

Shai is only recruit that is “not 5-star”



by Larry Vaught

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander is the only player in Kentucky's 2017 recruiting class who is not a five-star recruit. The Hamilton Heights (Chattanooga, Tenn.) point guard is a four-star but ESPN national recruiting director Paul Biancardi is a fan and thinks he will do well at Kentucky.

“I love him because he is steady. He is a solid, consistent player,” said Biancardi. “He’s a strong athlete, a good open shooter. He does a great job creating shots for others. He’s not an overwhelming athlete, but he’s good enough because he thinks the game. He understands the game, which is huge. He is not blazing fast, but he’s fast enough.”

“I think he and Quade (Green) will make a tremendous backcourt. It won’t be John Wall and Eric Bledsoe or Malik Monk and De’Aaron Fox, but they will complement each other and play well together. He’s the type of guy you will see at Kentucky for a period of time and it would not surprise me to see him end up a NBA draft pick.

“He can lead the team in assists. I like that he can see over traps, over the defense. He can see around defenders and he will shoot it and make shots. He’s going to be a very good player for Kentucky and John Calipari.”

Biancardi says Green has gone from a stocky, scoring guard in Philadelphia when he was younger to a true point guard who is one of the best passers in the country.

“He understands not only how to deliver passes, but how to use his dribble to make passing angles work,” Biancardi said. “His nature was to be a scoring guard. His size made him a point guard. He changed his game the last two years and thought about assists and running his team.

“He did a good job making that radical change but his DNA is to score and his mentality is to put the ball in the basket. He can shoot it. He has to use a pull-up jumper because he has to be careful going to the rim because he is small.

“He is a high level competitor. He understands how to take care of teammates first. He is great to be around, loves the game and really helps a team win. He is a great character guy and

him and Alexander should play well together.”

Likes His Class

Kentucky signee PJ Washington of Findlay Prep likes the 2017 recruiting class that he’s part of but he believes there is more to come as he continues to recruit Mohamed Bamba and Kevin Knox, two of the nation’s top 10 players in the recruiting class.

“I feel like we are close to getting them. I am working on it,” Washington said last week during the Kentucky Lake Showcase in Marshall County.

Knox visited Kentucky when the Cats lost to Kansas, the same weekend Washington was also on campus for an unofficial visit.

“I felt like he liked it. He is talking like he really liked it. I feel like we are in a higher place (with him) than these other schools and we will get him,” Washington said.

Some have speculated that Washington and Jarred Vanderbilt, another signee, are similar players to Knox and there might not be enough playing time for all three.

“I am not even worried about that right now,” Washington said. “I know we are going to play together great. Coach Cal will find the right system for all of us to do great things on the court.”

What does he like best about Bamba?

“Just his wingspan. He blocks everything, rebounds everything. I have been talking to him and trying to get him to UK. Texting, calling, all of it. I want him with us,” Washington said.

But how many five-star players can one team sign in one year?

“I don’t know, but we are trying to get them all,” Washington said.

Ladycats Signee

Kentucky signee Sydney McLaughlin continues to add to her incredible resume. She set an American high school record in the women’s 300-meter hurdles of 36.82 seconds at the Artie O’Connor Invitational at The Armory in New York.

She had hoped to set the record a week earlier at the Millrose Games against a star-studded field that included Olympic gold medalists Shauna Miller and Natasha Hastings.

“That got into my head a little bit and I really didn’t run my race,” McLaughlin, who signed with Kentucky in November, said. “This week I tried to get out and run my race and focus on all the points my coach taught me. From last week until now it was about building confidence. Coming into this race I wanted to mentally prepare myself that I could do this.”

The New Jersey standout competed in the 400-meter hurdles at the 2016 Olym-

pics in Rio and could be the highest profile freshman athlete at UK next season — with no offense to the UK football and basketball teams.

Makayla Epps

Makayla Epps will play her final game in Memorial Coliseum Thursday when Kentucky hosts Mississippi State. She could play again in Lexington if UK makes the Sweet Sixteen since Rupp Arena will be a host site for one NCAA Regional.

Epps has had an illustrious career. Her 1,664 points ranks fifth in UK history and her 389 assists rank eighth all-time.

She has been able to take sophomores Maci Morris and Taylor Murray basically under her wing for two years. Next year they won’t have her with them for the first time.

“They are my babies. I love those kids so much. They have so much potential and I don’t even think they realize it yet,” Epps said. “When Maci went for 29 against Arizona State early this year, I think it finally clicked that that is what you are capable of doing. Ten points, 11 here is good, but you are capable of going off for 29 if that is what you really want to do.

“Same for Taylor Murray. I think the freshman year they gained a lot of experience that helped them.

This year they are both starters and now they are getting more experience. When I leave, they will be fine. They will be juniors and veterans and leaders of the team and I will be able to say that hopefully I had a small part in how they lead this team the next two years.”

Final Home Game

Seniors Derek Willis and Dominique are both rare four-year players under John Calipari, especially when one considers they were both Kentucky high school stars.

Their final home game will be Tuesday when Kentucky hosts Vanderbilt for the traditional senior send-off that will also include Mychal Mulder, a two-year player.

Kentucky fans have certainly enjoyed watching Hawkins and Willis play despite the ups and downs both have had for various reasons. They have also enjoyed being at UK together.

“Derek has definitely been my best friend on this team for four years and playing with him has been unbelievable,” Hawkins said. “We have both seen our bads and our goods while we have been here. Derek is a tremendous player and I love playing with him. It’s going to be hard leaving him. It’s just great to play with somebody like that.

“He’s a great guy. He’s kind of a little shy guy. You



Makayla Epps plays her final UK home game Thursday but she can’t wait to see how Maci Morris and Taylor Murray do without her. (Vicky Graff Photo)

gotta get to know him, but he loves giving back to kids, going to hospitals and visiting them. People don’t realize that about Derek, he’s such a great guy.”

Willis feels the same way about Hawkins. He calls him a “great” teammate, roommate and friend.

“He is one of the greatest kids I have ever met, and I don’t really say that about a lot of people. Just a good dude,” Willis said. “That will be one thing I will really miss when this is over. I will miss being around him and playing with him.”

Their girlfriends never miss a home game and have seen what playing at UK means to both of them. They also hope UK fans understand how proud both players have been to be part of Kentucky’s team.

“I hope the fans remember Dominique’s passion and dedication. He loves this school and he loves this team,” Emma Smith said. “He’s worked so hard the past four years and it shows. You never hear anything negative about Dominique, and there’s a reason for that.

“He is such a well-rounded man and it’s obvious anywhere he goes. Whether he’s in an interview, talking to a fan, or on the court, his passion is apparent. And not

to mention that smile of his! I think everyone will remember how his smile and laugh can bring light to any room that he’s in.”

Willis’ girlfriend, Keely Potts, normally wears a Kentucky jersey with his number and name to games. Smith and Potts are having special T-shirts made for the senior game with pictures of Hawkins and Willis together on them. Both girls also expect to cry during the pregame ceremony.

“I hope all Kentucky fans remember that he truly played the game for them,” Potts said. “He values everything this program, the university, and these fans have to offer, and I hope they know how much this opportunity has meant to him.”

Early Start

Jamin Davis wanted to enroll at UK in January to get an early start on his football workouts.

However, he also had another reason. “I wanted to get my feet wet when it comes to grades and make sure I have my education straight,” said Davis, a linebacker from Georgia.

He plans to major in mechanical engineering, not exactly a typical major for a SEC football player.

Why mechanical engineering?

“That kind of stuff interests me. Math and things like that. I was always interested in doing advanced math,” Davis said. “I always was a fan of airplanes and interested in aerospace and things like that.”

He said keeping up academically had not been a problem so far. “If I need help I can run over to extra tutoring and spend time studying,” he said.

Lochmueller

Eastern Kentucky University athletics director Steve Lochmueller is a former UK basketball and football player. He still keeps an eye on the Wildcats and can only shake his head about the way recruiting

has changed for high profile athletes.

“Back when we were recruited we thought it was crazy and hectic,” Lochmueller said. “We did not have that level of basketball goes year round like it does now.”

“Today these top players go through the same thing with the recruiting attention but it is year round, not just a few months a year. Some will debate whether players today are more talented but they are so, so talented.

“They have to deal with a lot of unique situations. They do not have a second away from anyone with social media like it is now. In my time, we would escape to someone’s house and just watch TV to get away from campus. Now with social media, they can’t do anything without somebody know and people can be very mean on social media.”

Quotes of the Week

Quote of the Week: “If I think you’re playing timid in practice, I’m going to bury you. If you can’t take me, how in the world are you going to go in these games and take the other team? I’m rooting for you. But I’m going to call you out,” Kentucky coach John Calipari said about getting his team back into gear.

Quote of the Week Two: “It has sure brought me to my knees like nothing else ever had. I have been sick every day. It’s the toughest thing I have ever faced, but I have got to do what I have to do,” former Kentucky basketball player Larry Stamper on his battle with cancer.

Quote of the Week Three: “This has been one of the greatest years of my life from a professional standpoint and personal standpoint of learning some lessons that quite frankly I think I needed to learn to become my best coach,” Kentucky women’s coach Matthew Mitchell on this season.



Kentucky signee Sydney McLaughlin set a national high school hurdles record last week. (Myles Gaymon Photo)