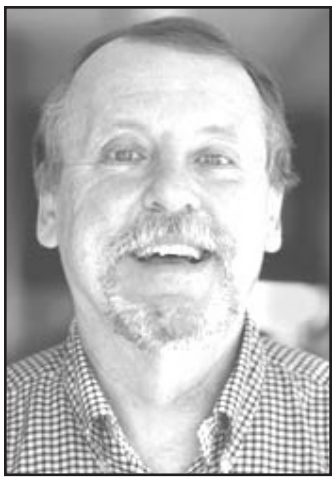


Why hadn't I signed her out of high school?



by Larry Vaught

As soon as Matthew Mitchell saw former Wayne County standout Jessica Hardin play last summer, he wondered why he had not signed her out of high school. Instead, she went to Bellarmine for a year (she hit 52 3-pointers and shot 40 percent from 3-point range as a freshman) before transferring to Kentucky to just be a regular student.

"I definitely went to Bellarmine based on academics," said Hardin, who was the 12th Region Player of the Year as a senior when she averaged 19.6 points and 6.0 rebounds per game and shot 40 percent from 3-point range. "For some reason, it was just not the right place for me and I came to UK and have loved everything about it."

When player defections left Mitchell needing players for his team, he found one in Hardin. The coach said UK's strength coach was immediately impressed with her quick feet and more.

"She's not going to look all-SEC the first month of the season. I think it's going to take some time and we're going to have to be very patient with her. But I've got a strong belief in her," Mitchell said. "She's just fast, quick, tough, tenacious and can shoot. If you're driving the ball and you kick it to her, she can step in and she can make that, and that's going to be valuable on this team. We have got some guards that can break you down, and somebody that can make 3's is valuable."

Hardin has two years of eligibility and has already been put on scholarship by Mitchell, who jokes she is too nice to needle him about not signing her out of high school.

"Now it just seems natural and feels like I should have been here the whole time," Hardin said.

Hardin admits she had interest in coming to UK out of high school, but was happy to go to Bellarmine for academics and basketball there until things didn't work out. She has relatives near UK and that impacted her decision to pick UK when she left Bellarmine.

Being on the UK basketball team has been a big hit in Wayne County. Even

Wayne boys basketball coach Rodney Woods, a former Tennessee basketball player, has let Hardin know he's excited for her.

"Everybody has been talking to me about it. They are super excited and a bunch of them want to come to the games. They are excited to see me play again," she said. "A scholarship is what every parent is looking for, but honestly my parents are probably more excited about just seeing me play. That's all my dad has talked about."

She has gone from being on the Delta Delta Delta (Tri Deltas) sorority team in the intramural league to a scholarship player in the Southeastern Conference. She's even had to adjust to signing autographs for fans.

"The sorority play was not quite as competitive as I would have liked it to be," she said. "I could do pretty much what I wanted. It was fun, but I wanted more competition. We won the championship and I got to meet a lot of girls. They were good but I don't think they thought I was as good as I am because it was just sorority basketball."

Her sorority days are basically over as basketball consumes her time now.

"Being off a couple of years, it has been hard. I just jumped back in, but it was hard to get in shape," she said. "This opportunity just kind of showed up and being back with basketball is the greatest feeling. Coach Mitchell saying all those nice things about me just gives me confidence and makes me feel even more a part of the team."

How Good Is He?

Kentucky fans understand how good freshman running back Benny Snell Jr. has been this year -- but so do others.

Pro Football Focus recently ranked the top 10 freshmen in the county, including four from the Southeastern Conference. Snell was No. 3 while Alabama offensive tackle Jonah Williams was No. 6, Alabama quarterback Jalen Hurts No. 7 and South Carolina quarterback Jake Bentley No. 8.

Snell probably has been UK's biggest surprise this year even though he was ranked among the nation's top running backs in the 2016 recruiting class. However, he was only a three-star player and not expected to be one to break Randall Cobb's record for rushing touchdowns by a freshman or perhaps have a 1,000-yard rushing season despite not getting a carry the first two games.

"I really think the biggest thing is when they do star rankings it is based on what you do at combines and workouts but they do not

give stars on passion and heart for the game. That's what he brings to football. He loves the game and wants to be the best. It's hard to put a ranking on that. He goes as hard as he can and you see the results you get," said Benjamin Snell Sr., the UK freshman's father.

At Westerville Central High School in Ohio, he had 1,826 yards rushing and 264 receiving along with 29 touchdowns as a senior. During his junior season, he ran for 2,077 and 26 scores.

"I knew if he had his opportunity it was going to shine through," Snell Sr. said. "I didn't think it would happen this fast. But I knew once he learned the offense and his line and quarterback, it would just be a matter of time before he could do this."

Football is in the Snell bloodline. Matt Snell rushed for 121 yards and a touchdown in Super Bowl III and was named Super Bowl MVP. One of Matt Snell's cousins is Snell Sr.'s father. Snell Sr. watched film of Matt Snell at Ohio State and became a running back at Ohio Northern who was drafted by the Baltimore Ravens in 1998. He played in NFL Europe and the XFL.

"Football was Benny's main sport from the get-go," his father said. "He played all the sports at age 6-7-8 but he gravitated toward football. Once I was done with my playing career, the timing was perfect for me to coach him in Pee Wee football. We were able to work on a lot of fundamentals and small things over the years."

Now those small things are paying big dividends for UK and Snell even though he did have a fumble inside the 5-yard line in last week's loss at Tennessee that had him visibly upset after the game. He did have 83 yards on 15 carries and now has 854 yards -- second most ever by a UK freshman -- going into Saturday's game with Austin Peay and has a chance to join teammate Boom Williams as 1,000-yard rushers this season.

Isaiah Briscoe

Count ESPN analyst Jay Bilas as one who thinks the experience Isaiah Briscoe got going through NBA workouts before deciding to return to UK for his sophomore season will help him a lot this season.

"Anytime you're a year older and you've been through it, it's really helpful. It just gives you a sharper focus and a lot of times players make their biggest jump in their careers between their freshman and sophomore years. That's not always true, but often times that's true," Bilas said.

"Isaiah's only issue last year -- he had a really good

year. He played really well. Really good defender. He's one of the best guard rebounders in the country. The only thing he didn't do was shoot it. And that impacted his game. Early on, people figured out, he's not going to take these shots and they started laying off him and taking away his drives and clogging everything up for others, kind of daring him to shoot.

"I don't think he'll be doing that quite as much this year. He's improved in that regard. And leadership's going to be a big deal for him, but I expect him to have a really good year."

Hornung Award

Congratulations to Lafayette senior quarterback Walker Wood for being named the Paul Hornung Award winner. Wood, who is committed to Kentucky, will be honored Dec. 20 at Big Spring Country Club by the Louisville Quarterback Club for being chosen as the state's top player.

Recent winners of the award have been Kash Daniel (2015), Damien Harris (2014), Matt Elam (2013), James Quick (2012) and Patrick Towles (2011). The first Hornung winner was Shaun Alexander in 1993.

"Walker Wood fits into the Paul Hornung profile perfectly -- a quarterback and an all-around athlete who racks up impressive running and passing stats each and every game for a top 10 team with a real chance at winning a state championship," Gordon Crawford, Louisville Quarterback Club president, said.

Wood will be playing in the Class 6A state quarterfinals Friday, one reason he says the award is as much about his team as it is him. However, he knows how special the award, named after former Heisman Trophy winner Paul Hornung of Notre Dame, is.

"When my mom told my grandma about the award, she wondered if I knew who he (Hornung) was," Wood said. "She gave me the whole spill about him. My dad's dad, one of his favorite players was Paul Hornung. He's passed away, but he would have thought this was so cool and would love to have met him. That makes this award even more special."

Makayla Epps

How good is Kentucky senior Makayla Epps? Let Miami (Fla.) coach Katie Meir tell you after watching Epps score 29 points against her team.

"I saw her over there I thought she was cramping up a little bit, we cut it to



DeAaron Fox admits his hair draws a lot of attention, but freshman teammate Bam Adebayo thinks Fox just doesn't want to spend his own money to get a haircut. (Vicky Graff Photo)

3 and I was like look at the poor girl and then she just blistered us. She's tough as nails and that's not a surprise either," Meir said. "I had some real compliments for her in the handshake line and she was really, really tough."

"Her strength was a big difference and getting her downhill one on one and some of her and-ones, even in the first half they didn't go in, but she was generating a lot of fouls on us so she's a very good player. Very, very good."

Kentucky Seniors

Kentucky seniors Dominique Hawkins and Derek Willis have roomed together all four years they have played for coach John Calipari and the two in-state players have been fan favorites every year. However, they really are the true odd couple.

"He is actually the most organized guy on the team," Hawkins said. "We have been in the same room every year. I remember leaving all my clothes on the ground and he comes in and cleans up my mess. Him doing that made me want to be more organized and has kept me that way."

Willis doesn't deny Hawkins description of how he likes things organized.

"I like things neat. I know it is just weird, but it is kind of good to keep organized. I just like it that way and Dom doesn't mind putting up with me," Willis said.

Three Hairstyles

Here's one more interesting -- or some may have another word for it -- insight into the UK basketball program.

Freshman point guard De'Aaron Fox has had three hairstyles in the last year from braids to a ponytail.

He says his current hairstyle does not show "how much hair I really have" but this is the style he'll have 95 percent of the time.

"I always had mom do my hair at home, but I've had to find somebody else here," Fox said. "I won't say girls like it, but a lot of them do. Sometimes people even ask me if they can touch my hair, which is kind of funny."

Freshman Bam Adebayo says Fox is the "goofiest guy on the team" because of his personality toward anything, including his hair.

"We could be hungry and stranded in the middle of nowhere and he would just start laughing at you for no reason," Adebayo said. "He's crazy about his hair. I have seen it short and stubby. I've seen him with a headband and ponytail."

Adebayo has his own theory on why Fox won't change his hairstyle now.

"I personally just don't think he likes to spend his own money to get it cut," Adebayo said.

Anything goofy about him?

"I used to eat gummies in the eighth grade but not now. Does that count?" he laughed and said.

Again, the main point here is to show how well this team gets along. The players can laugh with or at each other and when a team this talented also has that kind of chemistry, it usually makes for a special season.

Thank You

Also thanks to publisher Chris Evans of the Crittenden Press in Marion for joining those taking this column. As always, you can reach me at larryvau@gmail.com or on Twitter @vaughtsviews with any comments, column ideas or questions.



Jessica Hardin has gone from a star in the UK sorority league to a scholarship player for coach Matthew Mitchell. (Vicky Graff Photo)

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