In practice, he’s the one always talking and providing us energy for our next games.”

March Madness is just weeks away. There isn’t a ton of tournament experience on the roster, but Iyiola is one of the few that does have some. It was his goal to be back on the floor but to be healthy for it. It’s at the tip of his fingers.

“The first time I had a torn ACL,” he revealed. “I got a chance to experience it, but I never got a chance to see the floor. To come here, I wanted the power to see the floor. I just want to do everything in my power to win in the first place.”

How role players are elevating Kansas State to new standards



Nae'Qwan Tomlin (K-State Athletics) (K-State Athletics)

Alec Busse • EMAWOnline Lead Reporter 3.2.23

MANHATTAN, Kan. -- While working as an assistant coach at Baylor, first-year Kansas State head coach **Jerome Tang** worked closely with Bill Peterson from 2017-22. Peterson was a coach in the Orlando Magic and Milwaukee Bucks organizations from 2007-17 before joining the Baylor staff.

Working with Peterson, Tang learned an important coaching detail, one he brought directly with him to Kansas State this season. "He told me, 'Jerome, good coaches get their best players the most shots,'" Tang said following Kansas State's 85-69 win over Oklahoma on Wednesday night at Bramlage Coliseum.

Tang, a Big 12 and national coach of the year candidate, has done that pretty well this season. His two star players -- **Keyontae Johnson** and **Markquis Nowell** -- combine to take about 24 of Kansas State's 57 field goal attempts per game, and that has worked pretty well with Kansas State holding a 23-7 and 11-6 Big 12 record following Wednesday's revenge win over Oklahoma.

But in Kansas State's four most recent games -- all wins -- the Wildcats have started to see production from role players like **Desi Sills**, **Cam Carter** and **Nae'Qwan Tomlin** become more consistent. Sills earned his first start of the season four games ago, and Kansas State has not lost since he was inserted into the team's starting five.

Sills nearly recorded the first-ever triple-double in Kansas State basketball history against Oklahoma, scoring 15 points while grabbing nine rebounds and dishing out a season-high eight assists. He scored K-State's first five points of the game, which included three free throws.

"He gives us the right energy that we need throughout the game when me or Quis isn't providing," Johnson said.

Carter, who has struggled with consistency all season has now scored at least seven points in Kansas State's last three games -- all games Sills has played alongside the Mississippi State transfer for extended stretches -- something he hadn't previously accomplished at Kansas State this season.

"Offense is always better when you have three guards on the floor. It just provides so much better spacing," Tang said.

Tomlin, a junior college transfer, scored 19 points and grabbed five rebounds in Kansas State's win on Wednesday, the most he's scored in a Big 12 game this season and the most since his 26 points vs. Radford in the days before Christmas.

"Whenever he plays like that, we are a different team. He's like the x-factor that we need, that we want," Nowell said on Tomlin. "Whenever he can go in and get you 19 and five rebounds on any given night, I don't think we'll lose."

Tomlin drilled two 3-pointers vs. Oklahoma, the first time he's had more than one made perimeter jumper since the Wildcat win over Nebraska in Kansas City on Dec. 17. This season, he's shooting a lowly 24.6 percent on 3-pointers, but he is still a threat to make them, especially in the eyes of his coach.

"When he gets open looks, I think he's going to make them," Tang said. "He's been working, working at it. We've been showing him film, encouraging him when he turns shots down that we want him to shoot it."

Kansas State also received a positive contribution from David N'Guessan on Wednesday night, especially in the first half where he cashed in on a couple of dunks and layups via assists from a guard. N'Guessan scored nine points, going 4-5 from the field with his only miss being a contested shot in the paint.

In total, six Kansas State players had at least six points on Wednesday night -- Tomlin (19), Johnson (16), Sills (15), Nowell (11), N'Guessan (9), and Carter (7). When Kansas State has had at least six players score six or more points, they are 12-1 on the season with their only loss this season being at Texas Tech when the Wildcats turned the ball over 23 times in the 71-63 defeat.

"It helps our team," Johnson -- the team's leading scorer -- said of role player production. "Seeing different players showcase their skills and gain confidence going into the next game. When you have multiple players and everybody locked in, I mean, this is what we're capable of doing."

Kansas State won on the road at Texas with Carter scoring 17 points vs. the Longhorns.

Ish Massoud scored a season-high 13 points in the overtime win at Baylor in early January. Sills scored a season-high 24 points in the win over Kansas. When K-State beat Baylor for a second time, Carter scored 10 points against the Bears, making 5-of-6 attempts from 2-point range.

"We try to get others involved," Nowell, who is averaging over 7.5 assists a game this season, said. "On any given night it could be any person's night. So, what you see today is start a start. If we can keep playing that love, that joy, that passion, that freedom that coach talks about and keep believing in each other, nights like this can happen more often."

The Wildcats had 1.250 points per possession vs. Oklahoma on Wednesday night and had an adjusted offensive efficiency of 124.1, their fourth-highest rate in a Big 12 game this season, only behind the wins at Texas (159.1) at Baylor (131.0) and the loss at Iowa State (132.0).

"Whether it was pitching ahead, throwing out of the double on the ball screen, or allowing those other guys to make plays," Tang said of his team's offense vs. Oklahoma. "That really helped us. Because other guys were making shots, it opened up a bigger bubble for Desi to be able to

drive downhill and in turn give Markquis an opportunity to play one-on-one, later in the second half."

Kansas State is going to continue to get Johnson and Nowell the most shots -- and that duo is a big reason why Tang believes his team can go far in the NCAA Tournament. But the real key to making it to the second weekend -- or beyond -- could be Kansas State's supporting cast.

"Everybody is going to key in on those guys," Sills said of what opponents do to Johnson and Nowell. "So the other guys have to step up. Trying to stay consistent."

Tykei Greene the latest bench player to give Kansas State basketball a needed lift

Arne Green Topeka Capital-Journal 2.10.23



LUBBOCK, Texas — Jerome Tang was looking for production from his Kansas State bench, and all Tykei Greene wanted was to make a difference.

So after barely seeing the court in the previous two games, Greene showed up at Tang's office last Sunday for a heart-to-heart, making sure his coach knew he was ready and willing to help.

Both of them are glad he did.

Not only did Greene, an explosive 6-foot-4 senior transfer from Stony Brook, give the Tang 21 1/2 solid minutes Tuesday night, but his season-high 13 points and nine rebounds proved to be just what the Wildcats needed as they blew out TCU, 82-61, in Bramlage Coliseum.

"We tell everybody that at some point in time during the season, everybody on the team is going to have an opportunity to help us win a game," Tang said after the victory, which snapped a three-game Big 12 losing streak and pushed the Wildcats into a four-way tie for second place in the Big 12. "And Tykei came to my office and he said, 'Coach, is there anything that I could do to just help us?'"

"He said, Coach, whether you want me to play defense on the other team's best player, not let them touch the ball, whatever it is, I just want to be able to help contribute to our team winning.' All I asked was, I said, 'Just stay ready for me.' Just to stay ready, and if you stay ready, your opportunity's going to come, and tonight his opportunity came, and he was ready."

In fact, Greene wasn't the only backup to help the Wildcats' cause against TCU, a team that beat them soundly, 82-68, in Fort Worth on Jan. 14. With leading scorer Keyontae Johnson in early foul trouble, Desi Sills also came off the bench to contribute 14 points, six rebounds and four assists, while Abayomi Iyiola was solid defensively in the post and grabbed four rebounds.

In all, K-State got 29 points from the bench, something that had been missing of late. The Wildcats (19-5, 7-4 Big 12) will gladly take more of the same Saturday, when they face last-place Texas Tech (12-12, 1-10) in a 6 p.m. game at United Supermarkets Arena.

"It's big-time when we have guys contributing to the scoring load," said Wildcat point guard Markquis Nowell, who snapped out of a mini-slump with 18 points and seven assists in the game. "They're going to key on me and Keyontae for the most part, so when you have guys like Desi and Tykei who can finish and help us out, it's always good."

Greene's performance was especially welcome after he had played just over two minutes total in the two previous games — a pair of losses at Kansas and at home against Texas.

"I went to coach (last Sunday), and I told him I wanted to do whatever it takes to help the team," Greene said. "So he gave me a chance and an opportunity, and I did just that."

Tang, who has been looking for consistent contributions from his bench all season, listened to his super-senior guard, and they're both glad he did.

The challenge for Tang has been finding a spot for Greene, who is listed as a guard, but whose strength and leaping ability allow him to play closer to the basket. That was his role against TCU, where he consistently finished at the rim with several thunderous dunks.

"I think one of the things is, what role will you be happy with?" Tang said. "And the fact that he came in my office and said, 'Coach, I just want to help,' then now you're not worried about what do I need?"

"Because he was a guard at Stony Brook last year, but for us (on Tuesday), he was playing the four (power forward), and he was in a dunker spot — and he does that pretty well by the way. So it's just about buying into your role, and if you do that, then you add value."

Sills, another fifth-year senior transfer, has been more of a factor off the bench than Greene, scoring 24 points in the Wildcats' home victory against Kansas, and reaching double figures in nine other games. But he followed the first Kansas game with four, zero and 1 points before contributing 11 and 14 the last two outings.

"When he's playing downhill, and he's being aggressive, he really helps us," Tang said of Sills. "I think it's just we're trying to figure out some consistency here. It's tough when you get 24 one game, and you get zero the next."

"As a coach, you're like, which Desi am I getting tonight? And I'd rather take the 14 and six rebounds maybe that he had (against TCU). I'll take that Desi every night rather than the 24 and then the zero."

Tang added that he's not alone in seeking consistency, which makes it difficult for the bench players looking to establish their roles. Against TCU, for example, forward Ismael Massoud got just four minutes and did not score after playing at least 14 minutes in each of the first 10 league games.

"I'm sure players want to know they're going to play a certain amount of minutes every night also, and so we have to find that balance," Tang said. "But if we can get the production from Desi and Tykei off the bench like that, it makes us a much better team and harder to guard."