



2020-21 DUKE BASKETBALL
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If Duke is to make a run to NCAA tourney, Mark Williams just showed how to do it

By Luke DeCock, Raleigh News & Observer (March 10, 2021)

GREENSBORO - At this point, after a season of false dawns, far be it from anyone to claim, presume, surmise or otherwise deduce that Duke has turned some kind of a corner. One can only fall into that trap so many times.

But, just for sake of argument, if Duke were going to pull off the improbable five-in-five at the ACC tournament, or at the least win enough to actually make a legitimate case for the NCAA tournament, the way Duke has played so far in Greensboro is how Duke would have to play to make it happen.

"So far" is doing a lot of heavy lifting there, with Florida State looming in Thursday's quarterfinals, but Tuesday night's win over Boston College and Wednesday's 70-56 win over Louisville had a lot in common, starting with the continuing emergence of freshman big man Mark Williams as an unstoppable force and on down the line.

With Matthew Hurt making some unlikely shots from uncertain positions and the freshman backcourt of DJ Steward and Jeremy Roach showing considerable defensive improvement, the things Duke needed to fall into place are falling into place.

There was a lot of back and forth in Wednesday's first half – a 12-0 Duke run followed by an 16-0 Louisville run followed by a 12-0 Duke run that spilled into the second half – but the Blue Devils took firm control after that. Williams was a huge part of that, dominating the paint and breaking Ralph Sampson's ACC tournament record for rebounds by a freshman with 19 to go with 23 points.

"He only had one rebound (Tuesday), so he's averaging 10 a game," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "Keep his ego in check."

Williams didn't play in the first game at Louisville and had eight points and six rebounds in the home overtime loss to the Cardinals two weeks ago. In a sense, Williams' progression mirrors Duke's.

"Today I got to show a little bit of what I could do," Williams said.

In some ways, so did the Blue Devils. Their defense, at times, was smothering, denying Louisville any penetration and blocking the Cardinals to the perimeter. Roach in particular looks more comfortable on both sides of the ball. And if Williams has made leaps and bounds over the past four weeks, so has Duke in the four days since they were blown off the court at North Carolina.

That wasn't the first time this season Duke was written off. This isn't the first time Duke has turned around and raised hopes again.

If that was a team out of mental gas after back-to-back overtime losses, this is a team that seems to be tapping new reserves of confidence. Is it enough to shore up a shaky NCAA tournament resume? Is it enough to put together a historic run in Greensboro, four years after Duke became the first team to win four games in four days in Brooklyn? Only time will tell.

Either or both seemed unlikely a few days ago, and now both suddenly seem somewhere within the realm of possibility. In the absence of any great pronouncements about whether Duke is back or not, that will have to suffice.

Mark Williams is quiet, but his game is plenty loud in win over Louisville

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (March 10, 2021)

GREENSBORO, N.C. – If he wanted, Mark Williams could be one hell of a trash talker. Between the behemoth blocks, the demonstrative dunks, the glass-clearing rebounds, there's plenty of low-hanging fruit for him to get hyped about. Like, a lot.

But Williams, the biggest guy on Duke's roster, also has the smallest penchant for being loud. Rather than stare down his "subjects" – in other words, those unlucky enough to get in the 7-footer's way – Williams keeps his mouth shut. He runs back on defense. Then he does it all over again.

So consider all that and then contrast it with the moment Williams did flex his emotional muscle, in the waning minutes of Duke's 70-56 win over Louisville on Wednesday in the second round of the ACC tournament. After blowing a 14-point first-half lead, the Blue Devils stormed back after halftime and maintained a healthy cushion throughout the second half. Then, with about four minutes to play and Duke up 10, Jordan Goldwire attempted a 3-pointer than banked out. Williams was there to grab the offensive rebound – one of his seven on the night – and threw down a resounding dunk.

Then something unique happened: Williams screamed, tilting his head back and letting out the sort of exuberant roar that had yet to be seen from Duke's emerging star.

"Just expressing some emotion," Williams said afterward, flashing a toothy grin. "We lost to that team twice in the regular season, and that feeling hurt. To come out today and play the way that we did, it was fun."

Fun, indeed, especially if you're Williams. What else would you call recording a game-high 23 points and 19 rebounds? Obscene, maybe. Williams set an ACC tournament freshman record for boards in a game. The guy he surpassed? Oh, only Ralph Sampson.

"Look, Mark was fabulous, not good," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "He only had one rebound yesterday, so he's averaging 10 a game. Just to keep his ego in check."

If being mentioned in the same breath as Sampson doesn't get the point across, consider the rest of Williams' staggering growth. He entered Duke as a five-star prospect out of highly regarded IMG Academy, so he was hardly an afterthought. But after barely seeing the floor over the first two months of the season – Krzyzewski started him in December against Illinois, only to immediately yank him – it's almost difficult to accept this is the same player. Early mornings and late nights with associate head coach Nate James, though, have clearly paid off. James' reputation as a big-man whisperer is well known, from Marvin Bagley III to Zion Williamson to Vernon Carey Jr.; Williams is just his latest project.

But since Duke's mid-February rout of NC State in Raleigh – coincidentally, the last game Jalen Johnson played in – Williams has been on quite the ascent. In six of the nine games since, including Wednesday, he has scored in double-digits and been the rim protector holding the defense together. "He was going up against a really good other big – I think it was (Manny) Bates, and he did a great job on him," sophomore forward Matthew Hurt said of Williams' performance against the Wolfpack. "All that confidence he'd been doing at practice, and since the NC State game, I've really seen him take off, and I'm just so proud of him." And, if you thought the dunk at the end was special, you should've seen the way he sucked up defensive rebounds, like a human basketball vacuum.

"Those defensive rebounds in the last eight, 10 minutes," Krzyzewski said, "were the deciding factor in the game, really."

They were, for a multitude of reasons. One, it allowed Duke to catch its breath. Now two games into a quest to win five straight – which has never been done in ACC tournament history – every extra breath matters. So saving a bit of energy, not that Williams could really afford to, should pay dividends on Thursday against Florida State, in a quarterfinal game that is vital to the Blue Devils' resurgent NCAA Tournament hopes. Secondly, those defensive boards allowed Duke to get into its offensive sets. They weren't always pristine, but for the second consecutive night, the Blue Devils bombed away from 3 – and didn't completely brick. Six makes might not sound ideal, until you put it in the context of just 15 attempts. Krzyzewski would like both totals to be higher, but that dog'll still hunt.

Also, with Williams playing the way he did, the need for a perimeter-oriented offense was diminished. Louisville was playing without Malik Williams and had no real match for the man with a 7-foot-5 wingspan. Not that many teams have an answer for that.

Now, the 32 minutes Williams played certainly would have been felt on the team's hour-long drive back to Durham. (Duke has opted not to stay in Greensboro, instead doubling down on its COVID-19 precautions and keeping players in their rooms at the on-campus Washington Duke Inn.) He said he felt "all right" in the immediate aftermath, but there are a lot of places in his frame for Williams to feel aches and pains. He'll almost certainly spend more time in the cold tub and stretching than he will on the game plan for the Seminoles.

That, though, is what the Blue Devils need from him. Think back to that last dunk, to Williams winding up and unleashing a roar. For him to express himself on the court, in the middle of a basketball game, tells you all you need to know about where this Duke team is, knee-deep in its never-accomplished five-in-five journey. So if Williams needs ice on his knees instead of time on his feet, so be it. There isn't a viable path for this team to keep winning without him. If the shattering of Sampson's record wasn't a giveaway, then his performance in three games against Louisville should be.

In the first meeting, Williams didn't play. Duke lost. The second time, he had eight points, his fewest in the last six games. Duke lost again. You already know the numbers he put up on Wednesday.

Sometimes, it is that simple.

For an encore, Williams will hardly get a walk in the park. Florida State, the No. 2 seed in this event, practically plucks giants off the trees in Tallahassee. Per KenPom.com, the Seminoles have the tallest average height – 79.6 inches, or just over 6-6 – of any team in college basketball. That is a far cry from Louisville.

But Williams is also a far cry from any other player the Seminoles have seen, even if he remains a work in progress. He's still learning, still growing and still perfecting his craft. If one was to pick nits, his 5-of-9 free throw shooting would be an apt place to start.

Yet at the same time, Sampson. That dunk. And most important, a Duke win.

How much longer Williams can keep up this pace is impossible to say. But he has wide shoulders and a long back, plenty large enough to carry his share of the load.

"He's special," Krzyzewski said, "and he was special tonight. No question about it."

Should Matthew Hurt and other Duke Blue Devils return or go to the NBA?

By Brendan Marks and Sam Vecenie, The Athletic (March 9, 2021)

If national college basketball broadcasts have taught us one thing, it's that the people love their premature NBA Draft talk.

Only, is it really so premature? With March Madness on the horizon and the regular season having wrapped up, we're not that far out from the end of several teams' seasons. And while the NCAA Tournament bubble is certainly crowded – arguably as congested as it has been in years – we know not every team can get in. That means a lot of programs doing a lot of sweating it out down the stretch, including, for once, the Duke Blue Devils.

Saying this season hasn't gone according to plan for Mike Krzyzewski's team is an understatement. Duke has made 24 consecutive NCAA Tournament trips, and with the talent on this roster, making it 25 shouldn't have been an issue. But a number of close early-season losses, coupled with the departure of top freshman Jalen Johnson, has the Blue Devils sitting at 11-11 overall in early March, their postseason plans very much in doubt.

Regardless, this is a team that'll look much different next season. Only two players on the roster are seniors, but several other underclassmen will have NBA decisions to make. To sort through those choices – as well as where each prospect stands in the mind of NBA evaluators – The Athletic paired Duke beat writer Brendan Marks with NBA draft expert Sam Vecenie.

Matthew Hurt

Vitals: 6-9 sophomore forward, 20 years old

Stats: 18.7 ppg, 6.1 rpg, 1.4 apg, 56% FG, 43.7% 3PT, 71% FT, 32.8 mpg

Marks: I love Matthew Hurt's game. I don't think he's the next Christian Laettner, as some ridiculous radio hosts have suggested, but he has that Dirk Nowitzki inside-out style – and I'm a sucker for it. But the growth Hurt has shown to become that player, after a so-so freshman season, is impressive. It's obvious Hurt put in the work last summer to make himself better. He added about 25 pounds, which has helped him bang down low with the ACC's more physical forwards, without looking like he's stuck in mud. If anything, he has improved his foot speed and quickness too (although that remains a work in progress).

But my fascination with Hurt's game is the same thing that fascinates the NBA: his shot-making. As a five-star prospect coming into college, Hurt was advertised as a sharpshooter. And as a freshman he was better than good. He made 39.3 percent of his 3s on 3.5 attempts per night, and he did so playing only about 20 minutes. But over the summer, Hurt drilled in on speeding up his release and getting to his spots – and the results have been overwhelming. It's not an exaggeration to say he almost single-handedly has kept Duke's season alive at times. He has been that good.

I believe Hurt can be a 40-plus percent 3-point shooter, and with a 6-9 frame, that's invaluable in today's NBA. That skill alone could earn Hurt a lot of money. Now, there are concerns. For as great as he is at scoring, he doesn't create a ton for others as a passer, and he has a way to go on defense. Those limitations will probably push him to the back of the first round or early second. But he's a proven worker, selfless, and again, a walking bucket. I'll bet on him continuing to improve, although his shot-making is something every team will look for.

Hurt doesn't have much left to prove at the college level, while there is some downside to him returning. The Blue Devils' frontcourt will be loaded next season, given its incoming recruits, and he won't be in nearly as featured a role. Hurt's journey is one the Duke staff will surely use in its recruiting efforts, as it tries to straddle the line between one-and-done talent and building a longer-term base of experience. Go or stay: Go

Vecenie: First and foremost, I have an immense amount of respect for how Hurt has attacked his sophomore season. Remember, he was a consensus top-10 recruit, a five-star prospect who was expected to be a one-and-done. But things didn't go his way last year. He looked weak and couldn't play through any sort of contact. He had all sorts of issues establishing position. He was nowhere near ready to play professionally. And in that vein, it can be difficult for kids who don't live up to the weight of immediate expectations placed upon them. They're unfairly labeled "disappointments" or "busts." Some kids lose their confidence and never get it back. But he fought through it and added the necessary strength and mindset. He battled through an adverse circumstance for the first time, and came out on the other side an immensely better player who is in the running to win the ACC player of the year award. That says a lot to NBA evaluators.

The key skill with Hurt is his shot-making. He is one of the top shot-makers in all of college basketball. Before the season finale against UNC, he was averaging more than 19 points per game on an obscene 67.5 true-shooting percentage. Since the 2001-02 season, he's one of 11 players to have played at least 20 games and posted those numbers, along with Corey Kispert, Zion Williamson, Obi Toppin, Dylan Windler, Doug McDermott and a few others who are a who's who of elite-level athletes or shooters. The crazy thing? A ton of Hurt's offense is self-created because the guards often aren't able to get him the ball in positive situations.

The big question: What else does he do? Hurt has been a poor defender this season. For example, even though he dropped 37 on Louisville and was the reason Duke stayed in the game offensively, he was also a significant reason why the Blue Devils struggled to guard Louisville in ball-screen coverages as the Cardinals attacked him relentlessly. Additionally, Hurt has not shown much in terms of passing or playmaking ability. He rarely sees teammates who get open or makes passes that put pressure on the defense. He's looking to score, or make escape passes. Basically, Hurt needs to improve in at least one of those areas (most likely the passing). And even then, the question at the NBA level will still be, "Does his offense outweigh his defense?"

There isn't much else he can prove as a scorer. NBA teams see him as being about a top-40 pick. He'll have a chance to go in the first round, especially if he can play a big role in leading the Blue Devils back from the brink of missing the NCAA Tournament. He has an opportunity over the next two weeks to help himself. Regardless, his time to bounce is now. Go or stay: Go

DJ Steward

Age: 19

Vitals: 6-2 freshman guard

Stats: 13 ppg, 3.9 rpg, 2.4 apg, 1.1 spg, 42.9% FG, 34.2% 3PT, 81.1% FT, 30.9 mpg

Marks: DJ Steward is a scorer, plain and simple. When he's hot – as he was in his first game, when he dropped 24 points off the bench – it's hard to keep him from impacting games. Between his 3-point shot, his midrange game and floaters, and his crafty finishes near the rim, there's a lot to like. He's not afraid of contact, and he usually has the right mix of aggressiveness without playing out of control. He's also underrated as a rebounder, especially for a player who's only 163 pounds.

That said, Steward still needs to make a lot of progress. Namely, the guy needs to work on his body. He's just too small to adequately defend more physical guards, and offensively he can get knocked back by defenders of the same ilk. He also has been inconsistent, especially of late, shooting about 36 percent from the floor and 29 percent from 3 over Duke's last five games. How much of that is pandemic-related fatigue or just the insane nature of this season, it's tough to tell. But it's not like he has been efficient every game.

One last thing about Steward that can't be discounted: He's a remarkable human being. He's insightful and has an infectious positive energy, a sociable personality and a killer smile. And as a player, there's a lot to like too. He could just use a bit more seasoning.

I have no idea what Steward is going to do. He'd probably be drafted if he declared, just based on his scoring skills, but I have to think the Duke staff is selling him on Hurt's journey: Take the summer, get your body where it needs to be, focus on a few elements of your game – refine the 3-point stroke, for example – and show out as a sophomore. Again, Duke is going to be loaded in the frontcourt next season, but Steward would have a massive opportunity to succeed as the go-to shooter. Plus, playing alongside the elite talent Duke has coming in will only make his life easier (and make him look better). Go or stay: Stay

Vecenie: I liked Steward a lot coming into the year. I was a huge fan of his shot-making ability from distance and the swagger and confidence he played with at lower levels. I had him as a top-20 guy on my initial mock draft.

Unfortunately, that hasn't borne itself out consistently enough. Like many skinny freshmen around the country, I think he was hindered by not getting a full offseason to work on his frame, add weight and get accustomed to the physicality of college hoops. He's extremely skinny. He struggles to play through contact. Defensively, he struggles to guard because of his lack of experience and strength. On offense, the contact issue bears itself out largely as a ball-handler. If his momentum gets stopped, he gets slowed down, then doesn't have the ability to adjust to get into the lane a different way. Additionally, he's not where he needs to be as a shooter. He has only hit 32 percent of his shots off the catch, a number that needs to be closer to 40 percent if he's going to make it at the next level at his size.

Yet there are moments when his shotmaker skill set shines through. He can knock down shots off the bounce going around screens. If you get him flying to the rim in a straight line, he's a pretty awesome finisher with great touch. He's extremely gifted as a scorer, he just needs a bit more polish and strength to round out his game.

Duke is probably going to help Steward with the things he needs to improve upon more than going pro would. Steward needs to get stronger. Duke's facilities are going to be better for him in that regard than any G League facility would be, the league in which he'd likely be spending a majority of his time next season. He'd also be leaving at a point where his career most likely would be harder to get off the ground. No NBA evaluator I've spoken with has a first-round grade on Steward, despite those flashes of talent. So he'd probably be a second-round pick, which means depending on where he lands (assuming he gets picked), he wouldn't necessarily have a lot of organizational investment into his future. If he returns, makes the right strides in

Should Matthew Hurt and other Duke Blue Devils return or go to the NBA? (cont.)

By Brendan Marks and Sam Vecenie, The Athletic (March 9, 2021)

his game, continues to add some passing ability and keeps improving his scoring consistency, he has a pathway to be a first-round pick in 2022. That seems like a better road for Steward and his career. Go or stay: Stay

Wendell Moore Jr.

Age: 19

Vitals: 6-5 sophomore guard

Stats: 9.8 ppg, 4.7 rpg, 2.5 apg, 1.1 spg, 41.8% FG, 28.4% 3PT, 83.3% FT, 27.5 mpg

Marks: As someone from North Carolina, I've been hearing about Wendell Moore since he was in high school; he was that hyped. And despite a pretty rough start to the season, he has come on strong of late. He has done that by playing his role and within his talents, rather than trying to be something he's not. That meant playing solid defense, moving without the ball and making smart cuts, operating as a secondary ball-handler when advantageous, and taking available 3s. Early on, Moore tried to establish himself as a scorer, but with lackluster results. Over the last month, though, he has been as instrumental to Duke's turnaround as anyone outside of Hurt.

A lot of Moore's future success – whether at Duke or at the next level – hinges on the mental side of things. He's in great shape, works his tail off and has shown he can thrive in a secondary role. But not getting in his own head is critical for him to take the next step. Of course, there are basketball things too – refining his handle and 3-point shot top the list – but I'd bet on a guy with his work ethic and character. On a team without any veteran leaders, Moore has stepped up, answering tough postgame questions after losses and being more vocal on the floor. The thought was he'd build on a strong ending to his freshman year this season, but now it looks like that breakout will be another year delayed.

Moore would probably have some sort of professional opportunity if he left after this season, but not the NBA path he could have if he shows out as a junior. He loves Duke and seems committed to continuing to get better. Also, this is a dude who'll probably be going into his third year at Duke without ever having played in the NCAA Tournament. If he goes back, he can be the leader on a loaded team – and that usually bodes well for the next level. Go or stay: Stay

Vecenie: I want to give Moore credit where it's due for fighting through what had to be one of the worst starts to a season I've seen an NBA prospect have. Through his first 11 games, Moore averaged about seven points, and he scored under five points in seven of those games. He shot 38 percent from 2-point range, and under 28 percent from 3. He looked like he had no confidence, and I was worried where his career was going to go. Over the last month, though, he has started to play better.

Having said that, this shouldn't really be a conversation, even as someone who liked Moore a lot coming into his time at Duke as a 6-foot-5 wing with a 6-foot-11 wingspan and creativity as a ball-handler at lower levels. He has two glaring weaknesses. First and foremost, he's not up to NBA standards as an athlete. He has little explosiveness, and he seems to have somewhat heavy feet. Second, he's still just not a good enough shooter, having made only 26.6 percent from 3 in his career.

Moore is renowned as a great kid who works hard. Everyone is rooting for him to have success. Hopefully, his junior year brings that. Unfortunately, his sophomore year did not. I do not think he would be selected in the NBA Draft. He's young enough to go back and keep working on his skill set. Go or stay: Stay

Everyone else

Outside of those three, Duke has several longer-term prospects whom NBA decision-makers are keeping an eye on. That quartet of freshmen – Jeremy Roach, Jaemyn Brakefield, Mark Williams, and Henry Coleman – won't be targets in this year's class, but all four have potential. Of those four, whom do you feel strongest about? Or maybe a better way to phrase it: Who intrigues you most as a long-term option?

Marks: There's a lot of like about all four. Roach is a savvy guard with serious defensive upside. Coleman is a versatile big who can realistically defend four positions; plus, he's smart, well-liked in the locker room and has some sneaky athleticism. Williams' emergence after Jalen Johnson's departure has saved Duke's season. He's already a difference-making rim protector, with a developing offensive game that very well may include some range. I thought about picking him. But at the end of the day, I'll go with Brakefield for a variety of reasons.

One, he's a lefty, which is fun and weird but also I think helps at the next level. As he showed late in the game against Virginia, if you're not familiar with that aspect of his game, he can catch you off guard. Much more important, he's a 6-8 forward with an impactful 3-point shot. He plays with a lot of energy, and his teammates feed off of that. He's a better defender than he gets credit for too; he has good instincts and knows how to be effective without fouling. Guys like that – versatile forwards who can defend and knock down 3s – are where the NBA is headed.

Vecenie: If you asked four evaluators this question, you'd probably get four different answers.

All of them have potential to be NBA players with some growth in their games. Brakefield is 6-8 with a good-looking jumper and solid defensive instincts. His issue is that he's not the best athlete, which limits his upside. If we're talking purely about the guy with the highest upside, that would be Williams or Coleman. I'm fascinated with Coleman, a real athlete who has showcased some shot creation at lower levels. I know NBA evaluators who thought Coleman was one of the most underrated recruits in the 2020 class. I've been surprised Duke hasn't tried to use him more. But Williams has long been considered a high-upside, rim-running, rim-protecting big because of his shot-blocking prowess. Over the last month, he's starting to actualize the potential evaluators have long seen in his 7-foot frame with ridiculous length. I think Williams is the best mix of production and upside, so I'd go with him.

Having said that, the frontcourt will be intriguing next year, with the addition of Paolo Banchemo. He is a future lottery pick, and he'll get something in the ballpark of 30 minutes per night at the four and the five. How many minutes will be there for Williams, Brakefield and Coleman? You can play Brakefield at the three a bit, but five-star recruit A.J. Griffin will also get minutes there. That's a good problem for Duke to have, but I wonder what happens to some of these kids.

One positive spot in Duke's basketball season? The 'sensational' Mark Williams.

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (March 5, 2021)

A month ago, Mike Krzyzewski saw into the future.

His Duke Blue Devils lost 91-87 to rival North Carolina at Cameron Indoor Stadium on Feb. 6.

Krzyzewski had 7-0 freshman center Mark Williams in Duke's starting lineup but only played him for 15 minutes against UNC's cadre of big men.

"It was so physical inside, and he was not ready for that level," Krzyzewski said of his young center. "He will be."

Since then, slowly but surely, Williams has done just what his coach predicted.

Over Duke's last three games, Williams has played 28.6 minutes per game, averaging 15.1 points, eight rebounds and 2.9 blocked shots.

On Tuesday night, when Duke lost 81-77 in overtime at Georgia Tech, Williams saw his most extensive playing time of the season facing Moses Wright, the Yellow Jackets' veteran 6-9 center.

Williams scored 20 points, hitting all nine of his shots, with seven rebounds, three blocked shots and three steals.

Krzyzewski called his performance -- in 35 minutes of play before he fouled out -- "sensational."

And that brings us back to Duke preparing to face UNC a second time.

On Saturday night at the Smith Center, the Blue Devils and Tar Heels will face off in the regular-season finale.

This time, his recent play shows, Williams appears far more mentally and physically prepared to play against UNC's frontcourt featuring 6-11, 265-pound freshman Day'Ron Sharpe, 6-10, 240-pound sophomore Armando Bacot, 6-10, 240-pound senior Garrison Brooks and 7-1, 245-pound freshman Walker Kessler.

"He's obviously more ready, by far, than he was," Krzyzewski said, "and that was just a few weeks ago."

WILLIAMS IN THE STARTING LINEUP

He got there by working hard with assistant coach Nate James away from games and learning on the fly during them. It hasn't always been easy.

Though Williams started the Feb. 6 game with UNC and remained in the starting lineup for every game since then, his production has wavered.

Playing against ACC blocked shots leader N.C. State's Manny Bates on Feb. 13, Williams scored 13 points with five blocked shots, but also five turnovers, as Duke beat the Wolfpack 69-53.

A week later, Williams didn't have a point or a rebound while playing only seven minutes in Duke's 66-65 win over Virginia. Jay Huff, the Cavaliers' 7-1 redshirt senior center, had skills Krzyzewski didn't think Williams was ready to handle.

In the three games since then, though, Williams has become the inside force Duke needs to give them offense when jump shots aren't falling.

"Every game it seems like Mark continues to get better," Duke sophomore forward Wendell Moore said. "That's what we need, especially from him. He's a big piece for what we do. When he gets going we have a really good chance of beating anyone in the country."

NOT COMMITTING FRESHMAN FOULS

Of course, Williams' play isn't perfect. He did foul out of the Georgia Tech game in overtime.

He has to make sure that's not an issue against all those UNC big men. And that's a real concern.

"Now he's got to stay in the game by not committing freshmen fouls," Krzyzewski said. "In trying to battle, you've got to use your body, not your hands and your forearms, you know, the way to legally defend in the post."

It takes some big men a season or two to hone those skills. Williams is getting there, perhaps faster than anyone thought he could.

As a whole, the season has not gone well for Duke, especially compared to the program's storied history. The Blue Devils (11-10, 9-8 ACC) are in grave danger of missing the NCAA tournament for the first time since 1995.

Beating UNC would be a step toward fixing that but it wouldn't be nearly enough. Duke also would have to win multiple games at the ACC tournament in Greensboro next week, perhaps only getting in the NCAA tournament by winning the championship and accompanying automatic bid.

But amid all the ups and downs this season, having young players like Williams develop provides some solace.

"I think one of the real big pluses of the season is his development," Krzyzewski said. "He's going to be a real special player."

Duke's 'year of almost' continues in heartbreaking fashion vs. Georgia Tech

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (March 2, 2021)

If the basketball gods do exist, then you're damn right Mike Krzyzewski believes in them.

How could he not? Krzyzewski, after all, has benefited as much from their grace as arguably anyone else in the century-old history of college basketball. Krzyzewski's Duke teams have won five national titles, been to 24 consecutive NCAA Tournaments, sent countless players to the NBA, where their stars (and bank accounts) have only further exploded. And yet ...

"Over the years, we've been very fortunate," Krzyzewski said after his team's second straight overtime loss, this one an 81-77 heartbreaker to Georgia Tech. "So I don't know if the basketball gods are evening things up a little bit."

It's as good an explanation as any. Duke had ample chances Tuesday night to win, both at the end of regulation and in overtime, but no divine intervention came. In regulation, Jordan Goldwire drove the length of the floor with under six seconds left, made a pinpoint cross-court pass to Jaemyn Brakefield in the right corner ... and he missed. And in overtime, after a furious late comeback, DJ Steward had another wipe-open 3 that would've tied the score with two seconds remaining – only, he missed, too. Duke fell to 11-10, slipping off the NCAA Tournament bubble and into the less-than-ideal company of the program's leaner years.

Not exactly how the basketball gods have usually rewarded the boys in blue.

"It's been a year of almost," Krzyzewski added.

But if we're being honest, then there's no pinning this loss – or this season, mind you – on anything mythical or made-up. It's all there. It's well-documented. The fourth-least experienced team in all of college hoops, per KenPom, Duke's inconsistency all season has been its lone constant. One game, the Blue Devils upset tournament-bound Clemson, only to turn around and give away a game to Miami on the road. And more recently, after a four-game winning streak that pushed this club to the brink of the postseason, now two overtime losses have quelled that momentum. The loss to Louisville made any postseason path more perilous, but at least it was still flickering alive. Now? Well, Duke gets the unenviable task of trying to win (likely) four games in four days to punch the ACC's automatic bid.

Watching this team as of Tuesday, though, it's near-impossible to see that playing out.

This is not to say Duke's season has been entirely rotten. Not hardly. There are real, tangible positives to take from this campaign. Matthew Hurt, for example, has blossomed into one of college basketball's best scorers, a 6-foot-9 sharpshooter whose moves would make Dirk Nowitzki grin. And Wendell Moore, after a slow start to the season, has finally rounded into the do-everything weapon Duke needs him to be; on Tuesday, he tied his career high for points in a half with 16, before finishing with a 20-point, eight-rebound and three-assist line that will undoubtedly intrigue NBA evaluators.

Then there's the entire freshman class, many of whom will be back for more substantial sophomore seasons. Atop that bunch of promising youngsters? For seemingly the sixth or seventh consecutive game, freshman center Mark Williams. He had his latest "best game yet" against Georgia Tech courtesy of a career-high 20 points in a career-high 35 minutes. And in going toe-to-toe with Tech senior Moses Wright – a likely All-ACC forward who led the Yellow Jackets in both scoring and rebounding – Williams earned lofty praise from his head coach. "I think one of the real pluses of this season," Krzyzewski said of Williams, "has been his development. He's going to be a real special player."

Now, here's the issue: Williams, at least against the Yellow Jackets, was the only dependable freshman at Krzyzewski's disposal. Starting guards Jeremy Roach and DJ Steward combined for 11 points on 3-of-11 shooting ... plus six turnovers against three assists. Brakefield, the X-factor against Virginia, went just 1-for-8, missing each of his four 3-pointers. Then there's Henry Coleman, who had one rebound in one minute of action. The sixth member of Duke's freshman class, Jalen Johnson, was never expected to return for a second season but opted out of this one midway through February.

All six had their moments this season – just not all at the same time, and not for any extended period. If there's even a little more overlap, one or two who, at any given time, were playing with confidence and consistency, maybe we're talking about Duke barely making the tournament instead of barely missing it. But by now, this team's NCAA hopes were the same as its margin for error: razor-thin.

"We definitely knew the stakes of the game. Definitely was aware of the situation. We had the mentality that we had to win, and unfortunately, that didn't happen. All we can do now is focus on what we have left."

Disappointed as Duke is, its season is not over. There's still the regular-season finale against North Carolina, where the Blue Devils can play spoiler to a UNC team similarly on the brink (but for now, the right side of it). And then the ACC tournament, which – honestly – who knows what to expect? Hours before Duke and Georgia Tech tipped off, the conference announced Virginia Tech's game against Louisville was canceled due to COVID-19 precautions with the Hokies. Will VT, or every team, even make it to Greensboro? And what's left for those that do? With the conference as wide open as it has been in recent memory, there are worse years Duke could have picked to need a ridiculous run. The odds aren't great, or even good, but they're technically there.

So in this next week and a half, Duke has two options. It can accept the basketball gods' fate, accept that that special postseason streak will end, and walk calmly into the summer. Or, it can fight. It can kick and squirm and scream, display as much energy as it lacked at times on Tuesday. It can continue perfecting its ball-screen defense and teach those freshmen what's a good shot or a great one. It can, quite simply, do what Duke would do in any other year.

"We're gonna keep fighting," Krzyzewski said, "and see what the heck happens."

That's what faith in the basketball gods sounds like. In a week and a half's time, we'll know if that faith is rewarded.

Jordan Goldwire says it would mean ‘everything’ to play in NCAA Tournament

By Adam Zagoria, ZagsBlog.com (February 26, 2021)

Jordan Goldwire has already played in the NCAA Tournament twice during his four years at Duke. And he would have played in a third Big Dance last season had the tournament not been canceled by the pandemic.

Now with his senior season coming to a close, and Duke firmly entrenched on the bubble, Goldwire wants to help the Blue Devils make a push for one last March Madness run.

“To play in the [NCAA] Tournament, it would mean everything,” Goldwire, a Norcross, Ga. native, said Thursday on a Zoom call in response to my question. “That’s what you grow up watching, I’ve obviously had a little taste of it going to the Elite Eight twice and then last year it getting cut short. But being able to play in it, that means a lot.

“If we don’t get to play in it, it’s devastating, terrible. Terrible feeling if we don’t make it.”

Entering Saturday’s home finale against Louisville at Cameron Indoor Stadium, Duke (11-8, 9-6 ACC) has won four straight, including back-to-back wins over No. 7 Virginia and a blowout of Syracuse.

The Blue Devils are on the bubble, with ESPN’s Joe Lunardi listing them among the “Next Four Out” as of Friday morning. They will need to close strong in their final three games – Louisville, at Georgia Tech and at North Carolina – and then probably make a run in the ACC Tournament to make the 68-team field.

“I definitely think we have a team that’s capable of winning a bunch of games,” Goldwire said. “We lost a lot of close games, too, so I think definitely if we’re able to get in the tournament we can make some noise.”

The NCAA announced Thursday that there will be four “Replacement Teams” from among the “First Four Out” who will be poised to sub in for teams that have last-minute Covid-19 issues. With Duke currently on the bubble, it would be somewhat ironic if a team with five NCAA championships under Coach Mike Krzyzewski ended up as a “Replacement Team.”

“I’m sure that if you’re the team that’s trying to get into the tournament, you’re excited if a team does maybe get knocked out,” Goldwire said. “It’s something that I haven’t even looked at or paid any attention to, honestly. I’m just trying to worry about what’s going on here and just get into the tournament.”

Goldwire, who was headed to Eastern Kentucky before committing to Duke in May 2017, has been a key player for Coach K this season. He’s averaging 6.3 points, 3.8 assists and 3.1 rebounds while leading the ACC in assist-to-turnover ratio (2.8). He said he learned about running a team from former Duke and current Spurs guard Tre Jones.

“For me personally, I’ve never been a guy who has turned the ball over a bunch, so I think it’s something that comes naturally, honestly,” he said. “I’m just trying to make smart plays and not trying to overdo things. Overall as a team, like you said, we’ve been turning the ball over less. I think that comes from everybody trying to be more cautious and make the best decisions for the team.”

Goldwire’s defense has also been critical for Duke. He has recorded 2+ steals in 18 of 19 games this season. His 2.53 steals per game ranks tied for 12th nationally. Against Virginia, one of his thefts led to a transition layup by Jaemyn Brakefield.

Goldwire has also provided much-needed leadership to freshmen guards D.J. Steward and Jeremy Roach.

“Jordan has really helped them in the last few weeks,” Coach K said recently. “They are out there and learning from their experiences.”

Meantime, Duke has gelled in the wake of freshman Jalen Johnson’s decision to opt-out on Feb. 15, news first reported by ZAGSBLOG.

Goldwire did not want to get into the issue of whether Duke is better off without Johnson, a projected lottery pick, but did say the team is different with freshman Mark Williams now the full-time starting center.

“With Mark taking over full-time in the middle, guys coming off the bench know that they’re probably going to get minutes, Jaemyn, Henry [Coleman] and maybe Patrick [Tapé] so he gives us a presence inside and that’s something we needed so he’s playing great,” he said.

Heading into the Louisville game and another matchup with star guard Carlik Jones, Goldwire is aware this will likely be his final game at Cameron – unless he were to decide to come back next season and take advantage of the NCAA rule granting an extra year of eligibility to winter athletes.

“Definitely,” he said. “It’s been a crazy year, but this is our last home game against Louisville and I am a senior, so it definitely has come across my mind that it could possibly be my last game.”

He added of his time of Duke: “It’s a place that not a lot of people get the opportunity to go, and I’m just grateful that I’ve had the opportunity to play here and play for such a good coach and coaching staff and in front of the fans. I’ve loved every minute of it.”

One big key to Duke's recent success? Taking care of the basketball

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (February 26, 2021)

Taking better care of the basketball, cherishing each possession, goes a long way toward explaining why Duke is posting wins where losses were the result earlier this season.

As the Blue Devils prepare to face Louisville on Saturday night at Cameron Indoor Stadium, a quick glance to the last time the two teams met this season shows Duke's improvement.

In losing 70-65 at Louisville on Jan. 23, the Blue Devils turned the ball over 15 times or a whopping 22.7% of their possessions in the game. The Cardinals converted those turnovers into 17 points to pull out the five-point win.

During the three-game losing streak earlier this month that saw Duke saddled with a losing record, the Blue Devils averaged 13.1 turnovers per game in losing 77-75 at Miami, 91-87 to North Carolina and 93-89 to Notre Dame.

UNC turned Duke's 15 turnovers into 30 points.

FEWER TURNOVERS EQUALS MORE WINS

But during the four-game winning streak that has vaulted Duke (11-8, 9-6 ACC) back into NCAA tournament consideration, the Blue Devils have averaged 11 turnovers per game.

Virginia managed just 12 points off Duke's 10 turnovers when the Blue Devils beat the Cavaliers 66-65 last Saturday.

When the Blue Devils beat Wake Forest 84-60 in Winston-Salem on Feb. 17, they committed a season-low six turnovers and the Demon Deacons scored just two points off of them.

"Our team, in general, it's been great attention to detail," Duke associate head coach Jon Scheyer told the News & Observer Thursday. "Just understanding the value of a possession, the value of not turning the ball over. When you trade giving them layups with getting a good shot off, even if you don't make all of them, I was never a math major but you do the math and it really swings in your favor dramatically."

It's part of the team's growth and development through experience, Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said. A play or two here and there, a layup the other way after a turnover, perhaps, marked the difference between winning and losing.

Now, the Blue Devils are making the plays needed to win.

"We've been in a lot of tough games," Krzyzewski said. "When we were 7-8, you're two possessions from being 5-10 but you're a couple possessions from being 9-6. It's not like they were horrible ... we lost close games. They've learned from that without losing confidence. I'm really proud of them. They've been good the whole year and even when we lost, I told you they were good kids and they were working hard. We just wanted to play one game at a time and work to get better. We are getting better and, hopefully, we don't get anybody hurt."

YOUNGSTERS IN BACKCOURT ADJUSTING

The Blue Devils start freshmen DJ Steward and Jeremy Roach in the backcourt. Naturally, they've had to adjust to college play.

Steward, for example, turned the ball over four times while scoring 10 points in 22 minutes of play in Duke's loss to Notre Dame on Feb. 9.

Since then, he's committed four turnovers combined while playing 118 minutes during Duke's four-game winning streak. He averaged 14.5 points per game during that stretch.

He played 27 turnover-free minutes against Virginia, a team known first and foremost for its defense.

Steward and Roach did each commit three turnovers against the Syracuse zone on Monday night, but they also each had seven assists. That 2-to-1 turnover ratio is something coaches welcome.

"Jeremy and DJ, the strides they've taken have been huge," Scheyer said. "We feel like those guys should be as good of a starting backcourt as there is."

It's not just the guards, though. Turnovers were an area where Jalen Johnson struggled before he decided on Feb. 15 to end his college career and prepare for the NBA Draft.

Johnson turned the ball over 23.6% of his possessions, according to KenPom.com. That included six turnovers in Duke's earlier loss at Louisville.

Roach is still at 22.8% but Steward has lowered his turnover percentage to 17.6%. Sophomore Wendell Moore's turnover percentage is down to 18.2%.

As such, Duke's turnover rate as a team, which was 21.5% in December, is now 18.6%. That's No. 148 nationally and slightly better than the national average of 19.1%.

The Blue Devils turned it over at a 16.4% rate against Virginia and 9.8% when beating Wake Forest.

"Their turnover rate has definitely gone down," ACC Network basketball analyst Dalen Cuff told the News & Observer on Thursday. "Over the course of the season it's still in the bottom half of the league. But it has been much better as of late. That's a key part. You cannot give teams easy baskets and expect to win, especially when their margin is still thin. They are not going to blow teams away with talent like Duke teams of the past that overwhelm you."

A STEP BACKWARD AGAINST SYRACUSE

Duke's turnovers did creep back up to 14, at a 20.6% clip, against Syracuse on Monday night. So all is not fixed, of course.

It also must be pointed out that the Orange is highly adept at forcing turnovers with its zone defense. Syracuse forces opponents into turnovers 21.1% of the time.

But, still, the Blue Devils have shown the ability to take care of the ball better and that will serve them well as they seek an NCAA tournament berth.

Duke is living that bubble life, and for now that's just fine with the Blue Devils

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (February 22, 2021)

Let's cut straight to the chase, shall we? Duke clearly isn't wasting any time at this point in the season, what with its four-game winning streak, and so neither should we. The only thing that matters now, really, is attempting to answer the question: Is Duke back?

Now, not to go all Bill Clinton or anything, but it depends on your definition of "back."

Back to being a no-doubt No. 1 seed? Or one of the few favorites to win the national title? Not quite. For as well as the Blue Devils have played of late – most recently in their 85-71 blowout of Syracuse on Monday – nothing erases their first half of the season. Remember all those close losses, six of them by seven points or less? Well, they still count. They still don't look awesome. And they still very possibly might mean the end of Duke's dizzying March Madness streak: 24 consecutive trips and counting.

This last week, though? Hoo boy. It's getting harder and harder with each passing blowout not to want to push that Staples-style "Duke is back" button.

Because in some very important ways, Duke is.

Chief among those is that, after playing so-so for so, so long, the Blue Devils finally look inspired. It's not just that they're beating teams; they're absolutely barnstorming them. In three of the four games on this winning streak – hey, haven't seen one of those in a while! – Duke has at one point or another led by at least 23 points. NC State and Wake Forest aren't exactly the ACC's best, but Syracuse is (or was, at least) a bubble team. That sort of dominance says something.

"I mean, it's real simple," freshman Jeremy Roach said. "Just got tired of losing, and digging down on the defensive end. That's really been the key for us these last four games."

As for how Duke, you know, looks like Duke again? Its young players, including Roach, deserve a lot of credit. Freshmen scored 57 points against the Orange, marking a season-high by that group. Not coincidentally, Duke also had a season-best 27 assists, with free-flowing ball movement largely spurred on by these young guns. And again, with Jalen Johnson no longer in the fold, minutes have opened up for more guys – and they're making the most of them. Everyone is getting to eat.

So against the Orange and its porous excuse for a zone, 7-foot freshman center Mark Williams was the biggest beneficiary. He registered his first career double-double, with 18 points and 11 rebounds in just 25 minutes, and basically dunked just about anything he wanted. "Mark had his best game," Mike Krzyzewski said. Against Virginia on Saturday, though, Williams only played sparingly, and Jaemyn Brakefield was the dude. Brakefield's 9-0 first-half run against the Cavaliers kept the Blue Devils alive early, and then he all but sealed the game with a late block on Kihei Clark. Even Henry Coleman has gotten some burn in the last two games, using his size and nonstop motor to make impact plays.

And that's before mentioning D.J. Steward, the ACC's leading freshman scorer, and Roach, who dropped a casual 14 points and seven assists against Syracuse. Those two have been viewed this season – especially in the before times, when Duke's postseason hopes looked bleak – as the backcourt of the future. Well, how about the now too? Because that already has happened.

Add 'em all up, and it makes sense why Duke is playing so well. What requires a closer look is the changes necessary to reach this point – and if those fixes are sustainable. In other words, if Duke is truly back.

Here, there are also encouraging signs. With Johnson in the fold, as Krzyzewski said after the win over Wake Forest, Duke played a more perimeter-oriented style, meant to take advantage of Johnson's passing and potency in transition. That usually meant one of Johnson or Matthew Hurt had to man the interior offensively and defensively – and no disrespect, but that's not where either is most valuable.

Now things are more "conventional," with Williams starting at center and everyone else slotting into their roles naturally. If Williams can handle the paint defensively and present some semblance of an offensive threat, that means Hurt doesn't have to exhaust all of his effort banging with centers inside; instead, he has been freed up to hunt his shot much more, and he has responded by turning into a human flamethrower.

The trickle-down flows from there. With Hurt carrying the scoring burden more consistently, that has freed up Wendell Moore to do what he does best: a little bit of everything. Roach, firmly entrenched in the starting lineup, gets to lead the show and pick his spots as they unfold. And Roach's defense, which has improved fairly dramatically of late, covers up some of Steward's physical shortcomings, allowing the latter to focus more on his electric offense. There's a reason he's on track to earn Duke its fourth straight ACC freshman scoring title. And as if having more defined roles wasn't enjoyable enough, the winning certainly helps too.

"I mean, it's always fun when you win," Williams said. "Trying to keep this winning streak (going). Trying to stay consistent, trying to stay hungry."

It's not just the players either. It's the coaching. Krzyzewski has taught a lot of guys how to win a lot of games, but if Duke makes the tournament this year, we'll count this season as one of his coaching *creme de la cremes*. He, after all, is the one who switched up the ball-screen defense before the NC State game. He's the one who gave players dedicated "table" time for recovery on Sunday, in the 48-hour window between Virginia and Syracuse. Pundits will say Krzyzewski just rolls out the ball, that he recruits elite talent and lets that talent naturally settle, but that wasn't the case this year. If this team is a ball of clay, K has been slaving over a pottery wheel for months now – and this, finally, is the payoff.

"I'm proud," Krzyzewski said. "I really like my team. They've been great kids. They are fun, they're together. My staff is good. We've been really upbeat the whole time. I think that's the thing that's paid dividends: They know we're all together, no matter what."

All that brings us back around to the question. Earlier this month, when Duke was 7-8 – and under .500 in February for the first time in decades – a certain selling began to take place, by the coaches and the media (guilty) and the social media masses. Conversations about this team transitioned to ones about these players and their potential.

Potential is the fallback when things go belly up.

"You get old through experience, and sometimes you get older by losing – as long as you don't get down and lose confidence," Krzyzewski said. "Look, we've been in a lot of tough games. When we were 7-8, you know, you're two possessions from being 5-10, but you're a couple possessions away from being 9-6. So it's not like they were just horrible or anything. We lost close games. And so they've learned from that without losing confidence."

Since then, though? Duke looks like an entirely different team. The Virginia win was the *résumé-booster* the Blue Devils needed. Syracuse was another stepping stone back into the at-large conversation. And there are still three opportunities – versus Louisville, at Georgia Tech and at UNC – to make more statements. By no means is Duke back in the tournament squarely. By no means is Duke back in the normal sense, where it rolls through the ACC like a ball of knives.

But is Duke back at least to looking like itself, looking engaged, looking like a team no opponent wants a part of?

Absolutely. And there's no reason for the Blue Devils to stop now.

How Duke toughed out a win over Virginia – and improved NCAA hopes

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (February 20, 2021)

To earn a win that was a long, long, long time coming, Duke displayed the mental and physical toughness it lacked for so long this season.

To subdue No. 7 Virginia 66-65 at Cameron Indoor Stadium on Saturday night, the Blue Devils had to answer any of the tiniest Cavalier scoring runs with ones of their own.

Check that off the to-do list – Virginia never led by more than five points.

Duke had to force the slow-paced Cavaliers into empty possessions, not easy against a team that's among the nation's best at 3-point shooting (40%, No. 6 nationally) and one of the best at not turning the ball over (9.5 turnovers per game, No. 3 nationally).

The Blue Devils accomplished those things well enough, too. Even though Virginia hit 5 of 11 of its 3-pointers (45.5%), the Cavaliers turned the ball over 13 times. Duke's seven steals, combined with a pair of Virginia shot-clock violations, made the difference.

Virginia didn't score a point after Jay Huff hit two free throws with 3:09 to play. The Cavaliers' final field goal came with 3:48 left.

They had five shots to take the lead in the final 1:36 and missed them all.

"There's a lot of communication," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "You know, for our young team, they had to communicate a lot tonight. And they made really outstanding decisions on the defensive end of the court."

All that added up to a big mission accomplished.

Duke had yet to beat a ranked team this season. It had only one win that qualified as Quadrant 1 using the NET ratings system the NCAA tournament selection committee utilizes to select at-large teams.

Now Duke (10-8, 8-6 ACC), which moved up to No. 55 in the NET on Sunday, has a signature win to get the committee's attention.

For a team that dropped below .500 for the first time since 1999 with a 93-89 loss to Notre Dame just 11 days earlier, finishing off Virginia was huge.

Duke whipped N.C. State 69-53 and Wake Forest 84-60 in the two games prior to Saturday's matchup with Virginia. Those wins were important to get the Blue Devils going, but beating Virginia puts them in a different light.

Duke's two Quadrant 1 wins give them six against the top two quadrants. That's still not enough to make the tournament, but there's time to build on that.

Syracuse (13-6, 7-5 ACC) comes to Cameron Indoor Stadium on Monday, fresh off erasing a 20-point, second-half deficit Saturday to beat Notre Dame 75-67. That moved the Orange up to No. 46 in the NET.

Louisville is after that on Duke's schedule, a home game on Saturday. The Cardinals plummeted 21 places, to No 53 after losing 99-54 at North Carolina on Saturday.

Both of those games will be Quadrant 2 opportunities for Duke, since neither is in the NET top 30.

Road games at Georgia Tech (No. 51 in NET) and North Carolina (No. 33 in NET) the following week to close out the season project as Quadrant 1 games for Duke, as both of those teams are in the NET's top 75.

Duke could use wins in all of those games, of course. But even three of four would help.

The way the Blue Devils played against Virginia, 3-1 or 4-0 in the final four games before the ACC tournament appears far more possible than it did just two weeks ago.

When Duke lost three consecutive games earlier this month, including a disheartening 77-75 loss at lowly Miami, the Blue Devils appeared lost. Too often, even Krzyzewski said, players weren't able to handle the physicality of ACC play.

That wasn't the case in the Virginia game, which saw Duke's Wendell Moore stunned on two occasions with blows to the head, one of his own doing when he slammed into the 7-foot-1, 243-pound Huff.

Reserve Henry Coleman took an elbow to the chin under the basket. A Virginia player had his cheek cut and a bloody wound opened when Moore's hand caught him below the eye on a drive to the basket.

There was nothing soft about this game, nor was there anything soft about Duke's performance.

"We're together," Jaemyn Brakefield said. "That's it. Together. They preach every day. We got to play harder, play together and play smarter, and that's what we did tonight."

Brakefield was a big part of the win, producing 11 points, five rebounds and four blocked shots off the bench.

Another freshman forward, Coleman played only five minutes but scored four points on a pair of second-half rebound baskets. He also blocked a shot.

Senior reserve guard Jordan Goldwire had four steals and four assists to go with his four points.

They were important contributors along with Duke's main stars – like Hurt, who scored 22 points, or Jeremy Roach, who tallied 12 points.

They all played roles in Duke getting its biggest win of the season and maybe, just maybe, showing the Blue Devils can be a factor in March after all.

Duke makes powerful statement in blowout win over Wake Forest

By David Thompson, Fayetteville Observer (February 18, 2021)

WINSTON-SALEM – The focus entering Wednesday's road game against Wake Forest was on what Duke had lost earlier in the week.

Freshman Jalen Johnson, who was expected to be the program's next great one-and-done, officially left the team Monday evening, opting out in order to prepare for the NBA draft and leaving the Blue Devils to finish the rest of the season without him.

Instead of focusing on one empty locker, Duke focused on the talent that remained, dominating Wake Forest 84-60 at Joel Coliseum while putting the rest of the ACC on notice with three weeks left in the regular season.

More:'That's my guy': Duke players, Coach K offer support of Jalen Johnson's decision

The Blue Devils had fallen below .500 for the first time since 1999, but Duke (9-8, 7-6) has won two straight on the road -- also defeating NC State 69-53 Feb. 13 -- with a must-win game against No. 7 Virginia back at Cameron Indoor this Saturday.

Sophomore Matthew Hurt continued his scoring tear Wednesday night, hitting 8-of-9 shots for 22 points, including 14 straight in the second half against the Demon Deacons (6-10, 3-10 ACC), who played most the game without head coach Steve Forbes. Forbes was ejected after being called for two technical fouls with 3:18 left in the first half.

"I've never played with a scorer like this," said freshman DJ Steward, who added 16 points, seven rebounds, three assists and two steals. "He really doesn't miss, at all."

With the continued improvement of 7-foot freshman Mark Williams, who added nine points, seven rebounds, two blocks and altered many more shots, Hurt has been able to play around the perimeter.

He only missed three shots in the last two games -- he scored 24 in the win over NC State -- and has hit 9-of-11 from the three-point line.

"Mark is a presence and Matt has felt good with him there," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "It has also taken some of the load off defensively (for Hurt) with a big guy there."

Duke's offense shot 54% from the field, and with Johnson absent from the lineup, players like freshman Jaemyn Brakefield and Joey Baker had their chances to step into the spotlight.

Brakefield scored all seven of his points during a two-minute spurt in the first half and Baker, who has had a disappointing junior campaign, hit a season-high four 3's and finished with 12 points.

"They're all just getting more comfortable with one another," Coach K said. "After all these tough close losses, for these kids to have this great attitude and work ethic, says something about them. We just have to keep it going."

It's still an uphill battle for the Blue Devils (9-8, 7-6) to secure their 26th straight NCAA tournament bid and its likely that they'll not only need an upset win over Virginia, but a ACC tournament championship to keep the streak alive.

The players, at least publicly, said they aren't looking ahead. But if Duke can upset the Cavaliers, things start to get interesting.

"We haven't talked about the NCAA tournament at all," Hurt said. "We're taking it one day at a time."

Coach K, players speak out in support of Johnson's decision

As expected, many of the postgame questions directed at Duke players and Coach K were in regards to Johnson's decision to opt out.

Johnson was called a quitter by some, but his former teammates said he had their support.

"That's my guy," Hurt said. "I know he's getting a lot of crap on social media, but he's part of us. He did what's best for him, and we're all proud of him."

Coach K released a statement Monday in support of Johnson's decision, and two days later, offered a few more thoughts on the situation.

"I'm 100% behind him," he said.

With Jalen Johnson's departure, who will be Duke basketball's post players?

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (February 16, 2021)

Jalen Johnson's decision to declare for the NBA draft and end his Duke season removes a supremely talented player from the Blue Devils roster.

The answer to what Duke will look like without him, though, only requires a look back to Saturday.

Coach Mike Krzyzewski started 7-foot freshman center Mark Williams in the post along with 6-9 sophomore forward Matthew Hurt against N.C. State. The 6-9 Johnson played just eight minutes as the Blue Devils won 69-53 at PNC Arena.

This has become the preferred alignment for Duke over the last few weeks.

The N.C. State game marked the third game in a row Williams started while Johnson, a projected top-10 pick in this summer's draft, came off the bench.

"At one time, Matt and Jalen were our bigs," Krzyzewski said Saturday. "But if there's a big guy playing like Mark is, you've got to keep playing him. Look, Mark and Matt, they were really good today. So it's nothing against any kid, but sometimes some kids are better in a ballgame."

JOHNSON'S STRUGGLES WITH THE BLUE DEVILS

Krzyzewski said Johnson was "knocked back" by the game's physicality against N.C. State. He noted that two other freshmen forwards, 6-8 Jaemyn Brakefield and 6-7 Henry Coleman, handled that physicality better and thus were rewarded with more playing time.

This came on the heels of Johnson playing 15 minutes off the bench in Duke's 93-89 loss to Notre Dame on Feb. 9.

Johnson turned in a productive performance in Duke's 91-87 loss to North Carolina on Feb. 6, scoring 14 points with five rebounds and just two turnovers in his 25 minutes of play.

Since then, he combined for 23 minutes, 11 points, zero rebounds and four turnovers in what turned out to be the final two games of his college career.

His inability to play on a consistent level allowed Williams, Coleman and Brakefield to earn more playing time.

Now, beginning with Duke's game at Wake Forest on Wednesday night, they will be asked to handle the minutes inside without much depth behind them. The only other scholarship post player on the roster is 6-9 grad transfer Patrick Tapé, who battled a back injury last month and has only played four total minutes over Duke's last seven games.

MARK WILLIAMS CONTINUES TO IMPROVE

While Johnson's season proved to be a disappointment given his pro potential, Williams has been the opposite. He's continued to improve as the season has progressed.

Consider that Williams earned a start against Illinois on Dec. 8, only to produce two points, one rebound and two fouls in just seven minutes of play. He had similar performances when he started ACC games in early January against Wake Forest and Boston College, combining to play 10 total minutes with five rebounds and no points.

He's averaged 17.1 minutes of play over Duke's last six games, blocking four shots at Miami on Feb. 1 and five more on Saturday at N.C. State. The win over the Wolfpack marked Williams' top game, when he played a season-best 28 minutes and scored 13 points with five rebounds.

"His shot-blocking presence really helps our team and me individually," Hurt said. "I'm very comfortable playing with him. He gives me a lot of confidence and he's only gonna get better. He's young and he's only gonna get better."

N.C. State coach Kevin Keatts said Williams' play in the post, which allowed Hurt to move away from the basket on offense, made Duke hard to defend. Hurt drilled 6 of 7 3-pointers while scoring 24 points.

If that formula continues to develop for Duke, the Blue Devils (8-8, 6-6 ACC) could find success even missing a player of Johnson's caliber.

But the idea of building an offense around two all-ACC forwards -- Johnson a preseason choice and Hurt looking like a postseason choice -- is over.

There was no floor slapping from Duke, but the team ‘played really good defense’

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (February 14, 2021)

With Duke basketball not looking like Duke basketball, the program’s maestro focused on the program’s oldest foundational points to produce a strong performance.

Mike Krzyzewski geared up for his 74th birthday Saturday by putting his Blue Devils through their paces in practice focusing on defense and physical play.

Duke, after all, had given up more than 90 points in each of their last two games, losses to North Carolina (91-87) and Notre Dame (93-89).

It’s odd enough for the Blue Devils to have a losing record this season while not appearing good enough to make the NCAA tournament. To fix that, Krzyzewski and his staff worked mostly on stopping the other team from scoring.

While there were no patented floor slapping from the Blue Devils, there were plenty of strong defensive stands as they toppled NC State 69-53 at PNC Arena Saturday afternoon.

“We played really good defense today,” Krzyzewski said. “And by working on our defense, we also got to be more physical. And in the first half, our defense was outstanding and we got loose balls. We got scrums. We won some scrums.”

That old-fashioned Duke hard-nosed style of defending forced NC State into 18 turnovers, including 13 in the first half when the Blue Devils took control of the game.

The Wolfpack shot 45.1% during the game while hitting only 2 of 10 3-pointers.

“Our defense really wasn’t good the last two games,” Duke sophomore forward Matthew Hurt said. “We had to switch up the ball screen coverages and it worked out tonight. That’s why coach is so good at this. He makes adjustments.”

BLUE DEVILS WITH STEALS AND BLOCKS

The Blue Devils (8-8, 6-6 ACC) looked like a more complete defensive team. Jordan Goldwire and Wendell Moore each recorded three steals as Duke had nine as a team. Freshman Mark Williams, who continues to impress, blocked five shots with Hurt also blocking one.

“Coach has been harping on different defensive coverages, especially on ball screens,” said Williams, the 7-foot freshman center who started for the third game in a row. “I think communicating always helps find myself in the right places to be able to make the blocks. Credit goes to the coaching staff and myself. I think I did a good job of communicating.”

As is often the case, good defense allowed the offense to click. Duke moved the ball well on offense and hit open shots, collecting 11 assists on 24 baskets.

Led by Hurt sharp-shooting his way to 24 points with six 3-pointers, the Blue Devils made 51.1% of their shots overall, including 9 of 18 3-pointers (50%).

MATTHEW HURT A TOUGH MATCHUP

For the third game in a row, Hurt and Williams started as Duke’s post players and they continue to complement each other well on both ends of the court.

Williams scored 13 points, hitting 5 of 9 shots. But just his presence allowed Hurt to spend more time on the perimeter where the Wolfpack failed to slow him.

“With Mark Williams in there, it allows (Hurt) to play on the perimeter instead of inside,” N.C. State coach Kevin Keatts said. “That makes him one of the toughest, if not the toughest, matchups in the ACC.”

It’s just one game, just a win that put Duke back at the break-even mark both overall and in ACC play this season. Now the Blue Devils look to string more such performances together.

The next chance comes Wednesday night at Wake Forest. Virginia looms after that but that’s a worry for another day for Duke.

The Blue Devils have to defend Wake Forest the way they defended N.C. State and try to get back above .500.

Nothing would make their coach happier, even as he celebrates his birthday.

Duke finds its defensive energy in win against NC State

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (February 13, 2021)

RALEIGH, N.C. – It need not be repeated that this Duke season deviates from any in recent memory. That the team sits at just .500 in mid-February is proof. But lost in all the NCAA Tournament talk and statistical slippage has been one overwhelming on-court deficiency – one that, historically, has never been an issue for a Mike Krzyzewski-coached team: defensive fortitude.

Yet entering Saturday's game at NC State – which Duke ultimately won in dominant 69-53 fashion – the Blue Devils ranked just No. 95 nationally in adjusted defensive efficiency, per KenPom.com. That figure, if it endures to season's end, would be the program's worst in the KenPom era, which dates to 2002. It doesn't help, of course, that Duke allowed UNC and Notre Dame to score 90 points in its two most recent losses. So, yeah. Hardly the floor-slapping standard fans are used to.

That said, would you guess what Duke focused on in practice these last few days?

"Pretty much that's all we've been working on," Krzyzewski said of his team's defense, which forced the Wolfpack into 18 turnovers while allowing just two made 3-pointers. "We played really good defense today. And by working on our defense, we also got to be more physical."

For context, the defense this season has existed in a state of flux. At times it was heavy man-to-man. At others it was zone. Sparingly, it was even a full-court press. And those switches weren't just on a game-by-game basis either. In the span of 40 minutes, depending on the opponent (and the players available), there was a chance you'd see two or even all three strategies. Some of that switching was merely a result of not having certain players. When Jalen Johnson went out with a foot injury, for instance, Duke didn't have a real help-side option to cover up Matthew Hurt's defensive vulnerabilities. And considering that was before Mark Williams started earning serious minutes, the Blue Devils tried to scheme up solutions on the fly.

Now, though, with Johnson back in the fold? And Williams having better adjusted to the college game? And Wendell Moore playing like the do-it-all defensive stopper he was late in his freshman season? Well, now Krzyzewski has all the pieces to play with – and the results, at least against NC State, speak to this team's yet-untapped potential on the defensive end.

"That's why Coach is so good at this," Hurt said. "He makes adjustments."

One such adjustment, according to Hurt, was changing the way the team defended ball screens. But looking at the situation from a 10,000-foot lens, rather than one game against a team battling a locker room-wide stomach bug, it's the personnel as much as the philosophy that has made all the difference. And the best news related to the personnel is that all the dudes making a difference now should be back next season.

That starts with Williams, whose shot-blocking ability has been hyped since he arrived on campus over the summer. At 7-foot, simply standing straight up provides some level of rim protection. And when he gets into it and is well-positioned and uses every inch of his frame to play disruptor, you end up with a tone-setting two blocks in the first 101 seconds.

"Mark now has learned that: The physicality of this game is huge," Krzyzewski said. "If there's a big guy playing like Mark is, you gotta play him."

Playing like Mark is really means busting ass every minute on the court. So, yes, Williams' five blocks are nice. Really nice. But it's his sheer presence – the looming threat that his go-go gadget arms might swat your shot into the stratosphere – that makes his increased minutes so advantageous. And if he can hit a free-throw-line jumper and develop some post moves, then all the better. But Williams is making a defensive impact now, and that'll only form the foundation of what Duke does on that end of the floor next season.

Then there's the matter of everyone else. And in that respect, the commitment to detail was what won Duke the game.

Case in point: With 14:08 remaining in the first half, NC State's Jericole Hellems scored on a dunk that cut Duke's lead to 11-10. Fast-forward nearly eight minutes to a Jeremy Roach jumper, which made the score 33-13. Not that saying so is anything new or noteworthy, but if you can hold any Division-I opponent to three points in eight minutes, you've probably got a pretty good shot at winning said game.

The credit for that run, which propelled Duke to a double-digit margin it never surrendered, obviously lies with the defense. It helped that the Wolfpack were turning the ball over like it was their job, but at the same time, give credit to the scrappiness of the Blue Devils. Guys such as Jeremy Roach and D.J. Steward, who have battled their own bouts of inconsistency, dove into scrums. Jordan Goldwire, a legitimate All-ACC defensive team candidate, knifed through passing lanes per usual and came up with three steals. Moore matched that with three of his own. Even Hurt, arguably the most vulnerable interior defender of the batch, registered a block.

"I mean, I always think defense leads to offense, so us being active on the defensive end led to a lot of easy buckets," Williams said. "Again, I think we all played well together and moved the ball, we were unselfish, and I think that translated today."

Again, all of this must be taken with a grain of salt. That 22-3 run set the Wolfpack so far back it would've taken a near-miracle to make things close again. But balance that with the fact Duke didn't allow that to happen. Even when Hurt picked up his second foul and Jaemyn Brakefield and Henry Coleman came into the game, the same imaginary brick wall stood tall around the basket.

Basically, for one of the few times this season, Duke did exactly what Krzyzewski hoped it would.

Now, what this game ends up meaning in the larger context of the season is still TBD. It cannot be emphasized enough how out-of-whack and lackluster the Wolfpack looked. But Duke – and especially its young players – deserve a heck of a lot of credit for digging into that well again and again.

This victory pushed the Blue Devils back to even, 8-8 on the year and 6-6 in the ACC. An NCAA Tournament berth still seems unlikely for this group, but Saturday's win at least kept that hope alive.

More important, it gave Duke a foundation to work from. The defensive intensity the Blue Devils showed Saturday is replicable, or at least it should be. This team always wanted to play fast, to play in transition, to take advantage of its athleticism. That can still happen – and as Saturday showed, good things happen when it does. Worst-case scenario, even if this sideways season isn't salvageable, the work on that end of the floor should pay dramatic dividends in the future. With Duke potentially poised to return everyone outside of Hurt and Johnson, the development from guys such as Williams and Roach is paramount. We already knew these talented young players can score. Based on what we saw on Saturday, we now know they're capable of getting stops.

"I mean, they could've come in here down," Krzyzewski said. "You lose three in a row, you're under .500, you lose some close games, you're playing at Duke and all those things – and they've not done that. They've really worked hard, and have been enthusiastic, upbeat. We just have to keep doing that, and don't pay attention to anyone else. Just keep doing that, and something good will happen."

"Momentarily, because we won one game, (something good) happened today. But you've just got to stay with it, man."

What Duke has to build on for next season

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (February 10, 2021)

If this last year has taught us anything, it's that nothing is certain.

Not even a 15-point Duke lead in Cameron Indoor.

The Blue Devils lost on Tuesday, again, this time in excruciating fashion to Notre Dame. As the 93-89 score suggests, defense was optional, if not entirely absent. More important, the loss dropped Mike Krzyzewski's team to 7-8 overall and 5-6 in ACC play. If it feels strange, even wrong, for Duke to be on the wrong side of .500 this late into the year, well, that's because it hasn't happened in a very long time. You have to go back to February 1995 – the season Krzyzewski missed half of due to a back injury – to find the last time Duke had a losing record this late in the season. Duke hadn't had a losing record overall since November 1999.

In other words, before most of these Blue Devils were born.

So, no, losing is not something that Duke and Krzyzewski are accustomed to. And while the program's struggles this season are well documented – both those in and outside of the team's control – that doesn't make the accumulating defeats any easier to swallow.

"It's really disappointing for them. I mean, for me too obviously. You want this to happen quicker for them than it's happening," Krzyzewski said. "We're gonna keep going and keep pushing, and that's what you should do. It'll pay off at some time. And it's not paying off for wins right now."

Certainly not. At this point, Duke's NCAA Tournament dreams are fast-diminishing, if not downright done. Basically, only an ACC tournament championship – and the automatic bid that accompanies it – could lift the Blue Devils' postseason aspirations above a flatline. And given that this team has lost six of its last eight, that seems about as likely as the members of K's coaching staff each being granted an extra year of playing eligibility. (You're lying if you wouldn't want to see what a Chris Carrawell or Nate James or Nolan Smith or Jon Scheyer could do on this team.)

But listen closely to Krzyzewski's words, and you can tell this isn't a man who has given up. He's far too competitive, far too driven, to let a bushel of narrow defeats diminish his spirit. By no means is he giving up on this season, or this team – nor is he willing to pivot and lean all the way into gaining "experience." In other words, look ahead to next season.

"We're not playing just to get experience," he continued. "You get experience by playing hard to win. So even though we're not winning, I think the attempt and the preparation to win is there, or else I would tell you. Youth has to be developed. And in our program we're not accustomed to that, and we're not accustomed to losing."

Again, Krzyzewski is spot-on. That includes the development part, and the reality of the players at his disposal. In some ways, even though Duke is still committed to winning games and reversing its fortune, signs of that dedication to development are already evident. Look no further than Mark Williams' steadily increasing minutes and Jeremy Roach's share of time compared to Jordan Goldwire's. These guys can impact winning now, but that just hasn't happened; moving forward, though, especially next year, that will be the expectation.

Now, not everyone suffering through Duke's worst season in recent memory will be around to see the other side. Sophomore Matthew Hurt, the team's leading scorer, is expected to leave for the NBA Draft, which would make him the first multi-year Duke player since K's early seasons not to play in an NCAA Tournament. Same for Jalen Johnson, the team's highest-rated freshman, who many in the NBA still consider a potential lottery pick.

After those two, though, things get a little bit murky. If Duke were to return the rest of its roster – not to mention the addition of two top-10 incoming recruits – this season has the potential to be a one-year blip on the radar. Really, that's what it should be, with the Blue Devils once again championship contenders next season. But unexpected defections and declarations happen every season, across every conference and every team. Predicting exactly who is difficult, if not impossible. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

Let's sort through the potential returnees, and see which should be priorities both for the remainder of this season and the one to come.

1. Wendell Moore

The Wendell Moore Breakout Season we all expected back in November is finally playing out, although unfortunately too late to matter much on a team-wide scale. Moore was dominant against Notre Dame, finishing with a team-high 24 points and 10 rebounds on 9-of-16 shooting. It marked his fourth great game in a row. His understanding of the game, as well as his role, seems to have grown exponentially the last several weeks. Even if he's not scoring, he's arguably the most versatile defender on the team, and he's a strong rebounder and complementary ballhandler.

That he did what he did Tuesday without committing a turnover in 35 minutes speaks to his maturity as much as anything – but so too does that he has become Duke's de-facto player spokesman after some of these tough losses.

Moore has been a leader all season, but of everyone on the roster, he has the most potential to be "the guy" next year in terms of veteran dependability and production. There's no reason, even with the guys the Blue Devils have coming in, that Moore can't be the player next season we've seen in the last three weeks.

2. Jeremy Roach

Roach and D.J. Steward are really more of a 2A and 2B. If you wanted to argue Steward has higher upside, you won't find an argument here. But Roach gets a slight positional bump, seeing how he'll be the dude asked to tie everything together as next season's primary point guard.

Roach has been spectacular at times, but frustrating at others. The Notre Dame game was a pretty good summation of that. Roach scored 16 points on fairly efficient shooting, had two rebounds and two steals ... but also just two assists to one turnover. And that turnover was pretty crucial; with Duke down two and 1:06 to play, Roach committed a charge rather than shooting a relatively open 3-pointer. The next trip down the floor, Notre Dame hit a deep 3 that put the game out of reach. It's that sort of in-game understanding that can only come with more reps, and that's the best thing Duke can do with Roach these next few weeks.

There was preseason buzz he might be a one-and-done type of talent, but the NBA seems much more intrigued by the player he could become with another season under Krzyzewski's tutelage. Worked out pretty well for Tre Jones, right?

3. D.J. Steward

Steward, unlike Roach, will probably have an NBA decision to make. Teams see his youth, his scoring ability from all three levels, his personality – and they can't help but fall in love with the potential. Still, given Steward's inconsistency this season (not to mention the limitations of a 6-foot-2, 163-pound shooting guard), there's debate about whether he'd be drafted. And given the role awaiting him if he does return, Steward seems like an ideal candidate to follow the "Matthew Hurt sophomore season breakout" plan.

That's what the staff needs to sell Steward on: Come back, and you'll be our go-to 3-point shooter. Given the way basketball is moving, if Steward can prove he's a legitimate 40-plus percent 3-point marksman – as Hurt has – then he'll have NBA value. He's averaging 13.3 points and 4.5 rebounds per game already, but he hasn't been as efficient as he can be. The more minutes Roach and Steward get together now, the better, as that pairing could represent next year's starting backcourt.

4. Mark Williams

Williams' stock isn't quite a vertical line, but it's damn close. The dude has finally adjusted to the physicality of college basketball, after many early-morning workout sessions with assistant coach Nate James, Duke's resident big-man whisperer. At 7-foot, Williams has the potential to be among the ACC's best shot-blockers and rim protectors, but he'll need to keep developing physically.

Williams has played double-digit minutes in each of the last five games, after having previously done so just once in the first nine contests. Against Notre Dame, he had arguably his most complete outing: eight points on 4-of-7 shooting, plus four rebounds, two blocks and an assist. His post moves are coming along, and he drained a jumper from the free-throw line, so there's reason to be optimistic about his offensive game. If he can put on some more muscle and really hunker down as a defensive difference-maker, he could be the X-factor on a team with ample other scorers.

5. Jaemyn Brakefield

Nine Blue Devils played against Notre Dame, yet Brakefield, who started two games in mid-January, wasn't among them. If anyone on this list might look elsewhere for more playing time, he would seemingly be the guy. He didn't score in the previous three games, and his minutes have been in a free-fall the last three weeks. At 6-foot-8 and 216 pounds, Brakefield has intriguing 3-and-D potential, but the path to minutes next year won't be any easier. Still, this is a guy who shoots 38 percent from deep and plays with insane energy, making him a perfect depth option.

What Duke has to build on for next season

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (February 10, 2021)

6. Jordan Goldwire

Surprised to see the senior on this list? Don't be. Goldwire has the option, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, of playing a super-senior season, and according to sources, there have been discussions about him returning. He clearly doesn't offer the high-end scoring potential Roach does, but his combination of experience, defense and facilitating would be welcome. The staff would be banking on a player who loves Duke so much he doesn't want to go out after a down season like this. It's very possible, and Goldwire's leadership would be a welcome stabilizer.

7. Henry Coleman

It's hard not to love watching Coleman play. The freshman is a bit undersized at 6-foot-7 and 229 pounds, but he makes the most of every inch and pound. After not seeing any time earlier in the season, he finally broke into the rotation in February, including getting first-half minutes against the Fighting Irish. In four minutes, he made one tough layup over two defenders, drew the foul, made the free throw and then collected two boards. He's as well-liked as anyone on the team, and his energy brings a needed element to the roster. TBD on the full extent of his offensive potential, but any locker room would be better for having Coleman in it. Plus, he seemingly loves the Duke experience.

8. Joey Baker

This is not meant as a slight toward Baker, who played 16 minutes against Notre Dame. But hailed as a shooter, Baker has really struggled putting the ball in the hole – and if he's not doing that, there's nothing that separates the rest of his game. Again, Baker's a good energy guy, and he's well-liked by his teammates. Plus, he loves Duke in a significant way. It would be a surprise to see him leave, just because of that, but there isn't a path to playing time next season if he doesn't dramatically improve on the 27.6 percent shooting he has mustered from 3 this year.

Duke's Coach K eyes the future. 'This will pay off'

By David Thompson, Fayetteville Observer (February 9, 2021)

DURHAM – Matthew Hurt put his hands over his head and walked off the court at Cameron Indoor Stadium with a dejected look on his face.

It's an expression that's been a regular fixture on this Duke team and its hall of fame coach at an arena that's traditionally been a fortress of dominance for decades.

The Blue Devils' 93-89 loss to Notre Dame on Tuesday night, their fourth home loss this season, was just another in a series of disappointments that has led to a sub-.500 February record for the first time in 26 years -- and with a third straight defeat -- an almost guarantee that they'll be watching, not playing, at the NCAA tournament this year

Behind Cormac Ryan's 28 points, the Irish hit 55.2 percent of their shots with 11 3-pointers to hand the Blue Devils their fourth home loss this season. Duke opened a 15-point lead in the first half before Notre Dame fought back to take its first lead, 63-62, with 14:27 left in the game.

"We all hate losing," said sophomore Wendell Moore, who scored a team-high 24 points in the loss. "At this point in our season, and coach says it all the time, we have no choice but to get better."

The focus on improvement and development of this young team has been the consistent talking point for coach Mike Krzyzewski, but it's clear that Duke (7-8, 5-6) won't see the payout from that work in the next month.

"Youth has to be developed, and our program, we're not accustomed to that," Coach K said. "And we're not accustomed to losing. But sometimes you have to lose, take responsibility and build from it."

It's a hard pill to swallow for a team that began the season with high expectations and a No. 9 national ranking.

"There are times in our program that you learn to appreciate the winning that has come at such a high level and how hard losing is," Coach K said. "We've got to keep appreciating what it takes to win."

He referenced three seasons -- 1982-83, 1994-95 and 2006-07 -- during his postgame interview Tuesday as instances where his team underperformed but came back much stronger the next season.

Two of those said instances, 1982 and 1994, Duke missed the NCAA tournament and posted winning records the next year. In 2006, the Blue Devils lost more than 10 games for the first time in over a decade. They finished 28-6 in 2007.

As hard as it is to be patient, it would be foolish not to trust Coach K's process. Five national titles earn you a fair amount of breathing room.

"This will pay off at some point if you stay with it," he said.

The question remains, however, which players on this current roster will be there, when and if, the tide begins to turn?

Although he's played inconsistently -- he gets a slight pass due to his nagging foot injury -- freshman Jalen Johnson is gone after this year. He's a consensus lottery pick in the 2021 NBA draft pick and Coach K has acknowledged that his development has been stunted while trying to play basketball through a pandemic.

It's questionable if sophomore forward Matthew Hurt, averaging a team-high 18 points, will return as well.

"It's really disappointing for them, for me too, but you want this to happen quicker for them than it's happening," Coach K said. "I'm on their side forever and we're going to keep going and keep pushing. That's what you should do and it'll pay off at some time. It's not paying off for wins right now."

Barring a surprising run through the ACC tournament, Duke will likely miss the NCAA tournament for the first time since 1995. It's not certain, either, that the Blue Devils will accept an invitation from the NIT. Coach K said Monday that "to plan ahead during this season is not a good idea."

As of earlier this week, they were projected as a No. 2 seed in the NIT by [draftings.com](https://www.drafting.com).

Duke needs Jalen Johnson to play like a lottery pick to make NCAA tournament

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (February 8, 2021)

By this point, like so many Duke freshmen in recent years, Jalen Johnson was expected to be in conversations for ACC player of the year and first-team All-America.

Yet there the athletic 6-foot-9 forward was Saturday night, out of the Blue Devils' starting lineup for a game with North Carolina that Duke lost, 91-87.

Johnson played well in the game, stuffing the box score with 14 points, 5 rebounds and 5 assists, plus a block and a steal.

His talents are so wide-ranging NBA draft analysts still project him to be a top-10 pick this summer if he turns pro.

The disconnect between that future and the player deemed not worthy of starting for Duke against a fierce rival says plenty about why the Blue Devils (7-7, 5-5 ACC) are out of the rankings and out of NCAA tournament projections.

A foot injury, which Duke hasn't provided any specificity about, sidelined Johnson for three Duke games and all but four minutes of another between Dec. 15 and Jan. 12. He wore a protective boot and missed weeks of important practice time.

"It really hurt him to miss that much time," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said Monday. "Not just conditioning, although he's not in that bad of condition. Just to learn about the physicality of the game and just how hard it is. Especially because he's guarding big guys."

Johnson averages 12.3 points and leads Duke with 7.2 rebounds per game. He's also blocked 1.4 shots per game, tops on the Blue Devils.

But his play hasn't been consistent and his time away due to the injury is part of it.

Though he's medically cleared to practice and play, the foot injury remains something Duke's medical staff is monitoring closely. Johnson's pro career could be negatively impacted if the injury isn't handled properly.

He had another MRI exam Sunday night, which showed good news.

"We take precautions," Krzyzewski said. "We had him do an MRI last night, just to make sure everything's OK. Not because he was having problems. And it actually showed really good stuff, a lot better than it was in December. But you've got to be careful. The thing that we're monitoring for him is, if it's not done right – and it is being done right – it could be a major factor in his career."

Johnson playing to his full potential could certainly cure a lot of what's ailing the Blue Devils this season.

He looked like an NBA lottery pick and an All-American Jan. 19 at Pittsburgh in his first full game back from the foot injury. Johnson came off the bench to score 24 points with 16 rebounds, 7 assists, 4 blocked shots and no turnovers in 33 minutes.

Duke lost 79-73 but it looked like the team could be a force in the ACC with Johnson playing like that.

Unfortunately for Johnson and the Blue Devils, he scored 9 points with 6 turnovers in a 70-65 loss at Louisville four days later.

He had 18 points and six rebounds, but three turnovers, when Duke beat Georgia Tech 79-68 on Jan. 26. He turned in another 9-point performance Jan. 30 when Duke blasted Clemson, 79-53, in the team's best game of the season. Johnson also contributed eight rebounds, 5 assists and 2 steals with just one turnover in 28 minutes.

Again, it looked like Johnson and Duke were ready to take off.

"He's a really good talent who is trying to become a really good player," Krzyzewski said that day. "He sees himself growing in that regard, especially the physicality of the game."

Since then, he scored 13 when Duke lost 77-75 at Miami on Feb. 1, and 14 points when the Blue Devils lost to North Carolina on Saturday.

The Miami game was particularly problematic, though. Johnson started but turned the ball over three times in the game's first 14 minutes and finished with four turnovers.

Krzyzewski removed him from the starting lineup, although Johnson did play 24 minutes with only two turnovers against the Tar Heels.

"Jalen has come along well," Krzyzewski said.

But, clearly, Johnson has not impacted this Duke team like recent freshmen stars Marvin Bagley, Wendell Carter, Zion Williamson, RJ Barrett, Cam Reddish and Vernon Carey have. The first five on that list became NBA Draft Lottery picks while Carey, the ACC's freshman of the year in 2020, went in the second round to the Charlotte Hornets in 2020.

Duke is running out of games and time this season for Johnson to reach his potential in a Blue Devils uniform. Including Tuesday night's game with Notre Dame, Duke has just eight regular-season games left on the schedule.

The Blue Devils would have to win most, if not all, of them to be in consideration for a 25th consecutive NCAA tournament bid. A fully functioning Johnson could make that probable, but college basketball has yet to see that from him game-to-game this season.

Arrival of freshman Mark Williams shows Duke has plenty of potential for growth

By David Thompson, Fayetteville Observer (February 1, 2021)

DURHAM – It appeared as though Mark Williams had missed his chance at making a significant contribution during his freshman season.

The 7-foot forward started four of Duke's first seven games, in part due to the foot injury of Jalen Johnson, and failed to make an impact. Williams fouled early and often, taking him out of the game and giving him a permanent spot on the bench. His play was tentative and awkward. He looked out of place in a Blue Devils lineup that has been forced to go small without a reliable big man.

In four ACC games against Boston College, Wake Forest, Virginia Tech and Pitt, he played a total of 14 minutes. His stat line in those minutes: Zero points, five rebounds, four fouls and three turnovers.

Simply put, he was a liability.

Williams' development fell on the able shoulders of associate head coach Nate James, known for his ability to produce freshman big men at Duke. He'd done it before with players like Jahlil Okafor, Wendell Carter, Marvin Bagley III, and last season, with Vernon Carey Jr. Williams was just the next project.

"With Mark, he's just this seven-footer who's still trying to figure out how to use all of his tools," James said before the season started.

It seems James has worked his magic again.

Over the last two games Williams has elevated his play to a new level, making notable contributions during a 75-68 win over Georgia Tech and scoring a career-high 11 points with five rebounds and two blocks during Saturday's 79-53 blowout win over Clemson.

"I've been working with Coach James a lot, just staying the course and remaining consistent, and then just taking advantage of the opportunity I had," Williams said after his performance against the Tigers. "My teammates are finding me in the right spots, so it's just been pretty easy for me to make plays."

Those workouts with James, that include Patrick Tapé, Henry Coleman III and Keenan Worthington, are now part of Williams' normal routine. The four players went through drills together at 8 a.m. Saturday, four hours before the noon start against Clemson.

"A big thing for Mark is because we weren't able to play a lot of games in exhibitions, it took him a while to learn what college basketball is all about physicality wise," Coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "In the last week or 10 days, he's really got a good understanding of that. He can be physical without fouling and someone can be physical with you and not foul."

Williams' emergence gives Duke an option is desperately needed. Instead of chunking up three-point shots -- which the Blue Devils still did 31 times against Clemson -- they now have an inside presence, and a body to keep defenders from freely driving to the basket.

"You just get into the lane, you just throw the ball up, he'll catch it and dunk it," DJ Steward said of Williams. "It's really easy for him. He's an easy target, so it's really good for us guards."

Duke is finally trending upwards after two straight wins that came on the heels of its first three-game losing streak in five years. The Blue Devils (7-5, 5-3) are still, at best, on the bubble for a NCAA tournament bid, but Williams is an example of how this team can continue to grow.

"All he needed was the opportunity so he's really taken advantage of it," Steward said. "I just can't wait for him to keep it going."

Rout of Clemson was nice, but emergence of Mark Williams is even better

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (January 30, 2021)

This is not a “Duke is back!” story. Those may well be available elsewhere, but not here, where we deal in reality. One overwhelming win, against a team that has lost four of its last five games by 18 points or more, does not a season salvage.

But at the same time ... come on, now. Watch any one of Duke’s first 11 games, then watch the Blue Devils’ undressing of Clemson on Saturday, and say that’s the same team. The players and uniforms and expectations may be unchanged, but the outcome was totally different. Things have clearly started to shift.

Chief among them is the return to health of freshman forward Jalen Johnson. A 6-foot-9 physical specimen, Johnson suffered an untimely foot injury in mid-December that robbed Duke of any early-season semblance of continuity. There was an adjustment period with him, then without him, then with him all over again. But early in Saturday’s 79-53 win, Johnson used Clemson’s P.J. Hall as a personal prop, vaulting over the defender and detonating on him for the most thunderous dunk Cameron Indoor has seen in a year. Johnson didn’t even have to scream “I’m back!” thereafter – because the viral video of said act did it for him.

Johnson making an impact, however, isn’t a new ripple to Duke’s regular season; the duke had 19 points and 19 rebounds in his first college game. He’s a projected NBA lottery pick, and for good reason. No, much more interesting to the Blue Devils’ best win to date was the surprise emergence of a less-heralded member of the team’s gigantic freshman class: center Mark Williams.

No pun intended with the use of gigantic either, although with his 7-foot frame, Williams certainly qualifies. And Williams, by the way, is less-heralded only by Duke standards – meaning he’d be a bona fide star just about anywhere else. A five-star talent and the No. 28 prospect in the Class of 2020? Coaches across the country would go to great lengths to land such a talent.

Yet here at Duke, even as the program embarked on one of its worst starts to the season in recent memory, Williams was given time. Time to adjust to the college game, both in terms of physicality and skill. Associate head coach Nate James, the Blue Devils’ resident big-man whisperer, knows a thing or two about coaching up freshman big men such as Williams. He did it with Jahliil Okafor, Wendell Carter, Marvin Bagley III, and most recently, Vernon Carey Jr. Now it’s Williams’ turn.

“I mean, I’ve been working with Coach James a lot,” Williams said. “Just staying the course and remaining consistent, and then taking advantage of the opportunity I had.”

Against the Tigers, Williams posted the best stat line of his young career: 11 points on 4-of-6 shooting, to go along with five rebounds and two blocks. That he did all that in just 14 minutes of playing time – with no fouls or turnovers – is even more impressive.

Williams was one of Mike Krzyzewski’s first two subs off the bench, entering the game about five minutes in – or about the same time, in the four starts he has made, that he usually subs out. That’s a testament to Williams’ growth, which is perhaps as impressive as any of Duke’s freshmen since they arrived on campus in August. Back then, Williams was more of the string-bean body style, long and lanky and thin. Fine for dominating at the high school level, sure. But not so much against seasoned ACC bigs.

So Williams has lifted, eaten right and built his body to the point where he can both dish and receive a few body blows. Not fouling, per se, as Krzyzewski explained postgame, but the absence of that.

“A big thing for him, because we weren’t able to play a lot of games and exhibitions and all that, it took him a while to learn what college basketball is about physicality-wise,” Krzyzewski said. “In the last week or so, maybe 10 days, he’s really got a good understanding of that. Because he can be physical without fouling, and somebody can be physical with you without fouling.”

In that sense, Williams on Saturday simply used his size how he always has. As Krzyzewski put it, “Passing to Mark is different than passing to anyone on our team.” You’re darn right it is. The Blue Devils have a liberty with Williams on the court that they otherwise don’t: Throw the ball up and let the big guy go get it.

“You just get into the lane, you just throw the ball up, he’ll catch it and dunk it,” fellow freshman D.J. Steward said of Williams. “It’s really easy for him. He’s an easy target, so it’s really good for us guards.”

That sequence unfolded several times Saturday, and most of the time it was effective. And then there were the times that James’ stamp on Williams was more stark, like when he spun over his right shoulder and laid the ball in off the glass. That’s a post move, a skill move – a Nate James special.

What Williams did specifically Saturday, though, matters less in the grand scheme of things. Much more important is that this was the second straight game – he had a then-career-high six points in a win on Tuesday over Georgia Tech – where Williams showed not just growth, but difference-making potential. Johnson has shown it when healthy. Obviously Matthew Hurt shows it regularly. But Williams hadn’t yet, not even to the same level as Steward and fellow freshman guard Jeremy Roach.

Now he has, and here’s what to make of that. A team that at times has been missing something or another – consistent penetration or 3-point shooting or on-ball defense or rebounding – finally has something else to hang its hat on. In their first 11 games, the Blue Devils’ the margin for error was minute, if that. If Krzyzewski’s team didn’t play perfectly, it would lose. But as the experience across the roster slowly builds, that’s becoming the case less and less – because with each game Duke appears to be unlocking a novel philosophy or new personnel.

“There’s just more,” Krzyzewski said in reference to his team’s growing on-court options. “And our guys are unselfish kids, so they’re looking for one another.”

What Williams’ breakout, if we can call it that, signifies is that Duke isn’t done growing. That was always going to be the case with a young team, but it’s easier to rag on a down-on-its-luck blue blood than to let that process play out. If Williams can just do what he did Saturday – protect the rim a little, get an offensive put-back or three, provide a bail-out option for otherwise bad shots – then the Blue Devils suddenly have another element for opponents to address. The more of those, the better.

Which is also what you could say about Williams’ minutes moving forward.

Asked how he views his role, Williams didn’t mince words. “Offensively, just finishing around the rim, grabbing offense boards, tip-outs, extra possessions. Then defensively, obviously protecting the rim, guarding whoever I have,” he said. “That’s pretty much it.”

It sure is. And that’s all it needs to be.

Midway through the regular season, Duke men's basketball finally finds its energy

By Shane Smith, The Duke Chronicle (January 30, 2021)

It's officially past the midway point for Duke's regular season, so what better time for a little reflection.

The Blue Devils are 7-5 without a win against a top-25 opponent, undoubtedly cause for concern. Wins against Georgia Tech and now Clemson, two NCAA tournament hopefuls, snapped a three-game losing streak, but should that mean reason for optimism?

Regardless of what two victories over bubble teams might appear like, there's no denying the palpable energy flowing inside Cameron Indoor Stadium right now, an energy that might finally take the Blue Devils to their full potential.

Duke head coach Mike Krzyzewski emphatically high-fived his bench in the closing seconds of Tuesday's win against the Yellow Jackets, a clear display of what the win meant to the squad. There were smiles everywhere, Jalen Johnson and Matthew Hurt embraced and the Blue Devils showed some real emotion. There was some much-needed joy on Coach K Court during that moment, and the resulting energy was punched straight through a reeling Clemson team Saturday afternoon.

"This has been a long journey and every team goes through it differently," Krzyzewski said Tuesday after the Georgia Tech win. "It's long for anybody, but for a young group it's really long. I'm just so happy for them. I'm as happy as I was disappointed for them [against Louisville]."

A quick trip to the box score highlights everything that went right for the Blue Devils against the Tigers. Duke got to the foul line and converted, committed only nine turnovers, shot the ball well and found a balanced scoring attack. A 38-point second half lead was the obvious indicator of the team's most complete performance this season.

"I think it all just started in practice," freshman center Mark Williams said. "We've been preparing really well. Our energy has just been increasing day by day, and I think today it just finally showed."

The Blue Devils made a defensive statement early, setting the tone by allowing just one Tiger basket in their first 11 possessions. However, Duke's spirit didn't seem to gain the team separation until Johnson's poster dunk sent the bench into a frenzy.

"Our work ethic has been crazy in practice," freshman guard DJ Steward said. "It's not very surprising that we're coming along and we're playing together well. We just have to keep playing hard, keep practicing hard and just keep doing what we do, and wins are going to come."

From the dunk until the end of the first half, the Blue Devils outscored Clemson 30-17. But it was the 11 straight points in three minutes to open the second half that truly showcased the team's improvement since the beginning of the year.

Duke cruised out to a 17-point halftime lead in its opener against Coppin State, but turned its back on the Eagles and let them back into a close game. A double-digit lead against Michigan State was erased in an eventual loss, and the Blue Devils had some struggles closing out Wake Forest.

Needing a statement win, Duke's young core, complemented by surprising performances from the bench, showed no mercy. While even Krzyzewski mentioned that this team "may never develop" to its full potential, this win was clearly a statement of what the Blue Devils can mature to be.

"In the three losses, we were in position to win at certain moments," Krzyzewski said. "[The score was] 55-55 against Virginia Tech and three straight exchanges—we were horrible offensively and it hurt us. Against Pitt, it was a one-possession game. Against Louisville, we took a step up and really played well enough to be deserving of winning. It wasn't like you messed up...you just missed."

If the ball bounces the other way in those close-fought ACC games, maybe the Blue Devils don't adopt a new mentality and are lured into the sense of comfort that comes from the image of the Duke program. But if there's a message from these games or even from Steward's Twitter account, it feels like there's a new mentality.

"We can't go to Miami and not play hard, be aggressive, do what we did today," Steward said. "We've just got to keep it going."

An NCAA tournament berth is unquestionably on the line for Duke as the season enters its final stretch. But if the Blue Devils can match the energy they brought over the last two games, they should have no problems finding their way to Indiana in March.

"I think we have a chance to do something really special," Williams said.

The interesting questions Coach K asked Saban in radio interview

By Michael Casagrande, AL.com (January 28, 2021)

Arguably two of the best coaches of this era in college sports spent 20 minutes of satellite radio airtime Thursday talking shop.

Nick Saban appeared on Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski's SiriusXM show "Basketball and Beyond with Coach K" and the 2020 Crimson Tide football season dominated the conversation.

Krzyzewski, a five-time national champion and former United States national team coach, clearly had ample respect for Saban's seventh championship run. The questions reflected the admiration Krzyzewski had for Saban's success and his path to breaking Bear Bryant's record for title teams.

"You almost scored every time you had the dang ball," Krzyzewski said setting up his first question. "Was that the best offense you've had since you've been to Alabama?"

Saban, who might not have been as receptive to such a question from another source, said the group was "very, very dynamic" without assigning a ranking.

Krzyzewski then asked about how Saban builds leadership with such a massive organization compared to Duke basketball.

"Yours is like a business," Krzyzewski said. "It's like running a corporation."

It went on from there.

"You look really fresh and happy on the sidelines," Krzyzewski said. "I tell my wife 'How the hell does that happen? That guy is getting older just like me and he looks better now ...' Is it just being with that unit? What else are you doing, man to stay that fresh?"

Saban said he "lives in a constant state of tension" during the season and went on to discuss aspects of his now-famous "process."

Krzyzewski also wanted to know about the three biggest stars from the Alabama season -- Najee Harris, DeVonta Smith and Mac Jones.

Noting Harris' footwork, the Duke coach said he "should go on Dancing with the Stars." Krzyzewski was taken by Jones' poise on the field and accuracy with his passing.

And with the Heisman winner, Smith, Krzyzewski was fascinated with his skill-to-body mass ratio.

"How do you recruit ... he had to be the skinny receiver right?" Krzyzewski asked.

"He was 159 pounds in high school," Saban responded.

Krzyzewski was intrigued.

"So what do you see," Krzyzewski said, "like what did you guys see in him at that level and how he produced because he obviously won the Heisman Trophy and hands down he was the top player in the country?"

Saban responded by repeating Smith's weight as a high school recruit.

"We typically look at size and speed as a part of the criteria for recruiting a guy at every position," he said. "And we were obviously concerned, not only did he weigh 159 pounds, but he was also very slight of build. But we had him in camp and the guy had tremendous hands. He was fast. He could come out of a break. All the other factors were really high end and on top of that, he was a great person. ... I said this is just the kind of guy we want in our program. If we're going to take a chance on a guy being able to gain a little weight, getting a little bigger and stronger, this is the kind of guy we want to do it with."

Smith was the No. 62 overall recruit in the 247Sports composite and joined the star-studded 2017 signing class that also included Jerry Jeudy and Henry Ruggs.

Krzyzewski went on to call Saban "the greatest coach in the history of the game of football" and wanted to know more about how he kept that continuity alive with coaches and players coming and going.

Saban responded by talking about the culture that remains a constant, using a Julio Jones story as an example. The Atlanta Falcons star was out on the practice field watching current players during 7-on-7 one recent summer when a receiver lost his cool after dropping a pass.

"That's not what we do here," Saban said Jones told him he said a decade after playing his final game in Tuscaloosa.

They concluded by trading compliments. Saban told Krzyzewski that he's always looked to him as an example for how to run a program and handle certain situations.

The Duke coach thanked him with a laugh.

"Thank you for being kind," Krzyzewski said with a laugh, "especially during this season. This has been a challenging year in every way."

Duke has a 6-5 record and is unranked for the first time since 2016 after reaching No. 6 early in the season.

"Basketball and Beyond with Coach K" airs Thursdays at 5 p.m. CT on SiriusXM channel 84.

Duke showed its capabilities in beating Georgia Tech. Now comes the tough job.

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (January 27, 2021)

In a game tied late against Georgia Tech Tuesday night, Duke made play after play after play to post a 75-68 win.

Considering Duke hasn't lost to the Yellow Jackets at home since 2004, what's the news here?

Plenty.

This isn't a Blue Devil team playing like all those teams over the last 17 years that have whipped Georgia Tech and plenty of other ACC teams.

Entering the game on a three-game losing streak with a break-even overall record in late January, Duke is a long way from earning consideration for the NCAA tournament.

Playing the way they did against Georgia Tech, particularly late, the Blue Devils took a big step toward showing the kind of team they could become.

"We've had a lot of tough games, a lot of games that we could've won that came down to the wire," Duke senior guard Jordan Goldwire said. "For us to come out and beat a very good Georgia Tech team, an older team, just shows that we're trying to keep improving every day."

Duke (6-5, 4-3 ACC) played really well in multiple stretches Tuesday night. The Blue Devils had done the same in losses at Virginia Tech, Pittsburgh and Louisville leading into the game with Georgia Tech.

But in all three of those games, Duke faltered down the stretch and took losses.

Georgia Tech pushed Duke hard. The Blue Devils led 33-25 at halftime and 45-34 with 15:41 to play.

Led by senior guard Jose Alvarado, the Yellow Jackets chipped away and chipped away and finally tied the game at 52 with 9:30 to play on Jordan Usher's basket.

In the last four minutes, Alvarado gave Georgia Tech a pair of one-point leads on the way to his 26-point night. His 3-pointer with 3:21 to play left Duke down 64-63.

"They took the lead by one," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said, "and based on losing three in a row, a team can start thinking negative and our guys didn't. I'm proud of our players."

This time the Blue Devils didn't look and play young at key times.

"You expend so much energy trying to stop them and you can let up a little and not be poised," Krzyzewski said. "I thought we had good poise at the end. Not that we were rattled or anything at Louisville, but we worked better as a unit tonight. Again, it's a young team. Hopefully, we can continue to do that."

That is the next question Duke must answer. The Blue Devils have not turned in consistent performances this season, so all the good work on display Tuesday can be undone by a rough game on Saturday against Clemson.

JALEN JOHNSON'S MID-GAME TURNAROUND

As it is, Duke showed it has the pieces needed to string together wins.

Freshman guard DJ Steward scored 19 points, continuing to show he can be a reliable scorer on the perimeter.

Sophomore Matthew Hurt, Duke's leading scorer and one of the ACC's top scorers with a 19.4 average, produced only four points in the first half. He finished with 17 points.

Freshman forward Jalen Johnson, after scoring only two points in the first half, finished with 18.

Johnson's mid-game turn-around is notable because he'd been unable to overcome poor early stretches in games and produce this season. Even during Tuesday's game, Johnson twice allowed Alvarado to knock the ball out of his hands for turnovers.

Yet Johnson scored seven points in the game's final four minutes, including conventional three-point plays with a basket and free throw on consecutive possessions after Alvarado had given the Yellow Jackets those one-point leads.

"For him to be advancing like he is is really encouraging," Krzyzewski said. "And to learn about the physicality of the game and to play through contact. He made those two plays in the last few minutes through contact and he made one of them after letting Alvarado take the ball from him. That's a big sign. You can get down about that and not be strong in the next play, but he was."

Then there's Goldwire, who came off the bench to replace struggling freshman Jeremy Roach to produce 11 points, seven assists and two steals while committing just one turnover in 35 minutes.

The senior guard played well and gave Duke experienced leadership when it was needed. Now, he knows the team's strong play needs to be replicated over and over again.

"We lost three tough games and we've just got to get back on the horse," Goldwire said. "This win for us was huge, but we're not satisfied - we've got to come back Saturday (against Clemson) ready to play."

How can Duke turn its season around? First, look to the free throw line

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (January 25, 2021)

For all of Duke's shortcomings while starting the season with as many losses as wins through 10 games, the focus of improvement lies with wide-open shots.

Not gaps in defense, mind you, but the unguarded attempts that occur when the clock is stopped.

Free throws.

The Blue Devils aren't shooting as many free throws as they want, and their opponents are shooting too many.

In the midst of a three-game losing streak, those foul shots are the coaching staff's top concern as they get the team ready to face Georgia Tech at 9 p.m. Tuesday (ESPN) at Cameron Indoor Stadium.

"It's one of the differences between winning and losing," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said Monday while speaking with reporters during an ACC weekly Zoom video call.

Lately, it's led to losses. During the Blue Devils' three-game skid, the opposition has scored nine points per game more from the free throw line. Duke lost 74-67 at Virginia Tech, 79-73 at Pittsburgh and 70-65 at Louisville.

To be clear, Krzyzewski does not think subpar officiating has anything to do with this disparity. He went out of his way to say that both in Saturday's postgame comments after the Louisville game and again on Monday.

Rather, the Blue Devils (5-5, 3-3 ACC) need to defend better to avoid fouling while making the plays on offense that earn them more free chances at points.

"We have to learn how not to foul and how to get fouled," Krzyzewski said.

It's a problem Krzyzewski rarely has needed to tackle.

Made free throws only account for 13.5% of Duke's points this season. The national average is 18.5%, leaving Duke No. 335 among Division I teams.

From the 2001-02 season until the 2016-17 season, Duke's percentage only fell below 20% in one season, according to KenPom.com.

Last season, Duke scored 19.6% of its points at the free throw line.

In part of his deep analysis of college basketball teams, Ken Pomeroy uses four factors for each team. One of the factors looks at free throws attempted, then divided by field goal attempts, as a way to judge the effectiveness of offensive play.

This season, that percentage is 23.7% for Duke while the national average is 32.2%.

By comparison, going back to the 1996-97 season, Duke's percentage has never been lower than 33.2%. It has been above 40% in 12 seasons. Duke's 2015 NCAA championship team's percentage was 39.8%.

Krzyzewski said the Blue Devils are working hard on this topic at both ends of the court.

But focusing on offense, part of it is roster construction. Krzyzewski said this year's Blue Devils are a group "whose games don't naturally lend themselves to getting fouled."

Unlike last season when 6-foot-10 center Vernon Carey was fouled an average of 7.9 times per game, Duke has no strong post presence like that this season. Freshman forward Jalen Johnson has been fouled 5.1 times per game, tops on this season's Blue Devils. Guard Jeremy Roach is next at 3.7 fouls per game.

Looking at the perimeter, it would help if Roach or fellow freshman DJ Steward, just to name two players, could get to the line more.

"The other way you get fouled is by driving the ball," Krzyzewski said. "We have not driven into resistance as strongly or as physically as we need to."

Duke has scored 73.6 points per game this season, which is No. 140 nationally. The Blue Devils scored 82.5 points per game last season, No. 2 in the country.

So the lack of scoring has played a role in the Blue Devils winning fewer games this season. To change the season's direction, the free throw line could be one way to fix that.

"We're working on it," Krzyzewski said. "Actually we worked on it when the kids came in this morning before class. They have been very committed and trying to work on it."

Duke heads to Pitt with a healthy Jalen Johnson. Blue Devils have missed him.

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (January 18, 2021)

DURHAM - Unranked for the first time in nearly five years, Duke will at least take the court Tuesday night healthier than it has been since the middle of last month.

Preseason All-ACC pick Jalen Johnson is back practicing regularly after missing all of three games and most of another with a foot injury.

Reserve center Patrick Tapé, slowed by a back injury that kept him out of Duke's last three games, returned to practice and has a chance to be available when the Blue Devils play at Pittsburgh on Tuesday night (9 p.m., ESPN).

"It's been a little while," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said Monday. "These are things that happen, along with all the stuff this year. It's good to finally get to a spot where we have everybody."

Duke (5-3, 3-1 ACC) played without Tapé completely and with Johnson playing only four minutes while losing 74-67 at Virginia Tech last Tuesday night.

Entering that game, the 6-foot-9 Johnson had only been through one full practice and part of another. That left him not conditioned for a full game.

But Krzyzewski said the freshman forward is now better able to handle more playing time.

"He's practiced every day," Krzyzewski said. "Jalen's had good practices. He's got to get that court experience."

The Blue Devils, ranked No. 19 when they lost at Virginia Tech, dropped out of Monday's Associated Press Top 25 poll. It's the first poll Duke's missed since Feb. 8, 2016.

Projected as a first-round pick should he enter this year's NBA Draft, Johnson played in Duke's first four games, averaging 11.5 points per game, before being sidelined on Dec. 15 with a foot injury.

With him out, Duke posted wins over Notre Dame, Boston College and Wake Forest, while two other scheduled ACC games, against Pittsburgh and Florida State, were postponed due to COVID-19 concerns in those programs.

Now the task is to work Johnson back into the game plans while maintaining any growth the rest of the players made in his absence.

"We're trying to develop a team," Krzyzewski said. "So when you have somebody out like that, then he's not part of the team – the playing team. He's always be a part of the team, don't get me wrong about that. But now that he's there it gives us an opportunity to move forward and try to get to a better place with our entire unit."

Duke remains a team looking for consistency at both ends of the floor. Because of injuries and uneven play from its players, the Blue Devils have used seven different starting lineups in their eight games.

Last month, Pittsburgh coach Jeff Capel prepared his team to play Duke at Cameron Indoor Stadium on Dec. 29. The Panthers even loaded the bus to head to the airport for their flight when word came they had to return because their traveling party had been exposed to a COVID-19 positive person.

Preparing to face the Blue Devils this week, Capel sees good development from Duke freshmen guards DJ Steward and Jeremy Roach, along with superior play from the Blue Devils' leading scorer, Matthew Hurt.

"I think they've gotten better," said Capel, the former Duke player and assistant coach. "They are such a young group. Those guys have gotten better. Steward has gotten better. Roach has gotten better. Hurt is as good as anyone in our league, playing a very, very high level. They can put up points and put up points in a hurry."

Steward and Roach are becoming more reliable scorers as their first seasons progress. Steward has scored in double figures in Duke's last five games, increasing his average to 14 points per game. Roach has also scored in double figures in five consecutive games, including a season-best 22 points against Virginia Tech last Tuesday. He's now averaging 11.1 points per game.

Hurt, a 6-9 sophomore forward, leads the ACC in scoring at 19.6 points per game. Pittsburgh's Justin Champagnie is just behind him at 18.7 points per game. The 6-6 sophomore had missed Pitt's last two games before scoring 24 points against Syracuse on Saturday. Pittsburgh (7-2, 3-1) has played only two games this month, beating Syracuse twice. The Panthers won, 63-60, on Jan. 6 at the Carrier Dome before topping the Orange, 96-76, at home on Saturday.

Duke's offense again proves to be troubling in loss to Virginia Tech

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (January 13, 2021)

BLACKSBURG, Va. – There Jeremy Roach went, contorting and twisting in midair, trying to will one last basket in with one final burst of energy.

It's what Roach had done all game for Duke, over each of the 34 exhausting minutes he played. But individual effort only goes so far. One's tank only runs so deep. Some holes you can't climb out of.

Still, Roach had to try. So with 1:25 remaining in Tuesday's game against Virginia Tech, the freshman guard did as he had done so many times before and knifed to the center of the Hokies' defense. He lifted off. He went to lay the ball in the basket, to cut Duke's deficit to a more manageable five points. But then Keve Aluma, Virginia Tech's leading scorer, swallowed the shot in midair.

Block. Ballgame. Comeback not complete.

The final score – No. 20 Virginia Tech 74, No. 19 Duke 67 – would have you believe Duke was only a few possessions from winning on the road. And to some extent, that's true. Seven points is seven points. But after falling behind in the game's opening minutes – and by as many as 18 points in the first half – the Blue Devils never led again. They came close on countless occasions, even cutting the deficit to two points midway through the second half. Had Roach's last layup attempt gone into the net and not Aluma's into wingspan, Duke would've had another minute and a half to scrap.

But getting over that final hump? It just didn't happen. And against good teams this season, that has becoming a trend.

"You have to be in the game for 40 minutes and that is a learning experience," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "In the first half, they really hit us hard. They played great defense – really strong, physical, and tough. It knocked us back. We have not played in an ACC game like that."

Certainly not. There's a reason Virginia Tech, in just Mike Young's second season, has transformed from conference afterthought to a Top 25 team. The Hokies play a fast-paced, modern offensive style, predicated on ball movement and punctuated by nonstop energy. But at the same time, Duke had every opportunity to win a marquee game on the road – but didn't. And that deserves further investigation.

Really, nothing happened that Duke hadn't already shown this season. Against the two other top-75 KenPom.com teams the Blue Devils have played – Michigan State and Illinois – a combination of offensive stagnation and inconsistent effort led to losses. This was more of the same. Virginia Tech was the aggressor early, drawing fouls on Roach and fellow freshman Jaemyn Brakefield, the latter of whom got his first start.

"There was no energy. We were just playing lax," Roach said. "We were letting them come into us. We weren't being the aggressor. We were just doing everything wrong."

By the end of the first half, though, Duke had found its way back into its comfort zone, turning tenacious defense into offense. Roach and senior Jordan Goldwire led those defensive efforts, with Goldwire registering four steals and Roach swiping at shooters from every angle. Duke mostly seems to have solved that part of the equation. There are lapses, but generally, the defense has been good enough.

As for the offense? Woof.

Matthew Hurt has been the lone constant, and his 3-pointer with 13:12 to play cut the deficit to 56-55. Said 3-pointer gave Hurt eight points in the span of 80 seconds – and seemingly the green light to do more.

Instead, he and his teammates went the next 4:14 without scoring. Luckily Virginia Tech didn't stretch the lead to an insurmountable margin over that time, but the point remains: Duke's chance was right there. Yet in crunch time, the offense couldn't hit water from a boat.

"We were in a position where our guys came back to put us in a position to win, and we could not knock down a shot," Krzyzewski said. "We had some good looks (we missed) where we could not get one-possession game pressure on them."

The last nine or so minutes were mostly played in a holding pattern, Duke down five or six or seven points but unable to close the gap. It was the offense, again, that didn't hold up its end of the bargain. It was the offense, again, that cost the Blue Devils the game.

"We just had to execute. We were getting good looks," Roach said. "We've just got to make the open shots. That's all it is."

Admittedly, the Blue Devils have been in flux on that end of the floor. At the onset of the season, Duke wanted to play fast, relying on freshman forward Jalen Johnson – who played four minutes Tuesday after missing the previous three games with a foot injury – to thrive in transition. That was all well and good, except the halfcourt got clogged and congested. With Johnson out recently, the offensive strategy clearly shifted (and for the better): Put the ball in Hurt's hands, and let the freshman guard combo of Roach and D.J. Steward play off of him.

Three wins ensued, albeit not against any conference contenders. But the formula was seemingly there.

Tuesday's result doesn't suddenly make that strategy void. It does, however, raise some legitimate questions about this team's ceiling. Hurt is every bit the scorer he was promised to be out of high school, and he had 20 points on 50 percent shooting Tuesday from both the field and from 3. And Steward, while still somewhat streaky, has settled down. If anything, this game was Roach's best yet, more evidence of his growth into the "dynamic lead guard" he was advertised as this offseason.

But then who? Then what? Three scorers does not a team make – and sure as hell not a championship-caliber one.

Goldwire, as excellent as he is defensively, missed all five of his shots against the Hokies. Wendell Moore, who scored 25 just two games ago, had four points in 15 minutes. Brakefield, who so tantalized early as a sharpshooting wing, only attempted four shots. Naturally, getting someone like Johnson – a 6-foot-9 bulldozer – back in the fold will help. Cure them, though? That remains to be seen.

What's evident is that Krzyzewski still doesn't quite know what he has in this group. He has tantalizing potential, sure. He has a knockdown shooter and a lockdown defender. The others, though, fluctuate too much on a nightly basis for a contending team in January. It's not unexpected that without the luxury of a proper offseason, closed-door scrimmages, preseason exhibitions and the like that Duke is still struggling to find its footing. It also can't be used as an excuse any longer.

Duke looks a lot like a team in November, shuffling the pieces but not yet able to consistently put them together. Given all that COVID-19 has done to the college basketball season, that's understandable. But the reality is, it's not November anymore. It's contending time – and Duke is still behind schedule.

"Mike's team knows who they are, their substitution patterns were great," Krzyzewski said of his Virginia Tech counterpart. "They aren't the only team ahead of us in that regard. Where we are still finding out about our team."

Duke's schedule has been impacted as much by the pandemic as any ACC program. But unfortunately for the Blue Devils, there's no time to be made up for what already has been lost. One "L" is something Krzyzewski's team can withstand, without compromising its goal to win the conference.

But almost two months into the regular season, these offensive woes are worrisome. Duke most likely will drop out of the rankings next week, strictly by virtue of Tuesday's result. Continue this troubling trend, though, and the Blue Devils might drop out of a much larger championship conversation earlier than anyone in Durham could have anticipated.

Duke's recipe for success means a heavy dose of Matthew Hurt

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (January 9, 2021)

The voting, in hindsight, looks ridiculous.

As well it should. Two months ago, just before the start of this convoluted college basketball season, the Atlantic Coast Conference released its preseason award honorees. Not that the list counts for anything beyond sports radio talking points, of course, but still. They're intended to serve as a roadmap of sorts, a look at with whom we might become more acquainted in the coming months.

In years past, these polls have been hilariously wrong. They're as much predicated on past success as they are on unfounded speculation. Which is how every season, someone (or multiple someones) slips through the cracks ...

Someone like Duke's Matthew Hurt.

Entering Saturday's game against Wake Forest, Hurt – a sometimes-starter last season turned sophomore star, who was not named on either preseason All-ACC team and received few votes for player of the year – was tops in the ACC in scoring (18.5 points per game) and third in rebounding (8.5 per game). And on the heels of No. 21 Duke's 79-68 win and Hurt's career-high 26 points, there's little reason to believe those numbers will do anything but grow.

So credit is overdue there. But at the same time, as it relates to the remainder of Duke's season, it's also best practice to get used to Hurt's gaudy scoring numbers. Because through seven games, two truths have emerged.

The first is that Hurt, a 6-foot-9, 235-pound sharpshooter, is Duke's bonafide No. 1 offensive option. Even when freshman forward Jalen Johnson returns from his foot injury, Mike Krzyzewski's team will go only so far as Hurt can take it. Outspoken he is not, but skilled offensively? Oh, heck yeah. Adding 20 to 25 pounds to his base has allowed Hurt to better bang inside, without compromising the sweet 3-point shot that will (soon) land him in the NBA. It has also given him the confidence to play up to his potential, as was evident against the Demon Deacons; in addition to 26 points on 10-of-15 shooting, Hurt had six rebounds, three steals, and two assists. He's a full-formed force in the halfcourt, capable of shouldering the load on a nightly basis.

The second truth? If Hurt keeps playing at this pace, he'll have a strong shot to go from ACC afterthought to conference player of the year. (And to the three voters who selected Hurt for the preseason award – behind teammate Wendell Moore and four others – job well done.)

"I see consistency in him. He's ready to play every game," freshman guard D.J. Steward said of Hurt. "He's a great player, he's a great scorer. And I love playing with him. He knocks down shots, you know?"

That he does. Hurt made the Blue Devils' first three shots on Saturday, showing the same expanded range that made him a five-star prospect out of high school.

And you know what that does? It adds to Hurt's gravity.

Translation: Even when Hurt isn't shooting, defenses have to respect him every time he touches the ball. Per Synergy, he is Duke's most efficient offensive option, scoring 1.154 points per possession – easily the highest on the team, and the only player besides freshman forward Jaemyn Brakefield topping 1.0 ppp. So if Hurt get the ball on the perimeter? That draws the defense his way. It opens that much more room for his teammates, and it shifts how Duke can operate on offense.

"A big thing is for Matt to touch the ball, whether he's scoring or not," said Krzyzewski, whose COVID-19 contact-tracing quarantine ended earlier Saturday. "People are going to come at him, and they're going to defend him, and so when he touches the ball, our guys get a little bit more room. We need to keep learning that. We started to learn about that at Notre Dame, and we have to keep doing that."

That's particularly notable when Hurt functions from the post, as he has had to of late considering both Johnson and graduate transfer center Patrick Tapé are out with injuries. For example, when he is posted near the free-throw line, help defenders have to be conscious of Hurt's every move. If he attacks, they collapse – and leave their men open for the subsequent kick-outs. But even if Hurt feigns attack, or just stands still, defenses have to be mindful of where he's going next.

Given Duke's roster construction, that works nicely at its best. The skill sets of five-star freshman guards Steward and Jeremy Roach complement that strategy well. Both are excellent cutters and creative finishers in traffic, not to mention above-average shooters. So with Hurt sucking their guys just a couple of steps farther away from them, when he does pass, they have options. It's no coincidence that in each of the three games Johnson has been sidelined, those two have both hit double figures.

That's emblematic of Duke's offensive shift. At the start of the season, and in early-season losses to Michigan State and Illinois, the Blue Devils tried a five-out philosophy predicated on transition baskets and pace. But without any exhibition games to work out the kinks or build chemistry, the turnovers flowed more freely than the offense did.

"The offense that we were running before that was more of a five-out, like Golden State or teams like the Celtics (run)," Krzyzewski said. "And it really was not that good for us. That's something we would have experimented with in the two exhibition games, but it took us – especially the Michigan State and Illinois games – to find out, like, that's not going to work. And so we've been constantly working on our offense, and the guys are getting game experience. There's more of a chemistry on the offensive end right now. There's been a good chemistry on the defensive end. When we lost those two games, our offense really killed us because of bad shots or turnovers. But our defense has been kind of good the whole time, and we've cut down on the turnovers."

That is not to say the offense is a finished product. Hardly. The Blue Devils may have figured out that things work best running through Hurt (and Steward, though to a lesser extent), but items still need to be ironed out.

What to do with Moore, for example? In his first game after tying his career-high in scoring against Boston College, Moore had just four points on 1-of-7 shooting against Wake – and that make was the last of the game, with the outcome settled and no one truly defending him. There's also the matter of incorporating the other bigs, as Krzyzewski mentioned postgame. Mark Williams, a 7-foot freshman, earned the start, but he committed three turnovers in the first four minutes and never returned. Henry Coleman took a nice charge before halftime, but playing time has been even harder to come by for him.

Then there's one more thing about Hurt that must be respected, and it's something no box score can register: his big-time bucket-getting energy when things get stagnant.

Hurt flashes no look in his eyes to suggest that's coming. It's simply something he exudes as a man who knows what he's capable of. In a back-and-forth game, whenever the offense stalled, Hurt made something out of nothing. Not quite to play "hero" ball, but to be bailer-out of bad situations. At times that meant scoring, as evidenced by his seven points in the last 11:25. At others, it was snagging an offensive rebound, of which he had four.

But altogether, it was a performance that ranks as one of the conference's best this season – and Hurt, accordingly, belongs in the player of the year conversation.

There will be other contenders, and deserving ones. Clemson's Aamir Simms, for example, has led the Tigers to a national ranking and the best adjusted defensive efficiency in the country, per KenPom.com. Carlík Jones at Louisville is a scoring machine who can hang with the best of them. And as the next two months unfold, there undoubtedly will be other challengers, maybe Virginia's Sam Hauser or perhaps even the man anointed for the award in the preseason, North Carolina's Garrison Brooks.

In Duke's new-look offense, meanwhile, everything flows through Hurt, who has been up to the task as the Blue Devils have reeled off three straight wins. "My teammates were doing a great job of getting me in the right positions," Hurt said of his performance Saturday. "I just had the opportunity to score, and I just took advantage of it. But I can't get all the credit. I give the credit to my coaches, the other players. So it's not just me; it's a team effort."

It is. But Hurt's role – and standing in the conference – has clearly changed.

Both for the better.

How Duke survived so many weird things to, as usual, beat BC at Cameron

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (January 6, 2021)

DURHAM - In the strangest of basketball seasons, Wednesday night's game between Duke and Boston College delved even deeper into oddities before the Blue Devils escaped with an 83-82 win.

Already playing in a Cameron Indoor Stadium devoid of spectators due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Duke Blue Devils were playing just their second game in 29 days due to having games wiped out by the public health emergency.

Toss that on top of the strange sight of Mike Krzyzewski's absence from Duke's bench as the 73-year-old Hall of Fame coach is quarantining due to close contact with a family member who tested positive for COVID-19.

And the game was being played 250 miles south of Washington, D.C., where, earlier Wednesday, the U.S. Capitol was breached via an insurrection for the first time since 1814.

Then Boston College, having lost seven of its nine games this season and all three of its ACC games so far, went out and built a 16-point lead over the Blue Devils with 2:13 to play in the first half.

At that point, Duke provided some semblance of normalcy.

The Blue Devils defended with vengeance, getting arms and hands in passing lanes to deflect passes, force turnovers and get easy baskets.

JON SCHEYER RELIEVED WITH THE WIN

Wendell Moore, admittedly in the worst scoring slump of his career, started hitting shot after shot after shot. And he had help with four other Blue Devils reaching double figures in scoring.

Boston College's 16-point lead shrunk to eight at halftime. It disappeared completely less than three minutes into the second half.

Then Duke, as it routinely does, made big plays in the game's final minutes.

Moore's contested jumper, as the shot clock expired, with 44 seconds left gave Duke a 3-point lead. His free throw with 11 seconds left gave Duke its largest lead of the game at four points.

The Blue Devils walked off the court with a one-point win, just their fourth win of the season even though this is the first week of January.

Tasked with filling in for Krzyzewski as Duke's acting head coach, Jon Scheyer could smile and joke in his post-game media session on Zoom.

"It's easier to call Coach after the game," Scheyer said with a heavy dose of relief.

WENDELL MOORE FINDS HIS STROKE

Speaking of relief, Moore received a large dose, too.

He'd missed 20 of his last 21 shots to find himself a reserve after starting the season in the starting lineup. He began to find his stroke again playing pick-up basketball at a local high school gym while home in Charlotte for a quick holiday break last month.

His first 3-pointer banked in on Wednesday night. Sure it was unsightly but that was good enough all things considered.

"For me, I was just happy to see it go through," Moore said. "Just seeing that first one go through, I feel like it took everything that was on my shoulders off of me and allowed me to play free and just go out there and win the game."

He tallied a career-high 25 points by hitting 8 of 13 shots overall, including seven of eight free throws. He made Duke, as Scheyer said, a different team.

"I think his versatility is something we've missed," Scheyer said. "He's a guy who really defended every position tonight. We had him flashing in the middle of the zone. We had him driving the ball from the perimeter. Obviously, he got to the free-throw line. He's defending down on the block and guarding outside."

DUKE HOT ON DEFENSE

Oh and let's talk about Duke's defense. The Blue Devils recorded 14 steals, the most they'd secured in an ACC regular-season game in seven years.

Moore, DJ Steward, Jeremy Roach and Jordan Goldwire had three each.

Boston College shot 56.1%, an impressive number fueled by its white-hot start. The Eagles shot 69.2% in the first half while building that 16-point lead.

Their shooting dropped to 45.2% in the second half as Duke did a better job of keeping Boston College ball handlers out of the lane and away from the rim.

"We knew we had to get stops and the stops were going to lead to buckets," Steward said.

Duke did that and won a game it looked for the longest time like it wouldn't. It kept the Blue Devils unbeaten in 12 games against Boston College at Cameron Indoor Stadium.

An odd occurrence was averted, a downright weird thing these days, all things considered.

The stage is set for the breakout we've been waiting for from Wendell Moore

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (January 6, 2021)

One make. One ripple through the netted rope. Sometimes, it really is that simple.

And it doesn't matter, by the way, how said make comes to fruition. You want some creative, crafty layup? Sure thing. A floater? An easy elbow jumper? All fine. Or, as was the case for Duke's Wendell Moore on Wednesday, a banked-in 3-pointer from the top of the key.

Not necessarily pretty, but effective.

That effectiveness is all that matters, especially when you consider the shadowy shooting realm Moore has been engulfed in all season. Entering Wednesday night against Boston College – a game No. 21 Duke ultimately won 83-82 – Moore had made just one of his previous 21 shooting attempts. Yikes. Tough to sugarcoat that one. But for these particular Blue Devils, with just four returners and seven newcomers, any veteran's struggles are magnified that much more. Last year, Mike Krzyzewski's team could survive with a few off shooting nights from Moore. This season? That margin shrunk significantly.

So when Moore pulled up with 12:38 left in the first half, then watched the ball bank off the glass and down in? Oh, you can only imagine the sort of smile the sophomore let escape.

"I was just happy to see it go through," Moore said after the game. "Just seeing that first one go through, I feel like it took everything that was on my shoulders off of me. Just gave me a chance to play free."

What it really did was empower Moore to play the way everyone in the program thought he would – and knew he could – entering his sophomore season. As a former five-star prospect, Moore's physical gifts were never in question. Despite a broken hand costing him a month of his freshman campaign, Moore showed flashes of creativity and clutchness. For all of Tre Jones' heroics against UNC last season, let's not forget who had the awareness (and ability) to make the game winner: Moore.

All that context is crucial because it puts Moore's breakout Wednesday night in a different light. By tying his career high with 25 points, not to mention the four rebounds and three steals he tacked on, sure, he had a great game. Much more importantly, though? His re-emergence changes the trajectory of what this Duke team and season is capable of.

"Look, we're a different team (when he's at his best)," said acting head coach Jon Scheyer, who filled in for the still-quarantined Krzyzewski. "I think his versatility is something that we've missed."

Certainly so – and more on that in a second – but it's not the only thing the Blue Devils have been missing. Another key thing: games themselves! After a shortened nonconference schedule, Duke saw its first two post-Christmas contests either postponed or canceled because of COVID-19 complications with its scheduled opponents. That meant Wednesday night was the first game for the Blue Devils since Dec. 16, when they defeated Notre Dame to open conference play.

Understandably, given that sort of hiatus, there was rust to start against the Eagles – like, a full-on corroded car's worth. "I could tell we had a little (bit of) nerves," freshman D.J. Steward said. That's one way to say it. Boston College isn't exactly top-tier ACC competition, yet the Eagles raced out to an early lead before building a 16-point cushion. With two minutes to play until the half, Duke looked very much like the No. 113 team in the country the NET has it currently pinned as.

In the last 1:54 of the half, though, Steward and Moore combined for 10 points, which cut the Eagles' halftime deficit to just eight. And even without Coach K or the Cameron Crazies or any sort of recent play to go off of, that's within striking distance for a team with Duke's talent.

And out of halftime, that was obvious. Scheyer said after the game that, as simple as it sounds, his message at intermission was for guys to play harder. Get to loose balls, make some stops and let the offense sort of figure itself out from there.

Sort of sounds like one guy in particular, no?

"Wendell has always been at his best when he's playing defense, he's talking, he's leading," Scheyer said. "I thought to start the game, he did that – and then his offense came along, as well."

That was the exact script last season when Moore thrived as a point forward of sorts, operating as a secondary ballhandler and tenacious defender.

It's fitting that a second trip back home helped key Moore's return to form. This summer, for 138 straight days, he'd go to the gym and work on perfecting his form, trying to make himself more of a well-rounded offensive weapon. So when Duke sent players home for the Christmas break, Moore went back to the drawing board and did the very same.

"We got a little bit of time to ourselves, and I just kind of used that time to get in the gym and make a lot of shots," he explained. "For me, it was just seeing the ball go in."

For someone as cerebral as Moore, it really is that simple. Building your confidence back up, shot by shot by painstaking shot. The results, though, were clear even before Wednesday.

"I can honestly say the first time coming back, that first practice, that first scrimmage, I saw Wendell was a lot more confident," Steward said. "I just knew this next game, whatever game we played, he was gonna come out there and he was gonna hoop."

After halftime, Moore did so at an entirely different level. He seemingly couldn't miss, finishing with a career-high eight made shots. And that 3-point shot he'd so labored over? Well, aside from the bank that was the proverbial gas to his fire, he made a second, too. It wasn't just luck. The work was ... well, working.

Some of that credit should go to Scheyer and assistant coach Chris Carrawell, the latter of whom has worked most early mornings to hone Moore's game. And there's something else Carrawell deserves recognition for: the inspiration for arguably Moore's most impressive play of the day.

With 44 seconds left to play and Duke up one, the Blue Devils had an out-of-bounds situation to handle. One problem: only two seconds on the shot clock. Not enough for anything fancy or elongated or really more than a catch-and-shoot. Carrawell, during one of the team's scrimmages this summer, had taught an out-of-bounds play the Boston Celtics used to run, with multiple options for the inbounds passer. Scheyer went back to that well with the game on the line ... and Moore improvised.

"He broke the play off, and I'm glad he did. It worked out even better than what we drew up," Scheyer joked. "He was supposed to curl and ended up popping out. And again, I'm not sure about the rest, the landing and all that, but he made a heck of a play – and made us look good."

The play Moore ended up making, a fadeaway jumper as he scrambled to get set, put Duke up three with under a minute to play. "I went to the boards just in case he missed it," Steward said with a grin, "but he ain't miss."

It was only fitting that Moore's free throw with 11 seconds left gave Duke the one-point margin it ultimately needed to win. And now the stage is set for the sophomore breakout so many envisioned for him.

This Duke team, slowly, is starting to fill into roles. Matthew Hurt is the undisputed top offensive option, a legit stretch big with elite range. Then there's Jordan Goldwire, the savvy defensive-minded senior, and Jeremy Roach, the emerging freshman point. Steward is the energy guy with a silky shot of his own. So what about Moore?

Before Wednesday, many were ready to write him off. Scheyer spoke to as much after the game, how social media specialists were ready to cast Moore aside. But the truth is the best version of Duke always hinged on Moore playing like the guy he can be. Maybe not a 25-points-per-night supernova but a dependable scorer who does all the necessary little things.

"He's really a guy who really defended every position tonight," Scheyer said. "You know, we had him flashing in the middle of the zone. We had him driving the ball from the perimeter. Obviously, he got to the free-throw line. He's defending down on the block, he's guarding outside, so just his versatility (helps).

"He saved us throughout the entire game."

Now the question is: Do you buy it? Is Moore the guy who scored 18 points combined the first five grueling games of this season or the breakout candidate who topped that all in one night?

For Duke to come anywhere close to its lofty ambitions, it has to be the latter. And knowing Moore's work ethic and demeanor, it'd be wise to bet on him holding up his end of the bargain. Wild how one shot dropping can shape a new narrative, no?

"I don't want to have just one good game and then go back to whatever slump I was in or not playing the same," Moore said. "I want to really keep continuing to play like this, keep continuing to help our team win and, like I said, just keep doing everything I can."

No Coach K. No Jalen Johnson. Still, Duke just wants to play basketball.

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (January 5, 2021)

Already missing one of its most talented players, No. 21 Duke is now short another key to the team as the Blue Devils work to navigate a pandemic-altered season.

Freshman forward Jalen Johnson is sidelined with a foot injury, but he's around the basketball team and able to have his voice heard at practice.

That's not the case for Mike Krzyzewski, who is quarantining due to contact last week with a family member who has tested positive for COVID-19.

The Hall of Fame coach watches practice via Zoom, but it's not like having him in the gym as the Blue Devils prepare to play Boston College Wednesday night at Cameron Indoor Stadium.

So the players are taking it upon themselves to create the passion that Krzyzewski regularly infuses.

"Our energy has been there," Duke freshman guard DJ Steward said in a Tuesday phone interview with The News & Observer. "We've been bringing the energy that he's not able to bring. He talks to us after practice and before practice, just telling us to go out there and play hard and do what we do. Just play Duke basketball."

DUKE BASKETBALL AMID THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, Duke (3-2, 1-0 ACC) hasn't had a chance to play many games this season.

The Blue Devils canceled their last three nonconference games in December, two of which had already been postponed due to their opponents' COVID-19 issues, and saw ACC games with Pitt and Florida State postponed last week for the same reason.

Duke's most-recent game was Dec. 16, a 75-65 win at Notre Dame. Prior to that, Duke last played on Dec. 8, losing 83-68 at home to Illinois.

So if the Blue Devils are able to take the court against Boston College Wednesday night, they will have played one game in the previous 28 days.

"Really there is no template for this," Krzyzewski said during a Zoom call with the media on Monday. "I'm glad that so many teams have been able to get in games. I feel bad for our guys, especially the last two. It's nobody's fault. I don't blame Pitt or Florida State. We have no control over it. But we do have control over how we react to it. We're just trying to react in a very positive way."

The game with Pitt was called off 28 hours prior to tip. The Blue Devils had already traveled to Tallahassee, Florida, last Friday and held their final team meeting that night in preparation for facing the Seminoles Saturday when Florida State announced three positive COVID-19 tests in their program.

Duke was prepared and ready to play and then ... no game.

"That stings every time," Duke sophomore forward Wendell Moore said in a Zoom meeting with reporters last Thursday. "It really never gets any easier. All we can do is move forward to the games that we will have."

NO GAMES MEANS MORE PRACTICE TIME FOR THE BLUE DEVILS

The Blue Devils did play one of their better games in beating Notre Dame, particularly on offense. They've used the time without games to build on that performance while also shoring up their defense.

"We are very excited to go out there and play," Steward said. "We haven't played for a while. I feel like our preparation for the last couple of games with Florida State and Pitt, it was great. Even this game coming up tomorrow. I feel like we've been preparing well for these teams. Locking in on defense. Getting our offense tight. Getting the ball movement tight. We are playing together really well. We are playing fast. It's going to be exciting to get out there."

On Dec. 15, Duke announced Johnson would be out indefinitely with a foot injury. He began wearing a protective boot and the initial plan was to reexamine the foot in 2-3 weeks before he could be cleared to return.

In Duke's first four games, the preseason all-ACC selection played 23.8 minutes per game, averaging 11.5 points and 8.3 rebounds.

Now, he's on the sideline helping keep the team's energy up in practice, just as Krzyzewski's voice has gone missing.

"Jalen, he's been there for us," Steward said. "The whole time cheering us on in practice. His energy is there. So whenever he comes back, we're going to be excited to have him and it's going to be fun. But right now we're just playing together and having a good time."

ACC coaches anxious, hopeful amid daily COVID-19 drama

By David Teel, Richmond Times-Dispatch (January 5, 2021)

The NCAA confirmed Monday college basketball's pandemic finish line, a men's postseason tournament staged solely in Indiana and capped by a Final Four as originally scheduled. But can the sport endure another two-plus months of a regular season replete with COVID-19 disruptions?

College football and the NFL are poised to determine their champions. Fresh off its unprecedented summer playoffs in a Florida bubble, the NBA has embarked upon another season. Those are the encouraging signs.

But college basketball is an endeavor of more than 300 teams from Richmond to Moscow (Idaho). We're diving deep into winter, and students are returning to campuses after family holiday gatherings, a recipe for virus spread that will surely trump vaccination rates.

Moreover, protocols crafted by medical experts and embraced by university presidents dictate that one positive test and subsequent contact tracing can ground a program for two weeks. That's two weeks of lost games, practices and conditioning.

No conference values basketball more than the ACC, and its 15 teams, as of Tuesday, had played about 80% of their scheduled games. But there is doubt.

"I go back and forth every day," Notre Dame coach Mike Brey said Monday. "I'm thoroughly confused on whether we can get to the end line. I want to keep trying because I know the frame of mind of our young people. If I were to huddle them up ... to look them in the eye and tell them we were shutting it down, it would be crushing to them mentally. ..."

"We're getting kind of good at this, with shutting down, delaying, coming back later. It's crazy, but the opportunity for these kids to compete and play some games, I think that's really important. But I'm not so sure, I'm not so sure we can make it."

A former president of the National Association of Basketball Coaches, Brey is as eloquent, grounded and passionate a spokesman as college basketball has, and he's lived the cycle like few others. Six of his team's games have been canceled or postponed, including Wednesday's at Georgia Tech, all because of virus concerns within the opposing program.

When Notre Dame's contest at Pittsburgh last Saturday was postponed, Brey suggested the Fighting Irish play at North Carolina instead. Never mind the short notice, lack of scouting report and the likelihood of defeat against a bigger, stronger and deeper opponent. Brey just wanted to play.

Punished on the backboards, Notre Dame lost 66-65, falling to 3-6 overall, 0-3 in the ACC. But Brey doesn't regret his decision. His team competed admirably and was grateful for the opportunity, which is good enough for him this season.

"I'd love to be thinking about an NCAA tournament résumé," Brey said, "... but I think all of that is at the bottom of the priority list now."

Brey's mentor and former boss, Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski, was boarding the team bus to the airport last Friday when he learned that a family member had contracted COVID-19. Since Krzyzewski and his wife had been in close contact with the relative, they went into quarantine.

Led by associate head coach Jon Scheyer, the Blue Devils flew to Tallahassee, Fla., for their Saturday game against Florida State. Shortly after arriving, they learned that positive cases within FSU's team precluded the game.

Duke hasn't played since Dec. 16 – virus issues at Pittsburgh scrubbed a Dec. 29 road test against the Panthers – and Krzyzewski will miss Wednesday's scheduled contest against Boston College while quarantined.

"It's nobody's fault," he said. "I don't blame Pitt or Florida State. We have no control over [the virus]. We do have control over how we react to it, and we're just trying to react in a very positive way."

Krzyzewski, Florida State's Leonard Hamilton, North Carolina's Roy Williams, Syracuse's Jim Boeheim and Miami's Jim Larranaga give the ACC five coaches age 70 or above. College basketball's oldest coach, Boeheim, 76, tested positive in November but had minor symptoms.

Pitt coach Jeff Capel, 45, contracted the virus Christmas week, missed the Panthers' loss to Louisville and told Pittsburgh media upon his return that the symptoms were "a bitch," nearly sending him to the hospital.

Citing his age, Larranaga, 71, said he's "very concerned" about his health and that he may regret coaching this season if he contracts COVID-19.

"But right now, I love being around my players," Larranaga said. "I love interacting with them and trying to educate them and reminding them how important it is to follow the protocols, to listen to the experts."

That's the high wire many coaches walk. They set aside personal anxieties and revel in their players, who crave not only competing on the court but also bonding off the court.

"I think basketball's been an unbelievable release for our players," Clemson's Brad Brownell said. "... I think it's done a lot for their mental health and overall spirit."

As an Indiana native, Brownell knows how the state treasures basketball, and given Indianapolis' infrastructure of hotels and arenas, the NCAA selected the ideal region for its centralized tournament. Selection Sunday remains scheduled for March 14, the Final Four on April 3-5.

But those dates, like all others this season, are marked in pencil. Virginia and Virginia Tech were supposed to meet last Saturday, but a Cavaliers staff member tested positive Friday, dictating a postponement.

UVA is scheduled to resume play Wednesday, against Wake Forest, likely with a depleted roster and staff due to contact tracing.

"We're very conservative here," Cavaliers coach Tony Bennett said, "and we're trying to make the right decisions. ... You just learn from it."

Learning and adapting are daily chores.

"I haven't been comfortable a single moment with everything we're doing," North Carolina coach Roy Williams said. "But I think it's the right thing to do as long as we keep our ears and eyes open and use our brain. ... So I'm scared to death. I wake up every morning and think, 'OK, what's going to happen to college basketball today?'"

Jaemyn Brakefield's minutes, Mark Williams' potential and more: Duke mailbag

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (December 23, 2020)

Home stretch here, folks. Duke sent its players home for a few days to celebrate the holidays, and I hope all of you are able to do the same in some (safe) form or fashion. No more banter, no more fluff. Just one final thing before we dive into this week's mailbag.

I know how challenging this year has been for everyone, and that makes your support of The Athletic all the more meaningful. Everything we do, we do for our loyal subscribers. So thank you for sticking with us – and with me – these past few months. Hopefully, we'll get something of a reprieve from all the chaos of this year.

Now, onto the good stuff: your questions. And we'll start in an unlikely place.

I know it's hoop season now, but should we expect any major staff changes for the football team? Seems like recruiting has slowed, especially at the skill positions. The offense was a disaster this year. – Connor B.

What, if any, staffing changes do you expect for Duke football? Kevin White gave Cutcliffe a public vote of confidence, which certainly rubbed a lot of Duke fans the wrong way. When Cutcliffe made himself the offensive coordinator, he joked that he hoped he wouldn't have to fire himself. Have you heard anything regarding possible changes? – Andrew H.

Duke football questions – they do exist!

In all seriousness, though, once basketball season tips off, that's basically where all my attention goes. So rather than BS my way through an answer here, I reached out to trusted colleague Matt Fortuna, who always has the pulse of all things ACC. Matt said one source within the program said he's "not sure" if changes are on the way, but also consider this:

Under David Cutcliffe, there's essentially a coaching pipeline for every assistant to eventually rise through the ranks. That's not a bad thing necessarily, as it builds continuity and loyalty, but it does sort of mitigate the impact of moving on from any one or two coaches. The more pressing issue for Duke, at least in terms of recruiting, is who the Blue Devils are up against. With Mack Brown's return to Chapel Hill, and Dave Doeren surprising everyone at NC State this season, the in-state market for top prospects dries up quickly. One NFL agent I spoke to earlier this season said he didn't really understand what Duke's recruiting pitch even is to prospects, beyond elite academics. It's a tough situation to be in, but considering what Cutcliffe means to the program, it's incredibly difficult to see him moving on unless it's his own decision.

And now, back to basketball...

Why is Jaemyn Brakefield not getting more minutes? Is it his defense? I love the unpredictability he brings to the offense. The guy's always doing something (hitting a 3, get an offensive rebound, a nice dish). Is he still earning the staff's trust? – Jose C.

I think it's fair to say everyone outside of Jordan Goldwire and Matthew Hurt is still earning the staff's trust, but I get your point – and you're totally right that what Brakefield has shown in limited minutes is intriguing. Per Synergy, he's averaging 1.3 points per possession, which is the most of anyone on the team, and he's also one of just three players – Hurt and freshman center Mark Williams being the other two – ranking in the 90th percentile for scoring efficiency. Of course, the caveat is that he has only played 72 minutes and taken 26 shots, so it's a small sample size.

So why isn't he getting more minutes? Well, he is. Brakefield is the only player on the roster whose minutes have increased with each game: four in the opener, then 15, 16, 18 and most recently 24. And as long as Jalen Johnson is out with his injured foot – which is still TBD, but at least two or three weeks – I'd expect this trend to continue.

The best thing about Brakefield, at least to me, is the energy he plays with. He's not the best ballhandler or shooter, but everything he does, he does with supreme confidence. In an empty Cameron Indoor, that makes a difference, but it also does in terms of providing a lift. I don't love him playing alongside Hurt, just because that would expose some defensive vulnerabilities, but he's absolutely earned the 15 to 25 minutes per game he's getting.

Do you see Patrick Tapé and Mark Williams getting more minutes? – Branden P.

I do, and they should. Williams is a developmental center with crazy length and shot-blocking potential, but a very limited offensive game. He also needs to continue working on his body and getting stronger if he's going to bang in the paint in the ACC every night. That said, I think his defensive impact already warrants more looks. He's second on the team in defensive rebounding rate, per KenPom.com, and with only Johnson ahead of him, Williams is capable of filling some of that rebounding void.

As for Tapé, I still see him as more of a situational piece. He's solid defensively, especially guarding the pick-and-roll, but I don't know that he gives you enough offensively that you

wouldn't just play Williams. They're obviously different types of players, but given their limited offensive upsides, I usually go for the dude with higher upside. Tapé is going to have some moments this year, including some sneaky steals or assists, but we haven't seen enough of him to know fully what he's capable of.

Any word about players like Joey Baker or Wendell Moore thinking about a transfer as their minutes dwindle? – Ivan S.

Those are conversations for after the season, but I'll just say this: Both of those dudes love Duke. It was their dream school, the place they grew up loving and rooting for. Baker especially has already put in the time and work with minimal returns, and while I'm sure he'd love to be more impactful, he does genuinely seem to love where he is.

As for Moore, Mike Krzyzewski seems to go out of his way most postgame press conferences to mention Moore and "sticking with him." He's right. You do have to stick with Moore, even for as rough a start to this year as he has had. The sophomore wing is shooting a team-worst 21.9 percent from the floor, and he has made just 1 of 9 3-point attempts.

Frankly, it looks to me like Moore is a little lost. The things he did best last season – operating as a secondary ballhandler, locking up the opponent's best perimeter players, smart slashes to the basket – are still well within his wheelhouse, if only he'd stop trying to do too much. The staff was counting on Moore's production, but without it, things have been tough at times. Let's save all the transfer talk for after the season, and for now get back to simplifying Moore's role and getting the kid his confidence back.

You gave us some details previously about the team's "bubble" at the hotel on campus. I'm wondering if you can share more, as I'm interested in what this looks like. For example, are staff and coaches in the hotel or home with their families? Can players see friends or girlfriends? Are walk-ons living under the same rules as scholarship players? Seems like a really tough way for 18- to 22-year-old kids to live, even if it's temporary and for their own protection. Thanks for your insight! – Lindsay W.

I won't lie to you, Lindsay, and say I know every detail about the team's "bubble" on campus. It has been closed off for a reason. I detailed most of what I know earlier when explaining Duke's decision to cancel the rest of its nonconference schedule. But you're spot-on that this is a really tough way for young adults (or really anyone) to live. Imagine you could only be in your office or your bedroom – that's basically their reality right now.

Coaches are not part of the bubble, as they're at home taking care of their families. (Director of basketball operations Nolan Smith, for example, and his wife just welcomed their second child home a few days ago.) Walk-ons are living under the same protocols, as they're still part of the team and can't compromise their teammates. As for players seeing friends and girlfriends, not really. It's a bubble for a reason. The guys get to see each other, but outside of that, social interactions for them (and most athletes at most schools) don't exist. Tough is an understatement.

Do you have any feel that having to adjust and rethink methodology will have any lasting impact on Duke's program, and all of college hoops, moving forward? Is there anything from this hellish year that could actually have positive benefits down the road? – Bruce L.

Love your optimism, Bruce, and yes, I do believe we're going to learn things from this experience.

As far as all of college hoops is concerned, I think some of the measures being taken to ensure athlete safety now will factor into the larger discussion about name, image, and likeness rights. As Jeff Capel said earlier this month, it's hard to look at the accommodations being made for these 18- to 22-year-olds and still argue they're not professionals. They take all of their classes online. They basically live in the basketball office. They're sequestered in a hotel away from the student body. They have special access to COVID-19 testing, more so than even some of our invaluable frontline health workers. So, yeah, that's a tough sell on the "amateur" thing. And don't forget – the pandemic hasn't halted the impending NIL changes. The NCAA (and most likely Congress) has to sort something out essentially by July, when state laws begin going into effect.

On a more Duke-specific level, I believe the pandemic could alter a few things. Duke's staff spoke highly this preseason of the individual work players got in when they returned to campus. While that was for safety concerns, might it not be something that the staff continues to do? As far as scheduling, the idea of an on-campus MTE might seem strange under conventional circumstances, but I see it as a very cool way to honor people and causes close to a program. Duke's was named for Dr. Onye E. Akwari, the first Black surgeon on the school's faculty and a leading proponent for Black representation in medical fields. I'd like to see Duke and other schools keep those sorts of causes in the public eye, and hopefully attract some good nonconference games while they're at it.

Brakefield's minutes, Williams' potential and more: Duke mailbag (cont.)

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (December 23, 2020)

I know I should be focused on this season, but with all the uncertainty and turbulent landscape, it's hard to stay locked in. So I guess my question would be, which Duke team of this decade do you think had the most chemistry problems? This isn't to troll anyone or start a fight, but it's a fun thought experiment and it's no secret some teams are tighter than others. My bet would be that 2012 team with Austin Rivers. I truly believe that's what led to Andre Dawkins taking a redshirt year after spending a year with Rivers not passing him the ball when he was open. (Yes, I know he was dealing with his sister's death and I'm not trivializing it, but that would drive any player nuts.) Again, not looking to ruffle feathers, just throwing it out there to you and the commenters just for fun. Happy holidays! – Chris P.

This pre-dates my time on the beat, Chris, but I'll do some "process of elimination" work with you. Cross out last season and the year before. I know those two teams, having covered both in some capacity, and chemistry wasn't an issue. Cross out the title teams in 2010 and '15 too. (This year isn't done, nor would I place it in the conversation.) That leaves:

- 2010-11, when Smith and Kyle Singler were seniors.
- 2011-12, the Austin Rivers year.
- 2012-13, with seniors Mason Plumlee, Seth Curry, and Ryan Kelly.
- 2013-14, with Jabari Parker and Rodney Hood. (Jeez, this was that many years ago?)
- 2015-16, with Brandon Ingram and Grayson Allen's best statistical season.
- 2016-17, with Jayson Tatum and Luke Kennard.
- 2017-18, with Marvin Bagley III and Wendell Carter Jr.

Of those, you're probably down to two in my opinion: the Austin Rivers year, as you note, and the Bagley/Carter year. The latter was more an issue of over-recruiting/playing similar positions, but both guys ended up in the top 10 of the NBA Draft and that team made the Elite Eight. That also marked the freshman years of Trevon Duval, Gary Trent Jr. and Alex O'Connell. There may have been fit issues with that team, but not the chemistry ones I've heard about with the 2012 group.

I don't know Rivers, nor did I cover that team. I do know Smith, though, and can only imagine the massive leadership void his departure would have left. I guess I'll leave Duke fans with this, and consider it my holiday gift to you all: You want to know how I learned about the Rivers behind-the-scenes drama? All the accusations of being a bad teammate, not the best locker room fit, yada yada? From NBA scouts and personnel, who called this spring asking about similar concerns ...with UNC's Cole Anthony.

Sluggish offense no more. Duke finds its shooting touch to top Notre Dame.

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (December 16, 2020)

Playing outside Cameron Indoor Stadium for the first time this season, No. 21 Duke found the answers to its sluggish offense to win its ACC opener against Notre Dame.

The Blue Devils shot 51.7 percent, seven points higher than their percentage over the season's first four games, to beat the Fighting Irish 75-65 at Purcell Pavilion in South Bend, Indiana.

Duke (3-2, 1-0 ACC) hit 31 of 60 shots overall, including 8 of 15 on 3-pointers. The Blue Devils did so despite playing without freshman forward Jalen Johnson, who is out with a foot injury.

Sophomore Matthew Hurt led four Duke players in double figures with 18 points. Freshman guards DJ Steward (16) and Jeremy Roach (14) also contributed well after earning starting assignments from Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski.

Freshman forward Jaemyn Brakefield added 10 points off the bench for the Blue Devils.

Junior guard Dane Goodwin led all scorers with 25 points for Notre Dame (2-3, 0-1)

The Blue Devils shot 55 percent in the first half, building a lead as large as 11 before taking a 41-34 advantage to intermission.

The Irish drew as close as five points on two occasions in the second half, the last time at 55-50 with 10:43 to play.

But Duke scored the game's next nine points on Jordan Goldwire's jumper, Brakefield's driving layup, Steward's 3-pointer and Hurt's fade-away jumper in the lane to push its lead to 64-50 with 7:26 to play.

Brakefield, a 6-8 forward, continued to produce points for the Blue Devils off the bench as he scored in double figures for the third time in his last four games. He made 4 of 8 shots, including both his 3-point shots, and played turnover-free basketball in 24 minutes of play.

LANE VIOLATION

Duke played its first game this season without freshman forward Jalen Johnson. The preseason all-ACC pick is sidelined with an unspecified foot injury that has him wearing a walking boot. Johnson didn't travel with the team to Notre Dame. He's due to have another MRI in two or three weeks to assess healing progress. Duke's next two games are Dec. 29 against Pittsburgh and Jan. 2 against Florida State.

ICYMI

Notre Dame added another perimeter option as Santa Clara transfer Trey Wertz, a Charlotte native, found out less than four hours before the game he would be eligible for the remainder of the season. The NCAA made a blanket ruling Wednesday that all Division I transfers in all sports can play immediately without sitting out a season.

MAKING SENSE OF THE NUMBERS

1: Shots made by Duke sophomore Wendell Moore in 19 attempts from the field over Duke's last three games.

8: Season-low number of turnovers committed by Duke against Notre Dame. The Blue Devils entered the game averaging 16 turnovers per game.

9: Minutes played by 6-10 center Patrick Tapé, a graduate transfer from Columbia who earned his first start for Duke.

Minus Jalen Johnson, Duke finds resiliency in its other freshmen

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (December 16, 2020)

The people at Band-Aid do fine work, but asking for a 6-foot, 9-inch piece of gauze might be a bit of a stretch even for them.

That imaginary plaster, though, was what so many faux physicians prescribed online for Duke this week. On Tuesday afternoon, the program announced that freshman wing Jalen Johnson will be out indefinitely with a foot injury. Given Johnson was one of just two Blue Devils (along with Matthew Hurt) to start the first four games this season – and the fact that he, you know, is arguably as talented as anyone on the roster – that news came as a sordid surprise. And on the heels of two nonconference losses in the span of a week, too? Let's just say short-term expectations for this squad didn't exactly surge at EOB on Tuesday.

"You know how talented he is, how good of a player he is," Hurt said of Johnson. "Of course we miss him, but next man up."

That's a nice idea in theory. In actuality? Totally different animal. Saying you're going to seamlessly replace a human wrecking ball in the open floor is not the same as actually doing it.

Only ... Duke did – and pretty easily, at that.

In beating Notre Dame 75-65 Wednesday, on the road and in the first game of the conference schedule, Duke proved that it's premature to hit the panic button. Yes, Johnson is a dynamic talent. Yes, Duke's ceiling is much higher long term with him than without. Yes, he'll be welcomed back with open arms whenever he's fully healthy.

But in the interim, the sky isn't crashing down on Cameron Indoor. Far from it. Because on the first night without one stud freshman, all Duke's other frosh showed they're finally figuring this college basketball thing out.

"We're not any kind of juggernaut," Mike Krzyzewski said after the game. "We can be a good team, but in order to be a very good team, it's going to take some seasoning. It's not like the teams we've had over the last number of years. It's gotta be brought along a little bit different way."

That different way was on full display in South Bend, with Duke performing the best it has all season, stunningly without one of its best players. Krzyzewski started his fifth different lineup in five games, highlighting how much mixing and matching there still is to do with this group. Graduate transfer Patrick Tapé drew his first career start after seldom playing the first four games. Three guards at once, in Jordan Goldwire, D.J. Steward, and Jeremy Roach? Sure thing. It's all part of the process with this developing group.

The results, though, were a validation of the process. The past eight days, after Duke's 83-68 loss to Illinois, Krzyzewski said his team prepared harder than it has all year. That meant teaching new concepts in practice but more so learning how to practice. Remember: These players didn't get on campus until August, and they didn't start playing together until many months later. They're very much still in the incubation phase of this experiment, where a flash of promise or problem can send far-reaching ripples. "I don't think we were ready to prepare to the level for those (Michigan State and Illinois) games as we did for this game," Krzyzewski said. There was a reason, after all, that Krzyzewski basically ran an hour-long practice Wednesday instead of the team's normal game-day shootaround.

But if Duke plays with the same energy and fluidity it did Wednesday, this week's schedule may well become the standard. The Blue Devils jumped out to a 12-5 lead in the first six minutes of the game and never trailed thereafter. Much of that came as a result of playing through Hurt, who increasingly looks like the offensive fulcrum this group desperately needs. In adding 20 pounds of muscle to his base this offseason, Hurt has transformed himself into a legitimate inside-outside threat – and one that Duke can run its offense through. Case in point: Hurt scored four of his eventual team-high 18 in those initial six minutes, but he was also touching the ball basically every possession.

As he probably should be.

It's not just that Hurt's combo of size and shooting makes him a matchup nightmare operating at the top of the key (although it does). It's that banking on Hurt to do that now, on a nightly basis, sets a tone. It's a jumping-off point, a springboard. Really, Hurt's presence provides a constant that Duke's other freshmen can more clearly work around.

As Steward said afterward, "We've just really been focusing on getting the ball inside and then going out."

That's a plan, which is more than can honestly be said for Duke's first four games. As stiff and stagnant as the Blue Devils looked at home, they looked equally free and creative in South Bend. Steward, in the flashiest play of the night, crossed over a Notre Dame defender before

draining a step-back 3 in his grill. Less than a minute after Brakefield entered the game, he drained his first of two 3s. Roach, who started looking comfortable in the second half against Illinois, picked up where he had left off.

That trio combined for seven of Duke's eight made 3s, plus 40 of the team's 75 total points. Translation: Duke's three most critical freshmen – at least for as long as Johnson is out – were putting the puzzle pieces together in real time.

"You can practice offense and defense, but until you face high-level competition, you don't know just how hard and how sharp you're going to have to be," Krzyzewski said. "It's called experience, and that's why you see the veteran teams doing so much better than the younger teams – unless the younger team has exceptional talent; sometimes our teams get away with that. But our team has good talent, not exceptional. And so we just need to keep learning through the experience of playing these good teams."

As encouraging as anything, beyond the individual flashes from Roach, Steward, and Brakefield, was how a young work-in-progress team came together in the clutch. At several points in the final 25 minutes, despite Duke leading by as many as 17, Mike Brey's team did what veteran bunches do. It made a run.

Only in response, Krzyzewski's team didn't do what young teams do. It didn't cave. Just before halftime, with Duke up just five, Roach scored a layoff to up that margin. And in the second half, when the Fighting Irish cut the deficit back to five with just under 12 minutes left, Brakefield canned his second 3. Minutes later, another pesky five-point cushion, and Goldwire scored a jumper to make it a three-possession game.

Those are the plays good teams make. Winning teams.

The sort of team Duke wants to be but hasn't always looked like three weeks into this season.

Asked the biggest lesson he and the other freshman have learned since the Illinois loss eight days ago, Steward didn't hesitate. "Just showing poise. Letting the game come to us," he said. "We're freshmen, so we go out there, we're excited to play. We've just got to stay composed and be ready to play."

The early word on Johnson, Krzyzewski said, is that he'll be re-evaluated in two to three weeks. But for now, he has a boot on his foot, and there's no telling when (or, worst-case scenario, if) he'll be back. This means Roach, Steward and Brakefield can't let up anytime soon.

"All three of them bring their own different skill set," Hurt said, "and they've improved since day one."

It's one thing for Hurt to say that about his teammates. It's another for the Hall of Fame coach to do so, with all the talent and egos he's used to managing. And yet, doesn't this sound like someone satisfied with the growth of his youngsters?

"Jeremy played like a veteran tonight."

"I have a lot of confidence in D.J."

"Brakefield had a hell of a game for us."

Sure, Krzyzewski would like to have Johnson back. So would his teammates. At his peak, his potential to affect winning is tremendous. But what Duke learned Wednesday – or more specifically, what its emerging freshmen trio learned – will endure regardless of when or in what capacity Johnson eventually returns.

"It got down to five points, where there's a lot of game pressure, and our kids made plays," Krzyzewski said. "They invested a lot in this game in preparation, and when you invest a lot, you don't want to lose your investment. And I think that showed up for them. But they did that on their own. That's one of the things that makes me even more happy, and proud of them."

Now, about that gigantic bandage?

It doesn't seem as necessary as it did 24 hours ago, especially not when the Blue Devils healed their own wounds.

What is behind Duke's decision to end its nonconference basketball season

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (December 10, 2020)

Every story has two sides. The surface level – the social media spin cycle, the rival fan bases, the proverbial shot-taking – and then reality.

Duke's decision on Thursday to cancel the remainder of its nonconference schedule is a reminder of that. On the surface, the timing is interesting. It comes just two days after an 83-68 loss to No. 6 Illinois, the Blue Devils' second nonconference loss in a week's time. In his postgame press conference, Mike Krzyzewski was asked – in reference to comments made by Pittsburgh coach and former Duke assistant Jeff Capel – if it “felt right” to continue playing games amid a surging COVID-19 pandemic.

Krzyzewski's response was an acknowledgment of how dire the situation is, and more directly, that “we need to constantly look at this thing.”

The national response to his comments were what you'd expect: a lots of jokes about back ailments, and the coincidental timing of his comments, on the heels of two home losses to Big Ten powers.

Now for the reality, after Duke announced Thursday that its nonconference schedule is over, with plans to play ACC games on Dec. 16 and 29, with a holiday break in between to allow players to see their families in a more substantial way than they had in months.

Over the summer, when universities nationwide were formulating their return-to-campus plans, Duke differentiated from almost all of the rest of the ACC. Despite clearance from the conference to resume voluntary activities as early as June 1, the school opted not to bring its men's basketball players back to campus until early August. As Richard Hurt, the father of Duke sophomore Matthew Hurt, told The Athletic on Thursday night, there was a reason for the delayed return.

“They were going to go later than everybody else,” Hurt said, “just because they wanted to make sure they, from a procedural perspective, had everything kind of thought of and ironed out.”

When players returned to campus on Aug. 2, they moved into the Washington Duke Inn and were isolated in their rooms until they returned negative COVID-19 tests. Even then, they were only allowed to leave the hotel to go to the basketball facilities on campus. Players were placed in groups of four and could only interact with those in their pod. Their meals were served at the hotel or at the basketball offices, where catered “grab-and-go” options were prepared.

That isolation didn't stop when classes began. The staff set up a virtual classroom in the basketball offices for players to attend courses, meaning all their non-hotel interactions happened within the confines of the basketball office. Meals. Weightlifting. Practices, when it got to that point.

“They had spent every waking hour in their rooms,” Hurt said.

And why adhere to such strict guidelines, other than personal safety?

If you don't – even just one person – the season's in jeopardy.

It's not like any of these plans were over-the-top or reactionary. Keep in mind: Duke was also the first school to bow out of the ACC tournament last March, even before the conference itself called off the event. University leadership, including athletic director Kevin White and president Vincent Price, made the decision not to participate in a postseason despite sporting an impressive 25-6 record.

That steadfastness was reinforced in the fall, when Duke opted not to allow anyone – even players' parents and media – into Cameron Indoor Stadium for games.

And throughout the months leading up to the season, Krzyzewski's message has remained unchanged. In weekly conference calls with other top coaches (Roy Williams, Bill Self, Tom Izzo, Jim Boeheim and Mark Few, among them), Krzyzewski expressed concerns about the impending start of the season. He took the lead in advocating for an everyone-gets-in NCAA Tournament, predicting the postponements and cancellations that have come to pass. He urged the NCAA to consider eliminating the nonconference schedule altogether, to postpone the season until the start of the new year, when hopefully the pandemic would be better contained with vaccines on the horizon.

The pandemic has hardly been contained. It is exploding across America, with Wednesday marking the first day that more than 3,000 Americans died.

“As a family, we value people who do what they say,” Hurt said. “Coach Krzyzewski, with us, has done what he said he would do from the beginning. So whether it's this or other aspects of Matthew's experience at Duke, he's been 100 percent transparent with us, and he's kept his word and followed through on every one of them.”

Then Duke's scheduled season opener – or second one, technically, considering its bowed out of the Battle 4 Atlantis when the event was moved to South Dakota – against Gardner-Webb was postponed, due to COVID-19 issues within the Bulldogs' program. Now, after Thursday's announcement, that game will not be replaced. But that game spurred Krzyzewski and his staff to restart conversations about the smartest course of action.

Hurt said he spoke to Krzyzewski, a rare occurrence in-season, before Duke's 75-69 loss to Michigan State on Dec. 1. The coach confirmed in that call, and in Zooms with all the parents, that he was leaning toward shortening or scrapping the nonconference slate. Part of that clearly stemmed from concerns about the virus.

But just as central to Krzyzewski's thinking was the mental fatigue his players (and those around the country) have endured in sequestering themselves from any sort of social interaction.

“One of the things he has always talked to us about even in the recruiting phase – and was proud of – is he carves out a certain period of time in the schedule over Christmas break so that the kids could go home and spend that time with their families,” Hurt said. “Because he wants that for himself; he wants to be able to spend time with his family, and he wants his kids to spend time with their families. So the notion that this is all of a sudden coming up because he lost a couple of games, to me is ridiculous.”

And indeed the Blue Devils will get a much-needed reprieve. Duke was scheduled to play Saturday against Charleston Southern, but that game was called off due to COVID-19 protocols in that program. A source told The Athletic Duke most likely would have canceled that game, as well as the rescheduled Dec. 19 date with Gardner-Webb anyway. The Blue Devils' next game will be their ACC opener at Notre Dame on Dec. 16. Following that game, players will be free to travel home.

Hurt said he intends for Matthew and the family to drive home to Rochester, Minn., following the game in South Bend, Ind. Players will have a few days with their families before returning to campus by Dec. 23, where they again will undergo return-to-campus protocols before getting ready to play Pitt on Dec. 29.

“This is the best decision we could make as a program, in making sure that we are doing the right thing for our players,” Krzyzewski said in a statement. “This will also allow our team to have time over the holidays to safely enjoy with their families. These kids need to be with their families, at least for a little bit.” He added, “These kids go through so much, and we need to take care of them.”

In response to how everything has played out, Hurt pointed to Krzyzewski's consistency from the summer until now.

“They do not know Mike Krzyzewski the way I do,” Hurt said, “And the way some of the other parents know Mike Krzyzewski. Because Mike Krzyzewski cares about his kids, his program, his university, and as trying a time as this is, he's trying to figure out what the best thing to do is, and that's not an easy thing.”

“And by the way, you can disagree with playing the games and still play the games – because the kids and others still want to play them. Those things aren't mutually exclusive.”

Hurt said he spoke with Matthew on Thursday afternoon to confirm the family's plans following the Notre Dame game. Matthew, his father said, is excited about the opportunity for a break from the stringent lifestyle of the last four months.

And, of course, Matthew's parents are excited to see their son.

But this ordeal has been a months-long work in progress, not something decided hastily because of two losses. Safety has been the priority for Duke dating to the onset of the pandemic, and Thursday's decision is just the latest chapter in striving to meet it.

“I feel very strongly about people who are just going after (Krzyzewski) because they feel like they need to knock somebody off a pedestal,” Hurt said. “This isn't the subject to do it, especially in the environment we're in. This isn't the time to do that. Mike is doing what he feels he needs to do for his kids and his program, period.”

Mike Krzyzewski questions playing basketball games during coronavirus pandemic

By Alex Scarborough, ESPN.com (December 9, 2020)

Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski on Tuesday called on college basketball to consider whether it's best to continue playing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I would just like for the safety, the mental and physical health of players and staff to assess where we're at," Krzyzewski said.

Krzyzewski's comments came after an 83-68 loss to Illinois.

The five-time championship-winning coach said that the idea for everyone to start on Nov. 25 wasn't planned well. The goal, according to Krzyzewski, was to get in as many games as possible.

Many players won't be able to go home and visit family for holidays, Krzyzewski said, arguing that this is a time when they should do that for their mental health.

"We're just plowing through this," he said.

The sport is largely governed by an oversight committee. "Anything that's led by committee is not agile," Krzyzewski said, adding that he's "not sure who leads college basketball."

An NCAA official said the organization does not have a response to Krzyzewski's perspective on the current state of college basketball in the pandemic. "We don't have any comment," said David Worlock, the NCAA tournament spokesman.

Krzyzewski cited the rise in COVID-19 cases as the basis of his argument. On Tuesday, there were 220,225 new coronavirus cases reported in the United States and 2,597 deaths, according to The New York Times.

"People are saying the next six weeks are going to be the worst," Krzyzewski said. "To me, it's already pretty bad. On the other side of it, there are these vaccines that are coming out. By the end of the month, 20 million vaccine shots will be given. By the end of January or in February, another 100 million. Should we not reassess that? See just what would be best?"

Krzyzewski recognized that his comments could be taken the wrong way because they were made shortly after a 15-point loss to Illinois, which dropped No. 10 Duke to 2-2 on the season.

"We got our butts beat," he said. "For the good of the game and the mental and physical health of players and staff, we need to constantly look at this thing. I think that's a smart thing to do."

Duke has had two games postponed so far this season, but as Krzyzewski acknowledged, what happens in December isn't as important to some as fielding a tournament in March.

"I know the NCAA is worried about the endgame," he said. "They're not as worried about the game we're playing right now."

For Duke after another loss, it's less about reloading and more about remixing

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (December 9, 2020)

The recipe was clear, and the cupboard was stocked.

Right? And really, isn't it always at Duke? The specific ingredients may change, one spice instead of another, but the overall formula – at least over the past five years – has pretty much stayed the same. Basically, reload every summer with a new batch of uber-talented freshmen; surround them with experienced veterans; and watch, over the course of six months, how the parts rise as one.

Same soufflé, different day.

Only, is this one the same? It would be foolish to draw any concrete conclusions about the Blue Devils through four games – especially when you consider the six freshmen, the condensed offseason, the returning role players – but it's not unfair to at least ask the question.

The fact is, the team that lost 83-68 to No. 6 Illinois on Tuesday is not the No. 10 team in the country. When the next AP poll is released, Duke's ranking will assuredly drop. The only real question, then, is how far is the fall? And more important, is a climb back up realistic?

That's the question Mike Krzyzewski and his players must now answer, after Duke's second consecutive nonconference loss at home. It's the first time that's happened in Durham since 1982-83, back when Krzyzewski was still fodder for newspaper puns and not Hall of Fame speeches. And, sure, COVID-19 has kept the Cameron Craziest out of their cathedral. That matters. Atmosphere matters. But the building does independently, too, and nothing has changed in that respect. Only the group within it has.

"This is not inherited wealth, where we have what we have had," Krzyzewski said. "What we have had is really damn good, and it's produced a lot of championship teams. We do not have that; you have to earn that with a new group, and this group is one of the youngest groups we've had. So it creates a dynamic that's difficult."

Difficult, indeed. Truthfully, this might be one of the most difficult rotations Krzyzewski has had to crack in no time. As countless players have said this preseason, there's no Zion Williamson-esque player walking through the locker room door. There's not a Brandon Ingram, a Jayson Tatum, an R.J. Barrett. That's not to say the players Krzyzewski does have are bad. Far from it. But that overwhelming, elite-level talent? That gets-you-a-bucket-when-you-need-it-most type of guy? He ain't on this roster. Which means everyone else's load becomes just a little bit heavier.

Or as Krzyzewski said so succinctly: "We're not as good as they are."

That much, quickly, is becoming clear. But what, specifically, has gone awry, and can it be amended?

To know where Duke goes next, you have to know where it came from. All throughout this offseason, in piecemeal portions of Zoom calls and scrimmage clips, a hazy identity for this team came together. A few versatile wings here, some sharpshooting guards there, and just a dash of veteran experience sprinkled throughout. Only, one problem – a big one. The image of that team, that offensive identity, came together more readily than the players did.

"Whatever you see in the offseason, if you don't have a veteran team where you have a bunch of key guys coming back, you're kind of experimenting," Krzyzewski said. "You don't know for sure what the offense will look like. We thought we could be more of an up-tempo, penetrate, kick, ball screen, and be free shooters."

"Obviously, that's not going on."

With the Blue Devils on Tuesday, that couldn't have been more apparent. Krzyzewski started his fourth different lineup in four games, this time going big to combat Illinois center Kofi Cockburn. But in five minutes of game time, Mark Williams accrued two fouls and the Fighting Illini jumped out to a 12-2 lead. That plan, quickly, was scrapped, with Williams playing only two of the remaining 35 minutes.

"Everyone's versatile on the team and we can adapt to any set of lineups," sophomore forward Matthew Hurt said. "We're going to trust Coach, and whoever he feels like is going to be out there is going to be out there."

That, though, is sort of the problem. Who can Krzyzewski trust at this early juncture?

So far, only three players really fall into that bucket – and it should come as absolutely no surprise that two are returners and the third is the closest this team has to a dominant freshman. Senior Jordan Goldwire and Hurt, to date, have provided the Blue Devils some consistency on both ends of the court. Hurt, who set a career-high with six made 3-pointers Friday against Bellarmine, looks like the ideal stretch four he was sold to be as a high-profile

high schooler. And Goldwire, as the only four-year scholarship senior on the roster, has upped his offensive game closer to his usually dominant defense. Those two single-handedly scored a third of Duke's points Tuesday, not to mention their six combined assists.

And then there's Jalen Johnson, the 6-foot-9, 225-pound wing who so dazzled in his debut. Since that explosive opener, when he finished with 19 points and 19 rebounds, Johnson has cooled some. He made only 3 of his 10 shots against Illinois, settling for midrange and perimeter jumpers at moments that demanded more physical drives. But that's also to be expected from a kid who doesn't turn 19 for another two weeks, who missed most of his senior year of high school, and who is playing in his fourth college game. He still has more natural upside than anyone on this roster, especially as a small-ball forward who can snag rebounds and immediately initiate in transition.

Outside of those three, though, there are lots of question marks and lottery tickets. Take Williams, for example, a tantalizing 7-foot shot-blocker who has now played 30 combined minutes in four games. His body isn't ready, isn't yet strong enough, for the physicality of high-level college hoops. But run down the roster and similar conundrums come up. Such as:

What to do with Wendell Moore Jr., a valuable (and versatile) role player a season ago as a freshman? He played just eight minutes against Illinois, in the sort of high-stakes game where veteran savvy shows out. "Wendell is really struggling," Krzyzewski said. "God bless him. He's just really struggling."

Or how about freshman guard D.J. Steward? After dropping 24 points off the bench in the opener, he struggled mightily in back-to-back games ... and then promptly regained his form in the second half Tuesday, nailing the corner 3 that continued Duke's longtime streak. His 13 points tied for second-most on the team.

That tie came with fellow freshman guard Jeremy Roach, who had easily his best game in a Blue Devils uniform. Roach's stat line of 13 points, seven assists, four rebounds and no turnovers is super, but it doesn't do justice to the aggressiveness he played with. "I feel like my first three games, I was kind of feeling it out and kind of deferring to the older guys," he said, "but today I had to be in attack mode – and (now) just do that for the rest of the season."

You can just as easily add junior Joey Baker to that list, or freshman forward Jaemyn Brakefield. But the point remains: Who can K trust on any given night?

Four games do not a season make. As Johnson posted on Instagram after the game, this year – especially given all the COVID-19 cancellations that are bound to occur – is the epitome of "it's a marathon, not a sprint." Duke, though, in an effort to salvage its offense and send its season back on an upward climb, might want to take a very specific page out of its playbook. Namely, the page that turned from the five first minutes Tuesday to the other 35:

Scrap what you thought you had. It's not there (or at least it's not there yet).

The offensive statistics, as much as the eye test, back that up. Per KenPom, Duke is ranked No. 124 nationally in effective field goal percentage. It's also No. 210 in turnover percentage, No. 205 in free-throw percentage and No. 151 in 3-point percentage.

In other words, time to try something new.

And if we're thinking in terms of solutions, there is actually an apt place for Duke to start: with the guys busting their butts most consistently. Other than the aforementioned trusted trio, that looks like Roach and Brakefield for the time being. Maybe Moore turns it around soon and leans back into the simple effort plays that made him effective as a freshman. Maybe Steward settles down and plays more under control. Maybe Baker's shots start dropping, or Williams' post moves evolve.

But rather than throwing everything in the pot and hoping it tastes good, perhaps a simpler recipe is what the situation calls for. Less spice, more offensive sets. Let Hurt keep gunning from deep, let Goldwire run the operation and let Johnson use his freaky body the best way possible. And then fill in the gaps with grit and guts. After all, what's the alternative?

"We're just an average team that's very young that has to get better. On the offensive end, you know, we're not confident. For whatever reason it is, we are not confident on that end of the court," Krzyzewski said. "I've got to do things to make sure they get that confidence. So, a lot of work to do."

It is a lot. And, given this sort of start, it will continue to be.

But the best chefs improvise from time to time, and the best coaches are the same. Krzyzewski's ingredients aren't bad. It's just clearly time to try a new recipe.

Pandemic causes another Duke basketball schedule shuffle. Here's what's what.

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (December 3, 2020)

Less than two weeks into the new season, Duke is postponing a second game due to an opponents' COVID-19 issues. But the Blue Devils did reach an agreement Thursday to reschedule another game that had been postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Elon, one of four teams scheduled to play in the Duke Classic multi-team event, is quarantining and isolating for 14 days due to a positive COVID-19 test in its program.

The Phoenix had been scheduled to play Duke at Cameron Indoor Stadium Sunday at noon as well as Howard in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday night as part of the multi-team event, which Duke and Howard are co-hosting. Both of those games are postponed.

Duke and Elon have not ruled out rescheduling their game. Duke attempted to find a replacement team but has been unable to do. So, the Blue Devils are not planning to play Sunday.

Duke is scheduled to play Bellarmine on Friday night at Cameron in the first game of the Duke Classic.

The Knights, from Louisville, Kentucky, had to stop team activities last month due to a positive COVID-19 test, causing them to reschedule their first three scheduled games to later in December and January. But they have since passed protocols, resumed practice and are set to travel to Durham Thursday to play what will be the program's Division I debut Friday night.

Bellarmine, formerly a Division II program, will also travel to Washington, D.C., to play Howard on Sunday.

DUKE, GARDNER-WEBB RESCHEDULED

Meanwhile, Duke (1-1) and Gardner-Webb have rescheduled their game for Dec. 19 at Cameron Indoor Stadium. The game will start at 2 p.m. and be televised by ACC Network Extra online.

The Blue Devils and Bulldogs had been scheduled to open the season Nov. 25 before Gardner-Webb halted team activities.

The ragged nature of scheduling during the pandemic was expected, of course. Still, it does impact the players.

"We look forward to playing every game," Duke freshman forward Jaemyn Brakefield said Thursday during a video news conference with reporters. "Like the first game. Who doesn't want to play their first game? But you just have to go at it every day and play hard, not knowing if you are going to play the next day or if you will have the rest of your season. It's just hard to take in."

So, Duke's schedule now shows Friday night's game with Bellarmine, Tuesday night's game with No. 5 Illinois and a Dec. 12 game with Charleston Southern. All three of those games are at Cameron.

The Blue Devils scheduled to travel to Notre Dame to open the regular season on Dec. 16, followed by the rescheduled game with Gardner-Webb on Dec. 19.

Duke is off over the holidays before resuming ACC play at home with Pittsburgh on Dec. 29 to close out the 2020 portion of its schedule.

ELON LOSES GAMES TO DUKE, UNC

Elon not only lost a game with Duke but also a game scheduled at North Carolina on Dec. 12. The school announced it paused team activities due to a positive test among its Tier 1 personnel, which includes players, coaches and team support staff.

The school tests Tier 1 personnel three times per week. The positive test resulted from a regularly scheduled test conducted Monday, the school said in a news release.

"As we have said since the onset of COVID, the safety of our student-athletes is paramount and we will follow the guidance of our medical staff in making these decisions," Elon athletic director Dave Blank said in a statement. "We will continue to monitor the situation and make arrangements that will return our team to practice and competition when it is safe to do so."

Jalen Johnson, Duke's latest stud freshman, is going to be a problem

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (November 28, 2020)

Behold, the Jalen Johnson show.

At least the start of it. No. 9 Duke has only played one game, after all, an 81-71 season-opening win over Coppin State on Saturday. And while there's so much to take away from those first 40 minutes – and so much more not to overreact to – one thing cannot be ignored: Johnson looks like a surefire star in this young college basketball season.

Probably because after one game, he already sort of is one.

Honestly, though: What freshman drops 19 points (without missing a shot), 19 rebounds, five assists and four blocks in his first college game? Johnson, that's who. He wasn't perfect, especially when you factor in his game-high seven turnovers ... but again, this was the dude's first college game.

"Nineteen and 19, you know, we wouldn't win without him," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "Overall, (if) we don't turn the ball over like we do, we'd be jumping up and down here."

It's true – and fair – that Duke's stunning 22 turnovers will be something of a wet blanket over the game in general and Johnson's debut. Giving the ball away like that, as Krzyzewski discussed at length on Zoom, just isn't acceptable. It's not conducive to winning, especially not for a team with seven newcomers. But after an eight-month layoff, a new preseason schedule and structure, the original opener canceled due to Gardner-Webb's COVID-19 concerns, well, maybe cut these kids just a tiny bit of slack.

And instead of taking one game as the end-all, be-all of what's wrong with Duke, let's focus on the person who was most right: Johnson.

It was obvious early on that Johnson could do things that most human beings simply cannot. Most of us, for example, cannot leap three feet in the air, levitate and then deftly drop a basketball through the hoop with one hand. Nor can we block a regulation-size basketball with the ease of swatting soap bubbles. Johnson, however, is not like most. He can do these things. He might be able to do even more.

"The win was the only thing on my mind," Johnson said, "and I was doing whatever I could to help the guys get the W."

Really, Johnson hasn't been the talk of the Blue Devils' preseason. Other freshmen attracted more praise, including guards D.J. Steward and Jeremy Roach and forward Henry Coleman III. Now, though, it's obvious why more people weren't talking up Johnson. Why bother? Just watch the guy play for a half, and you'll know all you need to.

In the first half alone, Johnson showed off all the talents that make him as intriguing as any player on this Duke roster. The aforementioned disregard for gravity aside, he has the versatility and well-rounded talent needed to excel in modern basketball. That means he understands the gift his 6-foot-9, 225-pound frame presents, and how it's a springboard (especially on some of his dunks) for everything he does.

One example: Given Coppin State's undersized nature and proclivity for pulling up from deep – the Eagles launched 35 3s – Krzyzewski said he knew he needed to go small. That meant few minutes for his traditional bigs and more for the agile forwards such as Johnson and sophomore Matthew Hurt. With Hurt filling the stretch-four role, that left Johnson acting as something of a small-ball interior player. He thrived. Nineteen rebounds is the third-most by a Duke freshman in a game, behind only Marvin Bagley III and Jahliil Okafor. And Johnson's 15 defensive rebounds are the most by any freshman in program history.

"I can't remember when we had a guy with 19 rebounds," Krzyzewski said, "but he's shown that in practice."

Beyond the rebounding, Johnson's athleticism makes him an unforgiving defender. The nature of the game means he won't always be able to body defenders, but he has the wingspan, strength and speed to catch up when he needs to. Case in point, barely two minutes into the game when Johnson came flying from behind Coppin State's Anthony Tarke and relocated his shot to another area code. Then, just for good measure, Johnson gave Tarke a little staredown.

Duke fans, you should love that. The block, obviously, but the swagger too.

On the offensive end, Johnson flashed the vision that coaches have raved about for weeks. Whether as the lead ballhandler in transition or just finding a teammate in the half-court, Johnson seems to see every pass on the court. It helps he has the strength and accuracy to make them. But it wouldn't be a surprise for him to operate as a point-forward at times, grabbing a rebound and starting the break, where he'll draw defenders before kicking out a pinpoint pass.

"It's just really whatever coach wants us to do, how he wants us to execute things," Johnson said. "You're just not gonna question it. If I'm at the five (sometimes), I'm at the five."

And obviously there's the scoring element. Johnson is such a force slashing to the rim, not to mention on offensive put-backs, that he's always going to get his, even if that's not another perfect shooting night. Now if the free-throw and 3-point shooting hold up and make him a true three-level scorer? Well, there simply aren't many people at the college level capable of stopping someone like Johnson.

Other players besides Johnson impressed on Saturday, and they deserve mention. Steward, with a personality as dynamic as his scoring punch, dropped 24 points (fourth-most by a Duke freshman in his debut) on 10-of-18 shooting, including 4-of-9 on 3-point attempts. He also had nine rebounds, second-most on the team, and appears an integral part of Duke's multi-headed backcourt monster.

Hurt and Wendell Moore Jr., the two returning sophomores, had their moments. Moore struggled early to find his level, but he finished with 13 points and four rebounds. And for everything Moore did during the game, his accountability afterward – he also had four fouls and three turnovers – speaks volumes. "I'm supposed to be a leader on this team, so it's supposed to be my job to (get us settled)," he said. "I think personally for myself, I didn't do as well of a job as I could tonight, so that's just something we have to improve upon going forward." Meanwhile, Hurt played with more confidence than he did at any point last season, firing freely from all over the floor. His efficiency needs to improve, but if he can give the Blue Devils about 15 points and seven boards a night? You would gladly take that.

But at least through one game – remember what we said about not overreacting? – Johnson has the most potential to be the guy for Duke this season. He's big. He's strong. He's skilled as hell. There's a reason he was voted to the preseason All-ACC first team.

Because, as Johnson clearly proved in his debut, he's going to be a problem.

With 22 'crazy' turnovers, Duke has plenty to clean up after win over Coppin State

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (November 28, 2020)

DURHAM - The Cameron crazies were absent from Duke's basketball opener Saturday but that didn't stop Mike Krzyzewski from seeing something he deemed, well, crazy.

The No. 9-ranked Blue Devils won in their first game against an outside opponent, toppling Coppin State 81-71.

That, thanks to superior performances from freshmen DJ Steward (24 points) and Jalen Johnson (19 points, 19 rebounds), was the good news.

The troubling thing that had Krzyzewski concerned was the 22 turnovers the Blue Devils committed.

Yes, Coppin State played a small lineup utilizing five guards to pressure Duke and hope enough 3-pointers fell to create an upset.

The shooting plan didn't quite work enough as the Eagles finished 10 of 35 (28.6 percent) from behind the arc.

But Duke helped keep the game closer than it could have been with sloppy play that led to, as Krzyzewski said, some 'crazy' turnovers.

"We've got a bunch of guys who need to develop," Krzyzewski said. "We have good talent, but it's not developed talent. And when you make those ... a kid knows, when they make, you know, mistakes that are just crazy, that that affects you because you're like, 'Why am I doing that?' I mean, obviously he's not doing it on purpose."

NO FANS, NO ENTHUSIASTIC ATMOSPHERE

The coronavirus pandemic made Saturday's opener a game at Cameron like no one had ever seen or experienced. Duke had sold out its previous 472 games, dating back to Nov. 26, 1990, prior to Saturday's fan-less game.

Duke's players for decades have said they feed off the energy generated by the raucous student section. But when things went stale for the Blue Devils on Saturday, like when they produced seven turnovers and six points in the first four minutes after halftime to fritter away a portion of what had been a 17-point lead, it was up to the players and coaches themselves to turn things around.

"You have to provide the atmosphere with your enthusiasm to talk," Krzyzewski said. "And we did not talk very well. Not to the other team, but to one another. I think once you start making a few mistakes, you've drawn within. And you're thinking about that."

For as good as Johnson was in his debut, he turned the ball over seven times. That was more than twice as many as any of his teammates. Senior guard Jordan Goldwire had three, as did sophomore forward Wendell Moore and freshman guard Jeremy Roach.

Krzyzewski and the players weren't happy with their inability to be consistently strong with the ball.

"We just have to be stronger and more under control," Moore said. "Playing a team like that, they have a lot of older guys who have played a lot of college basketball at multiple different schools. They are coming in here hungry, trying to take something that's ours, especially on our home floor. So the biggest thing for us is to be strong because teams know we are you and are going to try to attack that."

But Coppin State's age and strength were only part of the story. The Blue Devils simply threw the ball away at other times.

"It's tough to explain some of those turnovers," Krzyzewski said. "You know, it's just tough to explain where you throw it across the half court, the side of the court, you throw it out of bounds? Like, why would you even be looking there? Or you leave your feet not knowing what to do. So I don't know if there were some jitters or whatever."

SLOPPY PLAY WON'T WORK AGAINST MICHIGAN STATE

Duke shot well enough to win easily, hitting 53 percent of shots overall and 33.3 percent of 3-point shots. Even though turnovers provided Coppin State with fastbreak opportunities, the Blue Devils limited the Eagles to 32.9 percent shooting.

So it goes in the books as a double-digit win for Duke.

But the type of sloppy play the Blue Devils displayed won't be good enough on Tuesday night, when No. 13 Michigan State comes to Cameron. Duke will also have to be better on Dec. 8 when it faces No. 8 Illinois.

And that's before ACC play starts on Dec. 16 at Notre Dame. But there's time. The season has only just begun.

"We'll work on it," Krzyzewski said. "You're not gonna win many games, and turn it over 22 times."

The 138 days that set up Duke's Wendell Moore for a breakout sophomore year

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (November 27, 2020)

Wendell Moore Jr. can't pinpoint the day. Which, fair enough. You try doing the same exact thing 138 days in a row, then pull one moment out of the blur.

So many things about those 138 days – every last one from March 16 through July 31 – were the same. The daylight creeping through the upper windows of the West Charlotte (N.C.) High School gymnasium. The warm, dull lighting that painted the basketball court. The squeak of sneakers on hardwood, and the net-whistling swish with every made basket. At the center of it all was Moore, Duke's 6-foot-6 Swiss Army knife, and his longtime trainer, Dominic Bishop. And occasionally, time permitting, a visitor: Patrick Williams, just months from being a Chicago Bull as the fourth pick in the NBA Draft.

"We've been best friends since we were eight or nine," Moore says of Williams, "so I was back home working out with him."

But these workouts weren't the same as the ones back when the two were budding basketball enthusiasts. Shooting with three-pound weighted balls? Tailor-made shooting drills? Uh, yeah, not for eight-year-olds. There was another difference about these summer workouts too: the stakes.

Moore, coming off a mostly up, sometimes down freshman campaign with the Blue Devils, was looking to take the step from role player to role model. He started 11 games and played 24 minutes a night in 2019-20, but he wasn't the dominant, do-everything player he had been in high school. Between bouts of inconsistency and a broken hand that sidelined him for a month in the spring, Moore's confidence – the quiet, steely type that needs not even be spoken of – had sagged.

Then there was the presence of Williams, who didn't start a game for Florida State and yet was being pumped up as a potential lottery pick. Back when they were kids, Moore was always supposedly ahead of Williams basketball-wise. Moore was the one who was supposed to be a one-and-done star. Moore was the one who was supposed to parlay his high school dominance – two state championship games, more than 2,000 points scored, time playing for Team USA – into a brief stint at Duke, and then a much-longer one in the pros.

But he wasn't. Williams was. And then it happened one day this summer – the day Moore looked at Williams and found peace.

"Especially with people who like to look into the future a lot," Moore tells The Athletic, "if you're not meeting expectations, maybe that you've put on yourself or others have put on you, then you kind of see it as a disappointment."

It would've been easy for Moore to be jealous. Resentful even. Young people today, especially highly successful ones, are always peeking over their shoulders at their peers. Are they better than me? Why are they better than me? And even as recently as last season, Moore might've fallen into that trap.

But over the summer, for as much as Moore honed his game, he spent even more time working on his mind – the finding yourself type stuff. Getting comfortable again in your own skin, with your own progress. No more over-the-shoulder double takes, no more doubting yourself for failing to be perfect. Just being the person and player you always have been, and letting that be enough. Really, more than.

"With (Wendell's) confidence, it was more that he was just always a top guy in that class," Bishop says. "Like him and Pat have been friends since second grade, but now you're finally seeing this guy has passed you – but not in a bad way. Just the way his path has been written, it's different. And that's no disrespect to you. You'll get there, whenever you're ready."

Now, saying you're going to think that way and actually following up are totally different animals. But through talks with Bishop, his family, Mike Krzyzewski and the rest of the Duke coaching staff – not to mention leaning fully into basketball for 138 straight days – Moore molded his mindset.

"I'm living my life in the moment, instead of thinking about whether I'm good enough to be a pro or anything like that," Moore says. "Throughout a couple of the workouts I was going through back home, I mean, I kind of just felt like I was becoming myself again. Not thinking about anything else but me playing basketball right now."

"That's really one of the best feelings that you can have."

Moore's parents, Wendell Sr. and Marie, knew early on that their son had the potential to be special. Like, really early on.

"When he started to walk at 11 months," Marie says, "without holding onto anything."

Adds Wendell Sr., "and chasing a basketball."

Moore's origin story makes sense, considering his basketball bloodline. Wendell Sr. played at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Va., and his cousin at VCU. But Wendell Jr.'s physical tools, and his ambitious goal-setting, promised that he would go the furthest of all. That was only reaffirmed when his first two recruiting letters came from Duke and North Carolina ... in the seventh grade.

"When he was nine, he was palming women's basketballs," Wendell Sr. says, "but the thing was, his arms could reach his kneecaps."

As Wendell Jr. grew taller, stronger, quicker, his profile only grew. He was the nation's top-ranked eighth-grader, right ahead of R.J. Barrett, who went from starting as a freshman at Duke to leading the New York Knicks. At no point did Moore slip outside of the top 20 or so players in the country, always on the elevator to athletic stardom.

Bishop, who played at Creighton and began training in 2012, first met Moore when he was an 11-year-old. "He was already 6-feet and he could handle the ball," Bishop says, "so he wasn't like your typical big 11-year-old." After his workout, Bishop already had a strong feel for his new pupil's potential. In fact, at that first meeting, he laid out a five-part plan for Moore, saying he'd:

- Make the McDonald's All-American game.
- Become one of the top players on the Nike EYBL circuit.
- Play for Team USA.
- Be selected for the Jordan Brand Classic.
- Attend Duke on a basketball scholarship.

"He looked at me like I was crazy," Bishop recalls with a chuckle.

Ye every one of those goals came true.

"He was always one to just go get it done," Marie says. "If he wanted it, he got it, and he excelled at it."

That was true not just about basketball, but also everything else in Wendell Jr.'s life. In kindergarten, other kids gravitated toward him for his art projects. If anyone could make a macaroni sculpture artistic, it was Wendell. Some of that was because of his size, and kids assuming the biggest of them could do the biggest and best things, but he was also just a natural. At basketball, at art, at other sports. At life, really.

But for all the attention Moore received, he never developed an ego. Not quite an introvert, according to his parents, Moore still mostly kept quiet outside of his close circle of friends. He'd offer short answers to questions, not really speak unless spoken to.

He was mostly the same way on the basketball court. In his first year playing rec ball, Wendell Jr. made a 3-pointer and ran down the court with his arm outstretched to the sky. It was a small gesture, but his father snuffed it out straight away. "I fussed at him. I told him, 'If you want to continue playing basketball, don't ever do that again,'" Wendell Sr. says, "and he very rarely showboated from then on."

Outside of one technical foul Moore received in high school – he drained a 3-pointer over an irksome opponent, then shot an imaginary arrow in celebration – he now lets his play do the talking. Dunk over someone? Smile while you're running back. No staredowns, no pushes. Just one of the best, not talking about his greatness but instead simply showing it.

"Coming to Duke, we're all the best players in every state, region that we come from," Moore says. "So I can say for me personally, there have been very few times I've been faced with adversity."

Which raises a fascinating question: What happens when you do?

Moore faced that situation almost immediately at Duke – he says he felt adversity in the first college game, against Kansas under the bright lights of Madison Square Garden. Coming off the bench, he finished with twice as many turnovers (four) as points scored.

"Scoring two points in one of the biggest games of the year," Moore says, "really it can kind of take a toll on you."

Krzyzewski and Duke's other coaches, all of them former Blue Devils stars, had preached one point to Moore in the prelude to his freshman season: Don't let the highs get too high, and don't let the lows get too low. Cliché, yes. True? Also yes. But for Moore, who'd never had "lows" before, hearing that principle didn't mean he knew how to practice it.

The 138 days that set up Duke's Wendell Moore for a breakout sophomore year

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (November 27, 2020)

"That's easier said than done," he says in hindsight. "Because you can go through a stretch where you're not playing very well at all, and you can think the worst of yourself, and then you go through a stretch where you're playing really good and you think you're on top of the world. So for me, I think confidence comes from finding the middle. Like, finally finding the middle, and finally finding out how to not let the highs get too high or the lows get too low – what that actually means."

Bishop says when Moore didn't start the Kansas game, he knew something was off with his confidence. For someone who'd accomplished every goal he set as an 11-year-old, why wasn't he playing with the same assertiveness he always had?

Bishop chalked it up to two things. The first was that Moore, who had been so ball-dominant in high school, wasn't that guy at Duke. With all of the other talent around him, including eventual ACC Player of the Year Tre Jones at point guard, Moore had to adjust. And secondly, Moore was barely 18 when he made his college hoops debut.

"His first game, he was only a month and a couple of days into his 18th year on this planet," Bishop says. "And the first thing you've gotta do? You're getting put in in Madison Square Garden, against Kansas, prime time. That's a little different."

The tide started turning for Moore when Duke traveled to Virginia Tech in December, and Krzyzewski unleashed the do-everything point-forward he'd always been. Unfortunately, less than a month later, Moore broke his right hand late in a win at Miami.

"The injury kind of played a part in it too, because I felt – especially coming off the trip from New York and a couple of the first ACC games – like I was playing pretty good. Finally starting to turn the corner for the better," Moore says. "Getting injured like that, being out for six or seven games, not being able to play with the guys, that just hurt a lot."

From afar, Moore's parents ached for their son. Now that he was finally at his dream school – Moore wore Duke basketball shorts in his first interview in the seventh grade, and he would ask for a Duke-themed rug and Christmas stocking – things weren't playing out as they always had. But at the same time, Moore's response to that fracture told them a lot about their son's resilience.

"Even when he had the cast on his (right) hand, he'd shoot with his left hand and he was running. So he never stopped," Wendell Sr. says. "He maintained running, kept working, lifted with his left. He said, 'I don't like sitting out.'"

And in Moore's third game back, there was the validation. Against UNC, in the rivalry he'd watched his entire life, Moore had 17 points, 10 rebounds, two assists, a steal and a block – his best game to date. Even more monumental? He caught Jones' miss with seconds left in overtime and hit the buzzer-beater, completing a comeback for the ages.

"It's everything I've dreamed of," Moore said that night.

Barely a month later, the college basketball season ended prematurely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He and his parents call that the "lowest" point of the season. Marie still remembers him running into her arms and sobbing.

"I've never seen him just break down and cry, and that's when you know, as a mom," she says. "He just ran to me and held me and cried. And I thought, 'He really loves the game.'"

Further proof of that? Three days later, Moore was back in the gym with Bishop.

During his freshman season, Moore displayed an all-around skill set that enabled to him play in any lineup. He was comfortable not only ballhandling, but also defending power forwards, slashing to the basket and finding teammates in transition. The biggest knock on him was his shooting.

Which also makes sense. When you're a 6-foot-6 wrecking ball at the high school level, able to basically teleport to the rim whenever you please, shooting offers a less-reliable means of scoring.

"He'd never had to do it," Bishop says. "Now you take a player who has been a slasher, do-it-all style of person and make him a spot-up shooter? That's kind of hard. Not that he can't shoot, but he just never had to."

So Bishop worked with Moore to bolster that one aspect of his game. "I broke his shot all the way down," Bishop says. That meant helping Moore develop muscle memory, from hand placement receiving passes to holding his followthrough more consistently. Throw in the three-pound weighted ball to build strength, and over those 138 days, Moore's shot improved dramatically.

"He needed to cock his hand back; he wasn't ready to shoot. His hand was always flat down," Bishop says. "I can sit next to you and tell you if he's gonna make the shot, just by how his hand is. If his hand is cocked and ready and he leaves his hand up, he's gonna make it 90 percent of the time."

That isn't just a longtime trainer praising his student either. Moore's teammates and coaches, in a series of preseason Zooms, praised the leap he has made with his jump shot.

"The most important thing that I've seen out of Wendell has been his confidence," assistant coach Chris Carrawell says. "There would be times in games last year when he was open and he wouldn't shoot the ball, and you could hear the bench and then some fans yelling, 'Shoot! Shoot!' and he would pass up open shots. Working on his game all summer and then you come back, you're older, you're more confident, and he's playing with extreme confidence now. So for us, that's going to help us because he can shoot the ball, but you wouldn't know it because he wouldn't shoot. Now when he's open, we encourage him to take a shot because it's a good shot."

But for all the strides Moore has made with his shot, that couldn't have come about without a change in his mindset. Namely, not worrying about all the other crud: the looming NBA, minutes, any of that. Instead, Moore needed to focus on himself, his game, what he was doing to better himself in the moment.

"The biggest thing for me wasn't so much anything physically. It was more mentally," he says. "Coming in with the confidence that I need to be able to play, just letting the game slow down in my mind, and just trying to be more in the moment – instead of focusing on things I can't control."

Now, with the college hoops season underway, Moore stands as a central piece for Duke's ambitious goals. He won't be a part-time starter anymore. He won't be a utility piece, praised for his hustle plays alone (although he'll certainly keep those up). Instead, he'll be a captain. A leader. A fulcrum on both ends of the floor. If the Blue Devils are to take home their sixth national championship this season, it'll be because Moore leads them there.

Good thing he has never had a problem with big dreams.

"He had a really good freshman year for a freshman in our conference," Krzyzewski says. "He didn't have a year where you would go pro, and that type of year. And so if you want to ever be a pro, you have to develop consistency and a certain mental toughness that anytime something goes a little bit wrong, you don't let it go a lot wrong. And I think last year, he was too hard on himself. We're all going to make mistakes – turn the ball over, whatever – where you let that affect you. And at certain times, I thought it did."

"It's just a sign of building maturity as a player. He's one of our leaders this year, probably our best talker out on the court with the team, and I think that's helped him. Because he's interested in taking care of everybody, not just himself."

It's a tremendous burden for a 19-year-old sophomore to bear, but Moore is ready for it. More than that, he relishes it. He's as happy as he has ever been, and fully motivated to show – and maybe tell – the world what kind of talent he can be.

"I just want to be ready, and I want our team to be ready for that first game we play," Moore says. "I think my role on the team, more than on the physical side, is make sure all the guys come ready every day. Like, we can't have any bad practices. We have to play hard every day."

Moore did that for 138 straight days. With his mojo back, there's no reason to stop now.

Ultimate guide to the Duke basketball season. Everything you'd want to know.

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (November 27, 2020)

Beginning a season like no other, and on the heels of ending a season like no other, Duke is a constant in an off-kilter world.

The coronavirus pandemic means the Blue Devils play home games at their famed Cameron Indoor Stadium without the raucous Cameron Crazies to aid them, but No. 9-ranked Duke has the talent to compete for conference and national titles.

In his 41st season at Duke, coach Mike Krzyzewski has built this year's team around four returning players with seven talented newcomers all ready to contribute immediately.

"We have a lot of pieces," Krzyzewski said, "and we're going to play a very up-tempo game and fast paced."

The best of them all looks like 6-9 forward Jalen Johnson, who is already projected as a NBA Draft lottery pick in 2021. The freshman from Milwaukee, Wisc., figures to be the guy teams will focus their game plans around, what with his scoring and passing ability both in the halfcourt and on fast breaks.

He's built to play inside, but can distribute like a point guard.

"I wouldn't necessarily call myself a pass-first guy, but it's something I love to do," Johnson said. "Just having those guard skills and guard vision, just being able to have that type of stuff will be able to help me down the long run."

The other freshman who has impressed enough to be considered a starter is point guard Jeremy Roach, who comes to Duke after having led Saint Paul VI High School to a Virginia state championship last season. Roach's scoring ability, along with his playmaking skills, should make Duke's offense go.

How the veterans play this season will determine how far Duke goes in the postseason if there's an NCAA tournament.

Sophomore forward Matthew Hurt, a strong 3-point shooter even at his 6-9 height, struggled to adjust to the college game at times as a freshman. There's hope at Duke he's left those problems behind after adding 20 pounds to his frame. He's playing with more confidence than he showed last season and if that translates into consistent double-double performances, Duke will be tough to beat.

Wendell Moore, Jr., a smart, athletic wing player at 6-6, and senior guard Jordan Goldwire round out what's expected to be Duke's starting five.

But the talent doesn't end there.

Patrick Tapé arrived as the first graduate transfer Duke has accepted in basketball. The 6-9 Tapé quickly impressed the coaches with his skills defending on ball screens, something the Blue Devils have had trouble stopping at times in the past.

Henry Coleman, at 6-7 and 229 pounds, stepped right in and has earned playing time with his hard-nosed play and production on both ends of the court.

SEASON OUTLOOK

Ranked in the top 10 nationally as has been the norm, the Blue Devils were picked second in the ACC preseason rankings in a poll of media covering the league. Krzyzewski's team certainly should be right in the mix in the league race.

Because the pandemic scuttled big-time neutral court events around the country, the Blue Devils play nothing but home games in nonconference play. The biggest tests will be Illinois and Michigan State, two of the teams expected to compete for the Big Ten championship.

In league play, Duke's trip to Tallahassee, Florida, to face reigning ACC champion Florida State on Jan. 2 will reveal plenty about both teams. It's their lone regular-season meeting. Duke also only plays league favorite Virginia once, but that game will be played in Durham. The Blue Devils should do plenty of scoring. Their ability to get stops on the defensive end this season, like last year's team did, will determine if they can return to the Final Four for the first time since 2015.

STARTERS LOST FROM 2019-20

Tre Jones (guard, NBA draft), Vernon Carey (center, NBA draft), Cassius Stanley (forward, NBA draft)

PROJECTED STARTERS

Matthew Hurt

2019-20 stats: 9.7 ppg, 3.8 rpg, 39.9% on 3-pointers

After a freshman season that was disappointing because of his inconsistent play, Hurt set about building up his body in the offseason. After adding 20 pounds, he should be able to play inside with more success while retaining his strong shooting skills. If he does, Duke will have a star player and Hurt will be ready for the NBA after this season.

Wendell Moore

2019-20 stats: 7.4 ppg, 4.2 rpg.

Moore already has a career highlight, with his game-winning basket at Chapel Hill last February giving Duke a win in a classic game against UNC. Now Duke needs him to contribute points, rebounds and defense at a high level with starter's minutes. He's capable, having played well down the stretch last season after recovering from a broken hand.

Jalen Johnson

2019-20 stats: In nine high school games, averaged 24.6 points, 10.9 rebounds and 4.8 assists

Duke saw its run of nine consecutive years with a first-round NBA Draft pick end last week but Johnson appears set to start a new one. He's already a projected lottery pick thanks to his ability to score, rebound and pass. A classic Duke stretch four player in the mold of past lottery picks Jabari Parker, Brandon Ingram and Jayson Tatum.

Jeremy Roach

2019-20 stats: As a high school senior, averaged 19.1 points, 6.3 rebounds, 2.8 assists and 1.9 steals

After leading his high school team to a state championship last season, Roach takes over the point guard reins at Duke from Tre Jones. Yes, he's replacing the reigning ACC player of the year in Jones. But Roach is seen as a more dynamic scorer while also possessing top playmaking skills.

Jordan Goldwire

2019-20 stats: 4.7 points, 2.5 rebounds, 2.3 assists

Goldwire has proven there's a place in the game for four-year, program-type players even in the one-and-done era. Considered a mid-major player as a recruit, Goldwire has improved his game each season at Duke. He's used his solid, consistent defense as a foundation to build a more complete game. He's not an all-conference player, but a glue guy who can make a good team great.

DEPTH SITUATION

During a pandemic when players can be ruled out for weeks at a time, everyone needs good depth. Duke will bring experience off the bench in junior swingman Joey Baker, a dead-eye shooter who scores in bunches from the perimeter. On the interior, look for 6-9 graduate transfer Patrick Tapé and 6-7 freshman forward Henry Coleman to get plenty of minutes. Tapé is a strong rebounder and post defender. Coleman has already impressed the coaches with his overall play. When Duke wants to really go big, 7-1 freshman Mark Williams can handle minutes in spurts to aid with defense and rebounding. Freshman guard DJ Steward will push for more playing time as well.

What to watch for from Duke as it begins its season

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (November 25, 2020)

Duke basketball without the Cameron Crazies? It feels impossible – if not just plain wrong – but that’s only one of a number of massive changes the Blue Devils will deal with during this unprecedented season.

“Not having fans is huge,” Wendell Moore Jr. said on a recent Zoom. “With the Cameron Crazies being so historically involved in our program, it gives us the ultimate home-court advantage – and so not having them there hurts us.”

Instead, Duke has installed illustrated tarps around the lower bowl of Cameron Indoor (which looks cooler than that sounds) to honor the Crazies and give them a presence this season.

Beyond just the decidedly different feel for home games is the matter of how many games Duke, and every team, will actually play. The team’s scheduled season opener, on Wednesday against Gardner-Webb, already has been postponed due to a positive COVID-19 test within GW’s program. Instead, Duke won’t take the floor until Saturday afternoon, when it hosts Coppin State. What to expect when the Blue Devils actually take the floor? Here are a few things to pay close attention to.

Starters vs. closers

There’s always so much hype about starters, which, I get. It’s exciting. You hear the names called out over the sound system, the grandiose introductions. And while Duke hasn’t named any starters, a group has started to emerge in practices and at three preseason scrimmages:

PG: Jordan Goldwire
SG: Jeremy Roach
SF: Wendell Moore Jr.
PF: Jalen Johnson
C: Matthew Hurt

Now, those positional designations don’t fit very neatly. Roach is more of a point than a shooting guard, but he’s more comfortable off-ball than Goldwire, so he gets that nod. The backcourt will be interesting to watch as the season evolves. Does Roach eventually succeed Goldwire, opening a starting spot for five-star freshman D.J. Steward? Maybe, although Goldwire’s senior savvy and defensive acumen make it less so. Also, Moore is probably more of a natural two-guard, but in this smaller lineup, he slides to the wing, given he can defend opposing forwards.

As for Hurt, the 6-foot-9 sophomore is clearly no center, but he’ll see time there given the strength he added in the offseason. By bulking up some 20 pounds, the hope is Hurt is more of a consistent rebounding threat with the offensive potential to play inside or out. What I’m more interested in is who finishes games for Duke. Is it this same group, or does Mike Krzyzewski opt for a more shooting-heavy lineup? To be determined. But also, keep in mind ...

This might be as deep a rotation as Coach K has played in some time

Krzyzewski usually prefers to keep a short bench, with Duke’s recent teams only doling out heavy minutes to seven to nine players. But with seven newcomers, including six freshmen, there figures to be a lot more mixing and matching than normal.

The result should be not just more players getting action, but more lineups. For example: The aforementioned starters, clearly, are a smaller team, with no one taller than 6-foot-9. But Duke likes the promise of 7-foot freshman Mark Williams as a lob threat and shot-blocker, as well as graduate transfer Patrick Tapé’s dependability defending pick-and-rolls. Both guys are going to see time, and not just a minute here or there.

It’ll be interesting to see the lineups Krzyzewski and his staff employ. A few other possibilities:

- All-freshman lineup: Roach, Steward, Johnson, Henry Coleman, Williams
 - Big lineup: Goldwire, Moore, Johnson, Hurt, Williams
 - Shooting lineup: Roach, Steward, Moore, Joey Baker, Hurt
 - Defensive lineup: Goldwire, Moore, Johnson, Coleman, Williams
- Again, the point is that there are loads of options. But overall, depth and versatility will be the hallmarks of this team.

Freshmen are fun, but don’t forget about the returnees

When you have one of the nation’s top-three recruiting classes, it’s easy to get excited about the new haul of freshmen Duke has to work with.

Roach is, to quote associate coach Nate James, “the dynamic guard that we’ve always had that really makes our team go.” Steward, aside from having one of the most upbeat personalities on the team, is a sharpshooting combo guard with the ability to score from all three levels. Coleman is a powerful rebounder, a switchable defender and one of the leading voices on the team. Jaemyn Brakefield has great pick-and-pop potential as an athletic forward. Johnson is “going to be one of the best,” in James’ words, for his otherworldly passing abilities and attacking nature in transition. And Williams, even as he develops his body, is a disruptive shot-blocker in addition to being a ready-made lob threat.

That’s all great, and those guys are going to be good ... but don’t forget about the returnees who will lead the team.

That starts with Moore and Hurt, who seems back from a minor leg injury sustained in the team’s first scrimmage. Assistant coach Chris Carrawell spoke at length recently on how much Moore has improved, particularly as a shooting threat.

“He can shoot the ball, but you wouldn’t know it because he wouldn’t shoot (last season),” Carrawell said. “Now when he’s open, we encourage him to take a shot because it’s a good shot. Even if he misses it, he shoots such a good ball that it’s easy to rebound it.”

Expect Hurt and Moore to compete for the team MVP award, as both will be essential multi-positional pieces at Krzyzewski’s disposal. Hurt should be among the team leaders in scoring, if not atop that list. And Moore does a little bit of everything, from shooting and ballhandling to slashing and defending.

Goldwire, a senior point guard, and Baker, a junior wing, will also see substantial playing time, although most likely less than Hurt and Moore. But they will still be integral players on this roster. Feel free to get excited about the freshmen – as you well should – but if Duke is to make a deep postseason run, it’ll come on the backs of those four returnees.

Duke's season-opener against Gardner-Webb postponed due to COVID issues

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (November 23, 2020)

DURHAM - Duke's scheduled season-opening basketball game with Gardner-Webb will not be played Wednesday.

COVID-19 issues with in the Gardner-Webb program caused the two schools to call off the game Monday morning.

According to information released by Gardner-Webb, an asymptomatic player tested positive and the school is going through its contact-tracing protocol.

Duke and Gardner-Webb had been scheduled to play at 8 p.m. at Cameron Indoor Stadium. No make-up date has been set. While it is not certain the game will be made up, both schools said they "may seek to make up the game at a later date."

No. 9 Duke is now scheduled to open its season against Coppin State at 2 p.m. on Saturday at Cameron.

Gardner-Webb has a game scheduled at Florida State on Friday that remained scheduled as of Monday afternoon. But Georgia announced it has canceled its home game with Gardner-Webb scheduled for Sunday. Georgia is seeking a replacement opponent.

"When learned mid-morning about Gardner-Webb's situation, we immediately started working on what our next steps can be," Georgia head coach Tom Crean said in a Monday afternoon statement. "We are currently in that process and are hopeful we will be able to find another opponent for Sunday. We wish Gardner-Webb the best through this period and the season."

Duke's Dec. 4 game at home with Bellarmine, part of the school's Duke Classic event, remains on schedule but is also on shaky ground. Due to COVID-19 issues within its program, Bellarmine rescheduled its first three games to later, making the game at Duke its season opener.

Duke is the second ACC program to see its season-opening game called off due to COVID-19. On Nov. 11, Miami announced its home game with Stetson, scheduled for Wednesday night, would be postponed due to a positive test in the Stetson program. The game has since be rescheduled to Dec. 4.

While Virginia is opening the season Wednesday against Maine at the Mohegan Sun casino's arena in Uncasville, Connecticut, the Cavaliers' scheduled game with Florida at the same location on Friday has been postponed due to COVID-19 issues at Florida.

Duke University schools the country on how to stay open during COVID-19 pandemic

By Melissa Healy, Los Angeles Times (November 21, 2020)

Duke University is sometimes referred to as a pretty good knock-off of fancier schools farther north. But while those ivy-clad universities with smart students, prestigious medical schools and big endowments stayed closed this fall, Duke invited its freshmen, sophomores, some upperclassmen and all of its graduate students to its Durham, N.C., campus for largely in-person classes.

Now, it's schooling those sniffer schools on how to reopen safely.

Starting Aug. 2 and continuing up to this week, when the Duke campus made a pre-planned reversion to online classes for the remainder of the semester, the university implemented a rigorous testing, tracking and surveillance program for more than 10,000 students. And it has carried out, on a grand scale, an innovative scheme – called pooled testing – that can stretch limited testing resources without forfeiting accuracy or resolution.

For Duke's returning students, the result has been a relatively safe and almost normal return to learning, at a time when other colleges and universities either shuttered their campuses or ignited community outbreaks as they reopened with scant measures in place to detect or isolate infected students.

At Duke, students lived together on-campus and off, mingled in dorms and attended classes and labs. There were football games (Duke athletes were tested and monitored in a separate program). Fraternities and sororities continued to operate. And on a few occasions, students partied like it was 1999.

When there were outbreaks, they were nipped in the bud. The surrounding community of Raleigh-Durham, N.C., was protected from 17 infected students – nine of them entirely free of symptoms – who arrived in their midst from far-flung homes. And extensive contact tracing found that class attendance was not linked to even a single case of coronavirus transmission.

"Duke has done an exceptional job compared to other institutions, and has been very quiet about it," said Christopher Marsicano, director of the College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College, in Davidson, N.C. "It's one of the few institutions in what we call the Ivy Plus that decided to have in-person classes. It deserves credit for stepping up and being an innovator here, and keeping its cases down."

As the United States enters a new and deadly phase of the pandemic, colleges and universities are caught up in whirlwind. Even as they approach decisions about whether and how to reopen for spring semester, many are responding to the pandemic's new spike by closing campuses and sending students home earlier than anticipated.

Just as students turned many college towns into coronavirus hot spots in the fall, there is concern that students sent home without being tested first will accelerate outbreaks as they're summarily sent home to their families.

If the nation's universities want to learn what Duke did right, they can turn to a detailed report published this week by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The university developed and fielded a smartphone app that monitored students for symptoms and communicated their test schedules and results. It organized teams of contact tracers and trackers who got infected students into quarantine, found exposed students and instructed them to self-isolate, investigated worrisome clusters, and identified certain students for extra monitoring and testing.

There was "the Duke Compact," a pandemic version of an honor code entered into by every student who came to campus. Students promised to wear a mask when in public, wash hands frequently and socially distance, of course. They also agreed to avoid large gatherings, to self-isolate for the prescribed period of time if instructed, to get a flu shot, and to allow the use of some personal data for purposes of finding and testing potentially exposed contacts.

"We are, more than ever before, individually and collectively responsible for the health and safety of our fellow students, faculty, staff, families and neighbors," the compact read.

Testing was a crucial element of the school's success. Duke established 15 on-campus test sites and a central laboratory based in its medical school's Human Vaccine Institute. It implemented the pooled testing program, which relayed highly accurate results in 18 to 30 hours. By pooling samples, Duke's program extended the reach of its testing effort without sacrificing speed or accuracy.

By mid-September, Duke's lab was working three shifts a day and processing 11,390 samples a week. Students who didn't feel well had their samples tested immediately and got their results in less than a day. But with or without symptoms, every Duke student who was living

on campus was being tested at least twice a week.

Off-campus students were tested once or twice weekly. And graduate students averaged one test a week.

The pooling scheme was first devised to test U.S. soldiers for syphilis during World War II, when the numbers of servicemen deployed to Europe and exposed to the sexually transmitted disease threatened to overwhelm available labs.

At Duke, lab technicians first consolidated a portion of five students' specimens into a single sample and tested it. If the pooled sample came up negative, all five students were pronounced well – on the strength of a single test.

In the rare cases where a trace of coronavirus was found, lab technicians immediately returned to the five students' specimens and tested each individually to find out which of the five belonged to an infected donor. In populations in which infections remain rare, pooling can help economize on tests and reagents and stretch limited supplies further. But keeping some backup specimen from each student on ice also sped the process of follow-up testing. Students didn't need to be called back to provide another sample.

For most, the fall semester was healthy, though not exactly normal. Dorm living did not include roommates. Meals were delivered to students in their dorms.

Between Aug. 2 and Oct. 11, 68,913 specimens from 10,265 students were tested. In that period, just 84 students were found to have a coronavirus infection. Slightly more than half of them – 43 students – were identified before any COVID-19 symptoms developed.

Had those asymptomatic students been left to mix freely with other students, college employees and community members, they would almost certainly have seeded outbreaks: Further testing revealed that "a good number" of asymptomatic students had very viral high loads, a measure that is widely viewed as a good stand-in for infectiousness, said Thomas Denny, a Duke vaccinologist and a key architect of the school's program.

There's no reason a program like the one at Duke couldn't be exported to other universities, said Denny, the lead author of the report, which appeared in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

"I think a lot of other places could do it," he said. "They just have to make a commitment and mobilize their faculty to use some innovative approaches."

Depending on their resources and the capabilities of the labs they partner with, colleges and universities could take a wide range of approaches to surveillance testing. But he said Duke's experience, in which more than half of all positive tests came from asymptomatic students, makes clear that holding off on testing until a student is visibly ill is not good enough.

College administrators "just have to make the commitment that they think it's important" for students and professors to be together on campus, said Denny. "A lot of programs have talent and innovative ideas. It's leadership that makes this happen." It's faith, too, in the real-world applications of the models and experiments that are the lifeblood of higher learning, said Peter Frazier of Cornell University.

A data scientist and professor of operations research, Frazier helped design a program that allowed students to return to the Ivy League campus in Ithaca, N.Y., by keeping a tight lid on infections with comprehensive testing and tracking.

Over the summer, Cornell administrators began to recognize that students would come back whether the university opened or not, and that abandoning them and the community of Ithaca was not an option, Frazier said. So the school turned to faculty experts, "and we developed mathematical models that helped us to predict it would work," he said.

Those models fleshed out the contours of an effective pooled testing program, and showed that Cornell's veterinary labs – which were skilled in the testing of herds of dairy cows – could carry it out.

"There was a lot of uncertainty, and that was just fundamental," said Frazier. "But we did this because we thought it would work. At the end of the day, you have to have some courage."

Duke's Nolan Smith steps to the forefront, unafraid to make his voice heard

By Dana O'Neil, The Athletic (November 20, 2020)

They left the house early, sometime before 4 in the morning, catching the Metro from their suburban Maryland house into Washington, D.C. He was just a kid, only 8, so his memories are fuzzy. He recalls mostly the silly things children remember – the fun train ride with Chris Webber and Juwan Howard, and seeing the monuments in the capital city up close.

That he was tagging along for the big adventure wasn't all that unusual. Back then he went everywhere with his father, the kid scampering around practices, in locker rooms and through hotel lobbies on road trips, his presence practically brokered into his dad's agreement to become an assistant coach. Almost like he knew his time was short and he needed to squeeze out every minute before it was over.

This trip was different, more meaningful than just a fun day with Daddy at work. He told his wife he wanted his son to see it, to experience it. Even if he wasn't quite old enough to really understand it, he wanted his child to see what hope looked like. Which is why on Oct. 16, 1995, Derek Smith hoisted his young son, Nolan, atop his shoulders, using his 6-6 frame to offer the child a bird's-eye view of the expanse of the National Mall, filled that day with men, men invited by Louis Farrakhan to the Million Man March.

Twenty-five years later, Nolan Smith stood before a microphone on the Duke University campus. Wearing a black T-shirt that declared in white capital letters, "BLACK LIVES MATTER" the former Blue Devil and the basketball program's director of operations implored his community to get involved, to talk about their feelings, to ask questions, not to get distracted by the daily grind but remain vigilant to the real work, and to hope, to hope for a better world.

"Is it a memory, or is it an inherited behavior?" Monica Smith says of her son's experiences. "I don't know. I just know the apple does not fall far from the tree."

Derek Smith was born near Hogansville, Ga., a one-stoplight town plopped between Atlanta and Columbus. Not many recruiting publications found their way to the high school, so few people knew much about the scrawny kid who led the school to two state titles. The story goes that Bill Olsen, a Denny Crum assistant at Louisville, found his way there only at the insistence of one of the school's football players, and came back insisting Crum roll the dice.

Derek became the classic saved-by-basketball story, able to break free from the boundaries of a hometown where most people's aspirations failed to extend beyond a high school diploma and a job at the rubber mill. The second all-time leading scorer at Louisville when he left, Derek won a national title as a sophomore, met his future wife, and on the day he graduated proudly wore his basketball jersey beneath his cap and gown, marrying his own hope with his opportunity realized.

Injuries turned Derek into an NBA journeyman, but he chased the dream for all it was worth. Eventually, especially after the birth of his daughter, Sydney, and then Nolan, the peripatetic life grew less inviting. "Parenthood changes you," says Monica, chuckling at her own memories of shutting down her daily viewing of "General Hospital," not wanting her kids to watch the soap opera. Lured by his old coach, Jim Lynam, Derek took a job as an assistant coach with the Washington Bullets, attracted by the stability and the chance to put down roots for his young family. But he also made the team promise he could tote Nolan with him wherever he went. He meant it, Nolan becoming such a constant he practically became an unofficial mascot as he toddled around with his dad.

Mike Krzyzewski calls Nolan a "heat-seeking responsibility guy," explaining how his staffer gets things done before people even know what the tasks are. "If the floor is dirty with responsibility, he's the vacuum cleaner," Krzyzewski says. Turns out, Nolan picked that up from his dad, learning not through the sit-at-the-knee lecture, but the way kids learn most things – through observation and example.

All that time Nolan bounced around practice, his dad was busy making an impact, vacuuming up his own responsibilities. Younger players gravitated to Derek, welcomed by his warmth and appreciative of his honesty. He could ride guys mercilessly, intent on making sure they understood they'd been handed more than talent, but also a gift, and they needed to use it properly. He treated Howard and Webber more like little brothers. The two were plenty blessed with skill, but needed maturity. That's where Derek came in, schooling them on professionalism as much as X's and O's. It wasn't an accident that when he packed up his own son for that Million Man March, he brought along his pseudo little brothers too. "He was always advocating on behalf of something," Monica says of her husband, remembering his willingness to speak out in support of John Thompson Jr. when he protested Prop 48 in 1989. "He knew he had a voice that others couldn't use."

All that time, Nolan was watching, maybe not realizing what he was learning but committing it to memory anyway – about being a decent man, about including people and helping them and teaching them, about doing something that wasn't simply for yourself.

Derek's voice was snuffed out on Aug. 9, 1996, the seemingly healthy 34-year-old dead of a heart attack. Days later, Nolan, all of 8, crawled into his mother's bed and slung his arm around her shoulders. "He was so serious," she says. "He just looked at me and said, 'I'm the man of the house now.' And you know what? That's how he was. He never once asked for anything over and above. Never asked for Jordans, or the latest this or the latest that. He went through life his way. His father used to say, 'Run your own race.' That's what Nolan did."

Still floating after his national championship and ACC player of the year honors, Nolan Smith arrived in Los Angeles in 2011 after being drafted by the Portland Trail Blazers. He was near LAX, swapping

luggage out of his sister's car and into his rental when the police surrounded him. He reached down to fetch his phone after dropping it, prompting the police to scream to get out of the car, with their guns drawn. Smith was wearing a red Adidas hoodie – he'd just sign with the apparel company – and only after the police looked at his driver's license, and the Duke alumni card Smith intentionally handed over did they back off and change their tone.

The incident always stayed with him, buried deep in a place he didn't like to visit. It bubbled to the surface this summer, like something he simply couldn't keep down, after the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Smith didn't necessarily make a decision to speak out. A decision, after all, implies a choice. Smith felt like he had no say in the matter; he had a duty. "The whole good trouble thing," he says, quoting John Lewis, the late U.S. Congressman. "This is necessary trouble. This is necessary."

Krzyzewski likes to refer to Smith as "the Mayor," a nod not just to how beloved he remains in his adopted town of Durham, but also how deep his roots grow in the community. He is more than a resident; he is a citizen. In conversation, Smith drops the names of the real mayor, the sheriff and the chief of police, and he discusses his involvement in developing an after-school safe haven and facilitating a better relationship between the police force and Durham proper as casually as he might break down the Blue Devils' roster.

It also was Smith who started the regular Zoom "Brotherhood" meetings, bringing together Blue Devils old and new, and it was Smith who encouraged the current Devils to speak out at the protest and to develop their own personal response to the world they're living in. This year Duke's jerseys will read "Equality."

Krzyzewski last year suggested Smith join the board of the Emily K Center, a not-for-profit the coach started that helps low-income children hone their academic skills to become college-ready. It was not merely a suggestion to pad Smith's résumé, but also a recognition that his director of basketball operations brought something the board strongly believes in. "We wanted to work with Nolan for a lot of reasons," says Adam Eigenrauch, the center's executive director. "Yes, he has a platform and a voice that he wants to be heard outside of basketball; but it's also because he's so authentic in his perspective. He makes people feel valued, and when they feel valued, they listen."

The catch, of course, is that Smith is a basketball coach and a rising one at that. This summer Penny Hardaway put the hard sell on Smith to join him as a full-time assistant at Memphis, and Krzyzewski expects it will be just a matter of time before Smith, 32, jumps into a head-coaching chair, even if going from director of ops to boss means skipping a few steps. "He's going to be a real early head coach," Krzyzewski says. "He's got it. Not just talent. He has it." No doubt Smith's résumé speaks for itself: a national champion, league player of the year and almost five years on a college bench, accomplishments all given the extra benediction that comes with earning them alongside Krzyzewski.

But while coaching is not a political position, politics are involved. Fan bases are not unlike constituents, needing to be pleased and appeased, and plenty prefer their hoop leaders stick to X's and O's. For years coaches, especially Black coaches, toed that line, separating their lives into compartments, fearful of upsetting the applecart in an industry where job security already is tenuous at best. They looked at old-timers, such as Thompson and John Chaney, as outliers, men too big to be brought down by their civil opinions, and held up Nolan Richardson as proof that even a great coach can be victimized for being outspoken. Even men given head coaching positions were reticent to ruffle feathers, and rare was the assistant willing to risk offending before he even got a chance to become the boss. "It goes to the stereotypes of the angry Black man," Pitt coach Jeff Capel said when asked about it last year. "Stay in your lane."

Smith simply won't. Certainly, the climate has shifted, the lines between sports and politics blurred like never before, but it's still not the path of least resistance. "The thing that's been disappointing from my point of view is the negative feedback that can come with that," Blue Devils assistant coach Jon Scheyer says of Smith's social activism. "That's disappointing, whether it be from Duke supporters or not. The things that he's speaking up on and as our players have and we all have – it's about right and wrong, speaking from the heart, speaking from our hearts."

It would be cavalier to say Smith doesn't care; he does. He wants to be a head coach, and certainly isn't interested in sabotaging his chances. It's just that he sees the definition of coach differently. He's a father now, and parenthood has not just changed him, it has strengthened him, particularly his resolve. As he looks at his daughter, Cameron (yes, she's named for the arena), he wants what all parents want – a better world – but Smith doesn't want just to wish it into existence. He wants to make it happen, not just to be a coach who helps a player improve his jump shot. He wants to be more like the one who took his players to the Million Man March.

He will be here soon, in late December or early January – the joyful rebuke to a difficult year or the celebration of the calendar turning.

Just as he hopes for Cameron, Nolan Smith has a lot of dreams and wishes for Derek Indy Smith, the boy who will be named after his grandfather, and the site of his father's greatest accomplishment. Smith wants his son to be respected and loved for who he is, to be safe, to know a world that is diverse and inclusive.

Mostly he wants to be able to lift him on his shoulders and show him a world full of hope.

How Gene Banks paved the way for future generations of Black players at Duke

By Shane Smith, The Duke Chronicle (November 20, 2020)

Over the course of a five-year span beginning in 2014, the current state of the Duke men's basketball program was firmly established.

Amidst a flurry of five-star talent arriving (and departing) in Durham, four Black high school prospects, all ranked as the top player in their class, chose to experience college basketball in a Blue Devil uniform.

For Jahliil Okafor, Harry Giles, Marvin Bagley III and R.J. Barrett, the road to Cameron Indoor Stadium wasn't a shocking one, though that path had been paved almost 40 years prior by a Black No. 1 overall recruit from West Philadelphia who also chose the Blue Devils.

Gene Banks doesn't have his jersey retired in Cameron and spent just his senior campaign playing for legendary head coach Mike Krzyzewski, but his Duke career ranks as one of the more significant in program history.

'Divine Intervention'

Kenny Dennard, his close friend and teammate in college, describes Banks as, "like Muhammad Ali to me," an apt description for the bright and flashy persona of the high school basketball phenom.

Blossoming at West Philadelphia High School, Banks rose to the top of a class that included future Hall of Famer Magic Johnson. The man nicknamed "Tinkerbell" was also selected to the first ever McDonald's All-American team and took home MVP honors in the ensuing exhibition game.

Banks could have played for any program in the country and had already taken visits to Notre Dame, Michigan, UCLA, N.C. State and North Carolina. But from what Banks describes as "divine intervention," his English teacher urged him to travel to Duke for his final official visit. To get his teacher off his back, Banks obliged and agreed to take a trip to Durham.

The Blue Devils were led by a young, easygoing coach named Bill Foster, who took over the program in 1974 to bring it back to national prominence. When Foster first dropped off a recruiting brochure for Banks, the information inside detailed the positives of the school, rather than the basketball program.

"His quirks and the things that [Foster] did really caught my attention because of the way he was," Banks remembers. "Very caring, sarcastic, funny, whimsical. It got my attention because I met a lot of coaches who were pretty serious."

While Duke was a struggling program and didn't have a strong history of recruiting Black players, it was something about the landscape, the size and the people that led to Banks shocking the college basketball world and committing to the Blue Devils.

"There was a small contingent of Blacks there that were very connected with each other," Banks said. "I liked the diversity of the school. Students come from different ethnicities and different cultures. It was really a school where I felt more comfortable."

Despite winning just two conference games the year prior, Duke was suddenly armed with a new superstar to complement its returning talent, and Banks' commitment would set the tone for 40-plus years of recruiting success to come.

"I thought that was a great thing for Duke and for Bill Foster," Krzyzewski said this preseason. "That was a big commitment in the late 70s, along with [Jim] Spanarkel, Kenny Dennard, Mike Gminski. For a couple years there, they were one of the top teams."

Claudius "C.B." Claiborne integrated the Duke program as its first African-American basketball player in 1966, recruited to Durham by legendary coach and former Blue Devil assistant Chuck Daly. However, Banks was the first high-profile Black athlete in a Duke uniform, attracting attention the moment he arrived on campus.

"It all went smoothly. I never felt there was pressure," Banks said on having that role. "I never thought of it as a responsibility. And Bill Foster was great with that. He allowed me to spread my wings. He allowed me to be articulate. He allowed me to have the stage, and I loved it."

'We complemented each other'

Banks arrived in Durham hungry to prove himself, and even in pickup games in the I.M. Building, he sought to dazzle. It was a pickup session there when Banks drove the lane for a big dunk attempt, but was surprisingly met at the rim by Dennard. The two freshman classmates crashed to the ground and looked at each other before Banks exclaimed, "Yeah! That's how you play the game!"

It was all smiles as a lifelong friendship blossomed from that competitive spirit on the court.

Dennard committed to the Blue Devils the previous November with much less fanfare than Banks, though he was a major contributor immediately as a freshman. The 6-foot-8 forward hailed from nearby rural King, N.C., a completely different environment than what his star classmate had experienced growing up.

Dennard's girlfriend from high school (and eventual wife), Nadine, is Black, and has had a major influence on his life. Dennard was surrounded by racial diversity growing up and was just able to form a genuine bond with Banks, who was in a brand new situation entering college.

"Race wasn't a thing for me," Dennard said. "So when Gene and I hit it off, it was truly a bond of love, camaraderie and playfulness. We complemented each other."

Banks and Dennard were immediately thrust into the starting lineup as the future of Foster's program, a duo that just wanted to compete and win.

"We became so connected—kids from two different backgrounds," Banks said. "I knew he had the same energy and the same feeling of wanting to win. Kenny fed into that and read that and that's how we became connected. I love this guy almost close to more than life itself."

'The original Brotherhood'

Once the upper level of Cameron Indoor Stadium started filling up for preseason open practices, it was clear that the 1977-78 season would be special for Duke. Along with the newcomers, Spanarkel returned after an all-conference campaign the year prior, as well as Gminski, the reigning ACC Rookie of the Year.

The Blue Devils went through growing pains to begin the season, but found their stride toward the end of the year, reaching as high as No. 7 and taking home an ACC championship. Though carrying the burden of youth, Duke rolled all the way to the NCAA Championship Game, ultimately falling to No. 1 Kentucky, but gaining respect as "America's team," according to Banks.

"The things that I remember most [about the 1978 team] are the camaraderie and how that team grew together and became one big brotherhood," Dennard said. "It was the original 'Brotherhood,' if you ask me, before Coach K."

One of the lasting images from that season came after Duke's closely-fought NCAA semifinal win against Notre Dame, when NBC's cameras found Banks and Dennard sharing an emotional hug. The two kids from different worlds who just wanted to win were changing the landscape of Duke basketball.

While the Blue Devils failed to make the Final Four over Banks' next three seasons, their star forward continued his upward trajectory. All-ACC performances in his sophomore and junior campaigns led to his lone season under Krzyzewski, during which Banks took home All-American honors as a senior and edged conference legends Ralph Sampson and James Worthy for the scoring title.

Though a late-season wrist injury would take a hit to Banks' NBA Draft stock, the San Antonio Spurs selected him with the 28th overall pick. In the state of college basketball today, a No. 1 overall recruit with similar success would be a surefire lottery pick after their freshman season, and, while that was extremely rare in the 70s and early 80s, Banks did think about leaving after his freshman and junior campaigns to start his professional career. Ultimately, he never seriously considered abandoning the fun he was having in school.

"I was not going to leave Duke," Banks said. "I thought I made a commitment to finish this thing out and that was my main objective, let alone trying to get my degree as well."

Today, we've seen how far the Duke program has come since first welcoming Claiborne, Banks and other Black pioneers. The 2020-21 squad has done everything from a Black Lives Matter protest to organizing an increased effort to vote. The Blue Devils will also have "Equality" written on the back of their uniforms throughout the season.

"I commend Coach K, I commend Nolan Smith and all the people involved," Banks said. "I commend those players. It's the most amazing thing from a high profile institution like Duke to make that stance. I'm almost in tears seeing that effort and that commitment."

Before Duke's run to the 1978 title game, the Blue Devils rarely found themselves on national television, but sending the program back into the sport's spotlight allowed Black excellence in a Duke uniform to be seen on a national stage.

"TV was not yet big then. TV became big in the mid-80s with ESPN and that," Krzyzewski said. "But it helped our university a lot during that time, just like the kids who have played for me once TV hit have helped this university in that regard with a number of African-American players that we've had who are amazing guys and outstanding players also."

Banks remembers standing in front of the Duke Chapel before his career began, telling himself and his family that he would help Duke become a national power. Not only did Banks achieve that, but he also takes pride in the fact that the Blue Devils who followed him—such as Vince Taylor, Johnny Dawkins and Grant Hill—watched him play at Duke on TV and started taking an interest in their future home.

"With getting young Black men looking at [Duke] and saying, 'If he can make it there then I can do it'—I'm very proud of that," Banks said.

Blue Devil fans will be treated to another spectacle of freshman talent this year with Jalen Johnson, Jeremy Roach and company, young African Americans who will share the same floor as their pioneer "Tinkerbell" did 40 years ago.

Coach K says it'd be a challenge to contain the NCAA tournament to one city

By Myron Medcalf, ESPN.com (November 19, 2020)

While he's interested to learn more about the concept, Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said hosting an NCAA tournament in one city is a monumental undertaking.

"Logistically, I think it's a challenge to get that many teams there," Krzyzewski said.

Earlier this week, NCAA senior vice president of men's basketball Dan Gavitt said 13 preliminary sites had been eliminated and the 2021 version of the NCAA tournament instead will be hosted in one location.

Officials have commenced talks with the city of Indianapolis as the primary site, although Gavitt stressed that those talks were preliminary. A health department official in Marion County, where the event would take place, told ESPN that it had not been contacted about the NCAA's plans.

The tournament is a financial necessity for the NCAA, which lost \$375 million when the 2020 tournament was canceled due to the coronavirus.

"We need to have the tournament," said Krzyzewski, who had previously recommended an all-inclusive tournament where every Division I team would get an invite. "There's no question."

Krzyzewski said he would participate in a call Thursday with the National Association of Basketball Coaches and Gavitt to understand the specifics of the NCAA's one-site concept.

Duke's coach also said he has concerns about the season, which is set to begin next week.

Multiple programs have had to shut down their teams because of concerns about the coronavirus. Current NCAA guidelines call for teams to pause activities for two weeks if a player, staffer or coach (Tier 1) tests positive.

"I'm glad that [the NCAA is] looking at different things, including I would hope they always keep in mind that if it did get bad, worse than what it is, that maybe you could have [the season] later," Krzyzewski said. "I've always been a proponent of that, starting the season later."

Duke announced last week that fans would not be allowed at Cameron Indoor Stadium this season. The school will use other measures to "honor" them but will not use cutouts, Krzyzewski said.

"For all these kids, it's just a different environment," Krzyzewski said.

What will Cameron Indoor Stadium look like without the crazies? Here's a peek

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (November 19, 2020)

While it won't be anywhere close to the same atmosphere without the Cameron Crazies, Duke is making sure they and the rest of the school's basketball traditions aren't forgotten when the Blue Devils play home basketball games this season.

"Our people have done a good job making Cameron look fairly good," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said during a video conference with reporters on Thursday.

Fairly good qualifies as a big win in 2020. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, Duke will not be allowing spectators or any news media to attend games at Cameron Indoor Stadium when the Blue Devils open their season Nov. 25 against Gardner-Webb.

The famed, rowdy student section will be there in spirit and likeness, though. Rather than using cardboard cutouts, the school is installing a fabric covering over Section 17, the side of the court where the students are during games. The covering features images of the Cameron Crazies.

Coverings with photos will also be installed behind the baskets where the student band and the section where the graduate students are normally located during home games.

"I think the main people in Cameron are the Cameron Crazies and the band," Krzyzewski said. "And so they've created some really nice things to honor those people. People can have cutouts. We decided not to have them. We just decided to do it and kind of a big scheme in honor of the Cameron Crazies. And I think that's a good idea."

Duke's success at Cameron is well-renowned. The Blue Devils are 907-163 (.848 winning percentage) in the stadium since it opened in 1940. Since Krzyzewski began coaching the Blue Devils in 1980, Duke is 549-68 (.890) at home while going unbeaten at home during 11 seasons.

The streak of consecutive home sellouts is at 472 dating back to Nov. 26, 1990.

During two scrimmages this month, Duke used artificial crowd noise to create a game-type atmosphere. The ACC is establishing guidelines for that use during games for its member schools this season.

But, despite that, with no fans, Cameron won't have the same intimidating feel.

"I'm starting my 41st year here," Krzyzewski said. "So I've benefited greatly from having that sixth man to create one of the best environments in sport, not just in basketball, and not having that will mean, well, we'll see. You know, after we play a couple games, I'll let you know how good or how bad it is."

Krzyzewski said he fully supports the school's decision to keep fans out in order to slow the spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus.

"Everyone's got to adjust," he said. "I'm all for what our school's doing and no fans. They've done a great job for our university."

He and his staff must take extra steps to prepare the team for a different home atmosphere. Friday night's final preseason scrimmage will serve as a dress rehearsal. The team will enter the court from the locker room by running past the fabric coverings showing images of the Cameron Crazies and the band.

Everyone will wear masks when they are not playing. Bench areas will be adjusted for social distancing. The game management staff at the scorer's table will be separated by Plexiglass.

Given the unusual setting, the idea with the dress rehearsal is for the players to get over the oddity so when the games start for real they are mentally prepared.

"Getting accustomed to environment is huge," Krzyzewski said, "because you want total focus when you are in a game."

Freshman forward Jalen Johnson, who was named to the preseason all-ACC team, said he'll miss the fans. But he's still eager to finally play in a game for Duke on Nov. 25 no matter the circumstances.

"Fans or no, this is my biggest dream, just being able to put on a Duke basketball jersey," Johnson said. "So I think that's gonna be more special than anything is. Of course I'd love to have the Cameron Crazies in for sure. Unfortunately, things aren't going that way and are not looking too promising."

Pandemic-altered Champions Classic brings Michigan State to Duke

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (November 18, 2020)

DURHAM - The coronavirus pandemic meant the Champions Classic could no longer be the neutral-site, season-opening spectacle it has become in recent years.

Instead, the event featuring Duke, Kentucky, Michigan State and Kansas will be played in two different cities this year with no spectators in attendance.

Rather than a doubleheader at Chicago's United Center, the event will have No. 13 Michigan State playing No. 9 Duke at Cameron Indoor Stadium while No. 10 Kentucky and No. 6 Kansas meet at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis on Dec. 1. ESPN will televise the games back-to-back with Duke-Michigan State tipping off at 7:30 p.m. and Kentucky-Kansas to follow.

Because a neutral-site game became a road game for Michigan State, the plan is for Duke to return the favor with a game at Michigan State in the 2021-22 season. It could be part of the ACC-Big Ten Challenge or simply a standalone non-conference game.

Either way, it will continue what's become a semi-annual series between two of the sport's top programs, led by Hall of Fame coaches Mike Krzyzewski and Tom Izzo.

Duke and Michigan State already met nine times in the last 11 seasons. They've played three times in the Champions Classic, which began in 2011, and three times in the NCAA tournament. All those games were on neutral courts.

The Spartans and Blue Devils have also played three times in the last 11 ACC-Big Ten Challenges with Duke winning in 2010 and 2016 in Durham in addition to winning in 2019 in East Lansing, Michigan.

Since Izzo became Michigan State's head coach in 1995, Duke has gone 12-2 against the Spartans.

ESPN, which runs and televises the Champions Classic, attempted to move the doubleheader to Orlando. But different testing protocols in place by the four different conferences represented by the schools made that difficult.

With the time and location for the Michigan State game now firm, the tipoff times and television networks for all but one of Duke's nonconference games in late November and early December are set.

Duke opens the season Nov. 25 at home with Gardner-Webb at 8 p.m. on ACC Network. The Blue Devils play Coppin State on Nov. 28 at 2 p.m., also at Cameron, in game televised by ACC Network Extra.

After the Michigan State game on Dec. 1, Duke remains at home for two Duke Classic games: Dec. 4 against Bellarmine at 7 p.m. on Fox Sports South and Dec. 6 against Elon at noon on ACC Network.

Illinois comes to Cameron to play Duke on Dec. 8 in the ACC-Big Ten Challenge. The start time and TV coverage have not been finalized.

On Dec. 12, Charleston Southern plays Duke at Cameron at 8 p.m. on the ACC Network.

No. 9 Duke basketball has dodged COVID-19 so far, closing in on the season opener

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (November 17, 2020)

DURHAM - Other than a couple of apparently minor injury concerns, No. 9 Duke is progressing toward what it hopes will be a season-opening game with Gardner-Webb at 8 p.m. on Nov. 25.

With no current COVID-19 roster impacts, the Blue Devils have held two scrimmages at Cameron Indoor Stadium with a third one scheduled for Friday.

Along the way, Duke saw forwards Matt Hurt and Henry Coleman sidelined with leg injuries.

Hurt tweaked a knee during the team's first scrimmage on Nov. 6 and didn't participate in last Friday's scrimmage.

But the 6-foot-9 sophomore is progressing toward being ready for this Friday's final scrimmage before the regular season. Assistant coach Chris Carrawell said in a Zoom interview Tuesday morning that Hurt went through a 45-minute pre-practice workout Monday before participating in practice until he had to leave early to take an exam in one of his classes.

"We've kept him out just to make sure we get him 100 percent," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said in a video Duke posted on its social media accounts Monday. "You don't want to go into the season with some little nagging injuries."

Hurt averaged 9.7 points while making 39.3% of his 3-point shots last season. He's added 20 pounds to his frame, bulking up to 235 pounds, since last season, aiming to improve his play inside.

Coleman twisted his ankle in last Friday's scrimmage and didn't practice Monday. Prior to the injury, the 6-7 freshman had impressed the coaching staff enough to get minutes with the first team at times.

Coleman scored eight points during the 15-minute scrimmage period last Friday prior to being injured. He had 17 points and 10 rebounds in Duke's first scrimmage on Nov. 6.

"Hopefully he'll be back," Krzyzewski said Monday.

Carrawell described Hurt and Coleman's injuries as not ones that will keep them out of games.

"Henry twisted his ankle a little bit," Carrawell said. "He's a tough guy but right now you just want to make sure that they are 100 percent. If we needed both of those guys to play, they could play if there was a game today. But we just have to make sure they are 100 percent healthy."

The Blue Devils' players and staff continue to be tested daily for COVID-19 in accordance with Duke's campus-wide safety plan. College basketball programs elsewhere have seen cases crop up that have caused practices to be halted.

Within the ACC, Miami has already postponed its Nov. 25 game with Stetson due to a positive coronavirus test in the Stetson program.

After the Gardner-Webb game (ACC Network), Duke is scheduled to host Coppin State at 2 p.m. Nov. 28.

"We are testing every day," Krzyzewski said, "and we are hoping we can get started against Gardner-Webb and get going."

Moore, Hurt ready to take center stage as unique 5-star sophomores

By Max Rego, The Duke Chronicle (November 16, 2020)

Sometimes, you just need to get your feet under you in order to make the leap.

Going into last season, Matthew Hurt and Wendell Moore Jr. were consequential members of another stellar Blue Devil recruiting class tasked with returning Duke to the Final Four. While they never got the chance to prove themselves in the postseason, they added to Blue Devil lore with some memorable moments.

Who could forget Moore's tip-in at the overtime buzzer to vanquish North Carolina in Chapel Hill, capping off a 17-point, 10-rebound performance? And just two days later, in a game largely overshadowed by the preceding victory, it was Hurt's late rebound and clutch free throws that clinched the win against then-No. 8 Florida State.

But it was an overall rocky freshman campaign for the duo. Moore struggled with his outside jumper all year and missed six games due to a hand injury, while Hurt had issues defending the paint and fitting alongside the team's other big men.

After an offseason that defied conventional wisdom, however, both players are now over a year into the Duke experience, mature enough to embrace the spotlight while helping their younger teammates along the way.

"Freshmen—they're a little loose or they're not as locked in as you would like them to be," Duke associate head coach Nate James said. "It's really cool to see a Wendell Moore, and even Matt Hurt, say, 'Guys, come on, let's bring it in, everyone huddle up.'"

'A mindset thing'

For Moore, last season could only be described as a roller coaster. He began the season coming off the bench, seeing his minutes fluctuate depending on the matchup. A 17-point showing on 70 percent shooting against Georgetown in Madison Square Garden looked promising, but Moore simply couldn't take that next step.

The two-time USA Basketball gold medalist went scoreless in consecutive contests in December, making it clear that not every blue-chip freshman walks into Cameron Indoor Stadium ready to drop 20-point double-doubles every time out on the floor.

Moore has explained throughout this preseason that a lack of confidence was the main thing holding him back last year. The former five-star recruit is someone who tries to let the game come to him, which often fails to happen immediately when transitioning to the college level.

"I think for me it was more of a mindset thing, just getting into my own headspace where I can play the game how I want to play, at my speed, at my pace," Moore said of his work in the offseason. "Just developing a confidence that I felt like I was missing last season."

Continuing with the roller coaster theme, Moore did display some extremely encouraging signs as the calendar shifted to February. Obviously, there was the unforgettable moment in the Dean Dome, but there was also the 25 points at Wake Forest as well as the 10 points, six rebounds and six assists at home against N.C. State.

In both contests, Moore seemed to pick his spots beautifully, knowing when to attack and when to find an open teammate. That's a strategy that will serve him well, as the Charlotte native has more than enough athleticism and court vision to put pressure on opponents every possession.

"Just really keeping everything under control," Moore said with regard to how he will approach this upcoming season. "I feel like a lot of times [last year] I kind of got sped up and things were going too fast in my mind, so really just having a chance to look at the game and it kind of slows it down for me."

The new Hurt

When it comes to Hurt, last season was likely not what he or the Blue Devil coaching staff quite had in mind. While many expected his perimeter marksmanship to be the perfect complement to Vernon Carey Jr.'s interior dominance, that type of high-low combo never fully materialized.

At times, the Minnesota native displayed the shooting touch that helped make him the No. 10 overall recruit in the country. Performances such as when Hurt racked up 25 points in 26 minutes during a New Year's Eve victory against Boston College showed just how high the former McDonald's All-American's ceiling could be.

However, in similar fashion to Moore, there were also nights in which Hurt struggled to even stay on the floor, particularly during both battles with North Carolina and a physical road loss to Virginia.

In the wake of the cancellation of the ACC and NCAA tournaments, though, Hurt returned home to Rochester, Minn., with a specific goal in mind. Throughout last season, many pundits speculated that Hurt needed to add weight in order to adjust to the physical play that defines the ACC. Well, Hurt seemingly had the same idea, bulking up to 235 pounds over the summer, 21 pounds heavier than his listed weight entering last season.

"I got home around mid-March last year, took a week or two off since the season ended and just [tried] to focus on eating right, eating a lot and just stay working out and lifting," Hurt said. "I got with our strength coach, Coach [William Stephens]—three, four times a week we lifted."

With a different body comes a different playing style, and Hurt is envisioning himself having more of an impact down on the block this year. The sophomore still has the same smooth jumper, but it's obvious that the 2020-21 season will see a more varied skill set from Hurt.

"A knock on me was [the fact that] I was a little lighter guarding the four—people would try to take advantage of me down low," Hurt said. "I feel like this year, especially on defense but also on offense, just attacking it, being stronger with the ball, taking contact and finishing over taller defenders."

A new era of leaders

The end of the 2019-2020 season saw the end of an era for the Blue Devils. All four captains departed, as Jack White, Justin Robinson and Javin DeLaurier saw their collegiate eligibilities expire and Tre Jones decided to take his talents to the NBA. In their void, fresh voices are needed, a development that begs for Moore and Hurt to take another kind of leap.

If Duke is to be a true contender this season, it will need its sophomore duo to take that next step from a leadership perspective, and it appears they're doing their best to follow in the footsteps of previous Blue Devil leaders.

"Last year we had three great seniors in Jack, J-Rob and Javin, helping me out through practice, what practice was going to look like once the season starts and just everything around campus," Hurt said. "For this year, I'm just trying to do the same thing as last year, trying to help [the freshmen] get to class, what coach likes, what to do off the court [and] how to handle the academics."

The coaching staff has started to take notice. For Moore in particular, the change started with consistent conversations over the summer regarding social injustices, and it has now translated into a new role within the program as well as the NCAA, with the forward being named as one of the 11 student-athletes on the NABC Player Coalition.

"Normally, guys like Wendell, they're only around for a year," James said. "But now to see a talented player come back—now he's becoming a man, he's a sophomore. You hear the voice [and] all the things we try to instill in him as coaches."

All in all, both Moore and Hurt are ready to return to the floor and change the narrative after last season. While this year's team projects to be one characterized by depth and balance, if crucial experience is needed, expect Duke's sophomore tandem to take center stage.

Goldwire's growth from overlooked recruit to senior leader

By Conner McLeod, The Duke Chronicle (November 16, 2020)

The old adage "if you think you can, you can" is an easy mantra to say aloud. In practice, though, it's much easier to hide or quit when the going gets tough.

But for point guard Jordan Goldwire, that mindset, as well as an unwavering belief in himself, has propelled him from being the lowest-ranked member of Duke's 2017 recruiting class to now leading a championship-caliber team as a senior.

Even during the midst of Duke's one-and-done recruiting era, head coach Mike Krzyzewski continues to seek out talented players that will stay for more than a year to not only develop their own skills, but also help guide younger players in ACC play and the postseason. However, when Duke offered a scholarship to Goldwire, a three-star prospect with low name recognition, Blue Devil nation might have been confused, to say the least.

"Everyone's like, 'What in the world—where did this kid come from?'" associate head coach Nate James said. "I think he took that as a challenge. He took that as, 'I have to show everyone that I do deserve to be here and I'm good enough to wear the uniform.'"

Goldwire had a quiet freshman year, averaging only one point per game on a lowly 32.1 percent clip from the field. He wasn't big or athletic enough to make a scoring impact, and didn't earn enough playing time to lead any offensive or defensive units, despite his willingness to hustle at all times when he was on the floor.

"He was young," James said. "We had a young group of guys who were inconsistent and [we had] a lot of long talks before and after practice, watching film to help them get better."

Goldwire clearly took those criticisms to heart entering his sophomore campaign. He showed slow but sure improvements in his jump shot, but where he especially put in the work was in the weight room, going from 172 to 181 pounds in just one season. It might have been easy to get lost in the sea of NBA-ready freshmen eating up key playing time—not to mention the Zion effect—but Goldwire still found a way to make an impact in one of Duke's best wins of that 2018-19 season.

It didn't matter that Duke was down by 23 points in the second half against Louisville, and it didn't matter that Goldwire embarrassingly missed a wide-open layup earlier in the contest. His belief in himself allowed him to stay engaged on the defensive side of the floor, causing havoc with former point guard Tre Jones in the backcourt and helping the Blue Devils make a historic comeback with two crucial steals to end the game.

"[Goldwire] is a believer," James said. "He does believe in himself, and I think a lightbulb went off."

The Norcross, Ga., native finally found his stride during his junior season, when he and Jones combined for 3.3 steals per game, making life absolutely miserable for opposing backcourts game in and game out. Goldwire's much-improved offensive game—he hit a career-high 35.4 percent of his threes after connecting on just 18.2 percent of his treys over his first two seasons—allowed him to earn a spot in what would be Duke's most popular starting lineup. Once a player that opposing teams dared to shoot, Goldwire quickly became a certified threat from deep.

This year, as the leading returning player in minutes played, Goldwire will be faced with his biggest task thus far: coming into his own as a leader for one of the deepest teams Krzyzewski has put together.

"We got a good group of core guys coming back...and the freshman class is very deep. We can play across the board," Goldwire said. "We have a lot of confidence. It's been going well and we've been meshing well together."

Most likely, Goldwire will have to share point guard duties with another five-star: incoming freshman Jeremy Roach. Roach has the talent to possibly be the focal point of Duke's offense, but it will be interesting to see whether Goldwire's experience during crunch time will influence Krzyzewski to put the ball in his hands. Either way, Goldwire's tenacity on the defensive side of the ball will keep him on the floor, where he will surely become a mentor for his talented freshman counterpart.

"[Goldwire] is a guy who's got me acclimated here, showing me the ways and showing me how practices go," Roach said. "He's been a big part of why I came here and just a big part of my success here."

Based on preseason workouts and scrimmages, it is highly likely that Goldwire and Roach will start in Krzyzewski's backcourt to begin the season as well.

"It's fun playing with [Goldwire]," Roach said. "He can bring it up, I can bring it up. He can defend full court, I can defend full court. So it's really just a fast-paced game when we're in the game together. That's my type of game, so I'm ready to play with him."

If Goldwire can continue to exponentially improve his offensive skill set as he's done in the past, the one-two punch of him and Roach may be difficult to guard this season. What's certain, however, is that Goldwire's tendency to suffocate ball-handlers before they even reach half court will rub off on his backcourt mate, which could result in another year of a Duke team thriving off opposing team's turnovers.

"He is definitely one of the toughest defenders I've played against," Roach said of going against Goldwire in practice throughout the preseason. "I'm just trying to pick up on the little techniques that he does to make him such a great defender."

Goldwire's journey in Durham has been anything but perfect. However, the development and hard work he has shown over the past three years is any coach's dream, and it shows in the way Krzyzewski has increased his trust in the now-senior point guard every year.

His journey isn't done, however. He still has work to do in his senior campaign, and potentially one more. But if Goldwire has proven anything since he put on a Blue Devil jersey for the first time, it's that he believes in himself so much that everyone else is forced to believe in him as well. So far, believing in Goldwire has paid off for everyone involved.

"We're going to need [Goldwire] to have a great year this year, pushing Jeremy," James said. "You've got to get that right away, because as soon as things tip off, it's full steam ahead. I think when we have every player looking out for the name on the front and not the name on the back, that's when you have a true sign of being a team and being together."

What we're hearing about Duke before the start of the season

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (November 13, 2020)

During a closed-door scrimmage last week, seemingly every player on Duke's roster had a moment. A spectacular shot, a perfect pass, something. Which is to be expected, considering the No. 9 Blue Devils brought in the nation's No. 3 recruiting class this offseason to match with four valuable veterans.

But more than any specific moment, that scrimmage gave Mike Krzyzewski and his staff a chance to evaluate this team in as close to a game situation as possible during this preseason. So what was the most notable thing they learned?

Freshman guard Jeremy Roach is going to be a problem. Like, in the best way possible.

"He's a combo guard that can do both," a source told The Athletic. "Primary position I think he's a point guard, but he has the ability to score at a high level. So you'll definitely see him at the one and two spots. He can really shoot the ball. Shoots it with good range, with confidence. We knew he could shoot it, but it was definitely a good sign to see that in a game, see him make those shots."

"He's been that guy since high school," another source said. "Injuries set him back a little bit, of course, but he's won the Peach Jam. He's won a gold medal. He's been doing big things for a while."

According to stats provided by the team, Roach led all scorers with 22 points over the three periods of play. That included shooting 6-of-9 from the field, as well as making all eight of his free-throw attempts. It was an impressive display from the 6-foot-1, 175-pound guard, who sounds increasingly like a starter the closer the season gets.

In fact, associate head coach Nate James said on Zoom on Thursday that were the season to start today, Roach would be one of the starters.

"He's the dynamic guard that we've always had that really makes our team go," James said. "He's big-time in the ball screens, can really shoot the 3, can get after you on the ball. He's just young and will have to learn to run a team, but the talent is there."

Roach's emergence is just one thing we've learned about this team through a series of Zoom interviews. But between those and conversations with sources close to the program, a clearer picture of this team is starting to come into focus. Here's what we're hearing about the Blue Devils two weeks before the start of the season.

The strength of the team is ...

Guard play, and understandably so. Between Roach, Wendell Moore, D.J. Steward and Jordan Goldwire, that's a two-deep with three five-star talents and a fourth-year returning starter.

Yeah, that'll do.

"I mean, our guard play is definitely our strong suit," one source said. "All of them. Wendell – obviously he's made some big jumps, so excited to see him develop and grow – but also D.J., he's been super solid shooting the ball. We're a team that's built to go smaller a lot more than not. Hopefully, that's going to provide us with some mismatches."

That's without even counting a wing such as Joey Baker, who could slide down to the two spot in bigger lineups. But after losing four bigs off of last year's team, this situation was always going to exist.

Duke does have two true bigs on its roster, in 7-foot freshman Mark Williams and graduate transfer Patrick Tapé. Matthew Hurt, – who has been arguably Duke's most consistent scorer this preseason, will also play some at the five, but as more of a stretch option given his shooting prowess.

All of that to say, there's a reason three of James' named starters (Roach, Goldwire, and Moore) are guards.

"Coach mentions to us all the time that we're not going to be the biggest team on the floor," Moore said on Zoom earlier this week. "There's probably going to be one or two guys on the other team that are always bigger than us, so we have to use our quickness to our advantage, whether it's in transition or whether it's on the defensive end."

Big men developing

With such an exodus of big bodies this summer, Duke had to get creative with roster building. That led Krzyzewski to sign his first grad transfer. Tapé, who had previously been at Columbia, committed to the Blue Devils, decommitted soon thereafter, only to recommit for good two weeks later.

But it was worth the effort, given how Tapé is finally coming on in practices.

"Big Pat is emerging," a source said. "Just really good. And as an older guy, that's kind of what you expected out of him, but now he's doing it, and doing it at a very high level."

Tapé last played for Columbia during the 2018-19 season, when he averaged 11.3 points and 5.9 rebounds per game. But he injured his toe the following summer, and rather than miss half his senior season recovering (and because the Ivy League does not grant medical redshirts), he opted to transfer. Which is to say, the guy hasn't played a competitive game since the spring of 2019.

"He's been a pleasant surprise," a source said. "He hasn't played in like a year and a half, so it's really hard just to try to get the rhythm back, and you're going to a different league."

Because of that layoff, James said Tapé is further along defensively than offensively.

"He does a great job in the ball screens, he moves his feet," James said. "He doesn't talk a lot, but the one thing you need to do in the ball screen is call it out, and he does that a great deal. I foresee him being a guy who, if we face an opponent who runs a lot of ball screens in their offense, can really move and blow up and disrupt a lot of the plays. And he rebounds. So if you can guard the post, guard the ball screen, play with a level of physicality which leads to rebounds – which he's probably our best rebounder – that equates to being able to help us."

But Tapé isn't Duke's only big man showing signs of progress. Williams, whose older sister, Elizabeth, was the 2015 National Defensive Player of the Year at Duke, is also making strides.

"Mark Williams has been protecting the rim at a high level," associate head coach Jon Scheyer said on a recent Zoom. "He's a lob threat at all times and just seeing the way he's moving has been very good."

Williams dealt with tendinitis last season as a senior at IMG Academy, so he too is on something of an adjusted curve. The Blue Devils are optimistic, though, about how their big men are coming along, especially without a need to rush either into the starting lineup immediately.

Less talk about Jalen Johnson means nothing

When preseason All-ACC teams were unveiled this week, it wasn't Hurt and Moore making their way onto the conference's first-team list. Instead, it was Johnson, Duke's highest-rated incoming recruit. At 6-foot-9 and 220 pounds, Johnson already has the body of an NBA wing, and he was the No. 11 prospect in the Class of 2020 according to the RSCI.

So why haven't we heard more about him?

That's the question posed by fans on social media of late, but don't be fooled. Johnson is very much coming along, even if other freshmen have received more hype. James said it took Johnson some time to adjust to the level of competition,

What we're hearing about Duke before the start of the season (cont.)

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (November 13, 2020)

and to realize what type of effort was required to be his best self. That aligns with what Scheyer said last month, when he noted Johnson was still figuring out his base strengths.

"With his natural talent and ability, he's going to be one of the best. Especially in the open floor, he can really get out in transition, big-time athlete," James said. "And his passing ability ... I haven't seen too many guys (like him), and I've obviously been here at Duke and have seen some pretty good players. He can really see and find his teammates and he loves doing it."

James went on to say Johnson is a "pass-first" player, which should be a pretty scary proposition for opponents. "I think that's always been his thing, even watching him back in the summertime," another source said. "He's more of a playmaker as opposed to a scorer. He's the guy in transition, really athletic, but he enjoys passing the ball. If you get him going downhill, he's dynamite."

Imagine that. This dude, with that strength and power and leaping ability – and he's also got insane court vision?

"He's been fun to work with," Scheyer said. "If you're Joey (Baker) or D.J. (Steward) or whoever, you like being on his team because he's going to find you."

Don't sleep on Henry Coleman

Moore made headlines this week – be careful with context here – when he compared Coleman's power to that of Zion Williamson. Before you freak out, just hear out the entire comments.

"I didn't know Henry was as strong and powerful as he is. You can kind of compare him to Zion," Moore said, before quickly amending his statement. "He's not Zion, but he's almost just as powerful. Right there with it."

So no, don't expect Coleman (or anyone on any college team in America) to do Zion things this season. But Moore's comment is interesting in that it continues a string of praise for Coleman since he arrived on campus. At first, Coleman was celebrated for his leadership, including speaking at an on-campus Black Lives Matter rally partially organized by director of basketball operations Nolan Smith. Since then, Coleman's play has earned him just as much – if not more – attention.

"Obviously he has the physical makeup to bring that type of power and strength and athleticism to the game, which he's done each and every practice," James said. "Whatever team he's been on, he's given them a jolt. He's an energizer bunny."

James said the team has tried the 6-foot-7, 229-pound Coleman at the three, four and five, and that he's done well handling everything the team has thrown at him. In the recent scrimmage, Coleman tied for the lead in rebounds (10, same as Tapé) while also scoring 17 points. James said he would consider Coleman in the group just outside the starting five, alongside Steward, Williams and Baker.

"His motor's incredible. His personality's incredible," a source said. "He's incredible."

Early individual work paid dividends

Unlike several of its ACC counterparts, Duke delayed bringing players back to campus until August. Between that and an offseason schedule COVID-19 has already ravaged, there were questions if the Blue Devils would be on track by the time the season started.

The short answer is yes. The longer answer, though, is more interesting.

Essentially, because of all the university's pandemic protocols – Duke has already announced it will not allow fans at Cameron Indoor this season – players weren't able to work out in groups earlier on. That meant more one-on-one sessions with assistant coaches and trainers. All that extra time, as it turns out, was hugely important from a development perspective.

"It helped a lot," a source said. "Like, a lot. I mean, just from a skill development standpoint, you don't really get that in a normal year. You were able to get a lot of guys better with so much time doing individual work. I wish we had it like that every year."

That's the same perspective Scheyer shared from October, when he said the focus on personal sessions may mean Duke is better prepared this season than it would be traditionally.

"The biggest thing we tried to do was just control what we can control," Scheyer said. "I think that's been showing up every day. Our players have done an amazing job of coming focused and getting the most out of every practice. I know we've done that as a coaching staff, and I think we're going to be a team that is going to develop through the season."

How pandemic brought Adrian Griffin closer to his son, Duke recruit A.J. Griffin

By Adam Zagoria, NJ.com (November 12, 2020)

Adrian Griffin spent nearly three months with the Toronto Raptors cooped up in the NBA bubble in Orlando, unable to see any of his four children, including his youngest, 17-year-old baby boy A.J. Griffin.

Adrian Griffin, the former Seton Hall standout and current assistant coach with the Raptors, had to go it alone amid the COVID-19 crisis.

"Family were not permitted at the time, so three months away from the wife," Griffin told NJ Advance Media in a phone interview from his home in Illinois, referring to his wife Kathy. "And A.J. was actually in New York. But once the bubble was over and we got knocked out and I had time to be here in one place, he came to stay with me."

In late September, A.J., a 6-foot-8, 220-pound forward who has committed to Duke beginning in 2021, came to live and train with his father in Champaign, Ill. A senior at White Plains (N.Y.) Archbishop Stepinac, A.J. has been doing remote learning since September and has maintained a 90 average while living and training with his father. The time together has allowed the father and son to bond on and off the court after a period in which A.J. didn't see his dad much due to his NBA coaching duties before and after the NBA restart in July.

"For sure," said Adrian, 46. "Him being here with me, I haven't had this much one-on-one time with him since he was 11, 12 years old. This has been a dream for me to be able to just spend some quality time, and then we get on the floor and I'm able to share with him some of the things that I've learned as a coach and a player. And he has way more potential and talent than I ever did."

Off the court, they have been bonding during the pandemic by watching a lot of movies in their home theater, including "Step Up," "Conan the Barbarian," and "A Quiet Place."

"Yeah, that's probably the best thing about being here," A.J. said. "It's just a blessing just to be able to see him sometimes."

Father and son have also gone golfing and fishing, although A.J. joked "I'm not really a fisherman."

Adrian played four seasons at Seton Hall, averaging 16.2 points, 8.3 rebounds, and 3.1 assists per game as a senior, winning All-Big East second-team honors. In 2010, he was inducted into the Seton Hall Athletics Hall of Fame.

After Seton Hall, he played in the old Continental Basketball Association and then had a solid nine-year NBA career. He's been an NBA assistant since 2008, winning an NBA championship with the Raptors in 2019. He was linked to the head coaching opening with the Oklahoma City Thunder this offseason before they hired Mark Daigneault to replace Billy Donovan.

A.J.'s career is on a different trajectory, as he is projected as a potential one-and-done who could be eligible for the 2022 NBA Draft.

A four-year varsity player at Stepinac, he is a 1,000-point scorer who averaged 17.3 points, 8.8 rebounds, 2.4 assists and 2.3 blocks per game during his junior season. He committed to Duke last November after Blue Devils head coach Mike Krzyzewski visited him at the school that September. He held more than 30 other Division I offers.

"AJ committed to us a long time ago," said Coach K. "It's been a dream of his to be a Blue Devil and it's a dream of ours to have him in our program. He's an outstanding basketball player that is also an elite-level athlete. He defies one position, and physically he's ready to play right away. AJ is a very strong player, he's fun to play with and we're excited to have him and his family in our program."

Griffin has been hampered by foot and knee injuries during his Stepinac career that have limited his playing time. Now he feels the time with his dad has allowed him to work on all aspects of his game to improve.

"I never really had the time to really work on my craft, so that's why the past few years I know I could do better," A.J. said. "And I feel like now I'm more confident in my game because of all the work I put in. The same with shooting, I changed my shot form a little so I feel better and I'm back to where I should be."

"It all really connects together and I can really feel it changing my game."

A couple of weeks ago, Adrian brought A.J. up to Rockford, Ill., to work out with Fred VanVleet, the Raptors point guard who is now a free agent and is on the radar of the Knicks and other teams.

"It wasn't any contact but they just did a lot of drill work and Fred was very impressed about how advanced he was and that's a credit to Stepinac and the coaches," Adrian said. "They've done a tremendous job with him."

Stepinac head coach Pat Massaroni has sent two players to the ACC, with former point guard R.J. Davis now a freshman at North Carolina. He and Griffin will meet each other next season when the ACC rivals clash.

"I firmly believe that A.J. has a chance to finish the season as the No. 1 player in the country in the 2021 class," Massaroni said. "It wouldn't surprise me if he's a lottery pick in the future."

He added: "For us and at the next level, he's whatever position people need him to be. If they need him to run the point and be a pass-first guy, if they need him to be a scorer on the wing, I think at the next level he's a one through four. The game has changed to no more positions, just the best-skilled guys and athletes out there."

On Wednesday night, the Griffin family had a Zoom call in which A.J. signed his National Letter of Intent to Duke. The Griffin family is full of basketball talent. Alan is a junior forward at Syracuse and Aubrey is a sophomore forward at women's powerhouse UConn. (They have an older sister Vanessa.)

A.J. said he texted Duke associate head coach Jon Scheyer on Wednesday and told him he was excited and couldn't wait to get to Duke.

"I can't wait," Scheyer texted back.

Adrian said his youngest son has "loved Duke" since he was a young child.

"He's always been a big fan of Duke," he said. "I remember he had Duke posters all over his room when he was 10, 11 years old. I'm just happy that he's able to achieve his dreams. A lot of people are not able to do that. He set out to be a part of that Duke community and it's something that he's worked extremely hard for."

During the upcoming season, Adrian will have to find a way to watch all of his children play basketball – at Stepinac, UConn and Syracuse – even as the NBA season is set to start Dec. 22. Next year he'll have a son at Duke, too.

"Last year, I probably had a subscription to every network you could think of, trying to get the game," Adrian joked of watching his kids' games on TV. "And it was worth the trouble, just to see your kid run up and down the floor and compete."

"They're special kids. They're competing at the highest level of their sport."

Cameron with no Crazyes? That's reality for Duke basketball this season.

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (November 10, 2020)

DURHAM - Renowned throughout sports as a home court advantage like no other, Duke won't have its famed, raucous Cameron Crazyes in the stands when games begin at Cameron Indoor Stadium on Nov. 25.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the university's administration announced Tuesday it is continuing the no spectator policy for athletic events that's already been in place for fall sports, like football.

"As Duke University continues to be an industry leader per providing a safe environment for intercollegiate athletic competition, the decision to maintain our non-spectator protocol is imperative for the overall health and safety of the Blue Devil fan base, student-athletes, coaches and support staff, notwithstanding the immediate campus population comprised of students, faculty and staff," Duke vice president and athletics director Kevin White said in a statement. "We will continue to embrace the challenges of this unique if not unprecedented time with flexibility and compliance, and can't begin to thank our dedicated, passionate fans enough for their unbridled support."

The Blue Devils are accustomed to playing in an energized atmosphere at their famed arena. Duke enters the new season having sold out its last 472 games at the 9,314-seat Cameron, a streak dating back to Nov. 26, 1990.

Duke has won 84.8 percent of its games at Cameron, which opened in 1940, and is 549-68 (.890) there during Mike Krzyzewski's 40 seasons as head coach.

"Not having fans is huge, especially for a program like us with the Cameron Crazyes so historically involved in our program," Duke sophomore forward Wendell Moore, Jr., said. "It gives us the ultimate home court advantage. So not having them there will hurt us."

Associate head coach Nate James, a team captain on Duke's 2001 NCAA championship team, said preparing this year's team for a Cameron toned down by a lack of spectators is a challenge.

"It's very foreign, it's an unusual thing to be excited and pumped up for a performance and there's no one in the stands," James told the News & Observer.

The ACC is allowing teams to pipe in artificial crowd noise this season. Moore said the team has experienced that, including during a scrimmage last Friday night, and it does help some.

"We've been preparing in the atmosphere that we are going to play in," Moore said. "In Cameron, we have everything set up with the crowd noise. The atmosphere is great, the atmosphere that everybody put together. It's obviously the safest atmosphere for us and it is the best atmosphere that we can play in now."

Tuesday's announcement does not mean no spectators will be allowed in Cameron for the entire season. The possibility of a protocol change remains should the situation with the pandemic improve.

But, for now, the school will limit attendance to essential game management personnel and media members involved in the game broadcast, like television and radio play-by-play teams.

Parking lots traditionally used by spectators on game days will be closed.

Duke opens the season Nov. 25 against Gardner-Webb. No. 8 Illinois comes to Cameron to play the No. 9 Blue Devils in the ACC-Big Ten Challenge on Dec. 8.

Duke's first ACC home game will be either Dec. 29 or 30 against Pittsburgh.

Who's Duke's starting 5 this year? Here's the full breakdown of the lineup

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (November 9, 2020)

DURHAM - No. 9 Duke will begin the season ranked in the top 10 as usual and, while adding its usually strong freshman class, its veteran players have equally asserted themselves in preseason practices.

Senior guard Jordan Goldwire and sophomore forwards Matthew Hurt and Wendell Moore join freshmen Jalen Johnson and Jeremy Roach as the five players who have emerged as the starting five at this point.

Those five, and freshman forward Henry Coleman, made up the white team during the first period of the team's initial preseason scrimmage in an otherwise empty Cameron Indoor Stadium last Friday night.

"We believe our veteran players, Jordan Goldwire, Wendell Moore and Matt Hurt, are really crucial in us going far," Duke associate head coach Nate James told the News & Observer Monday. "Their leadership, their play. They have to show the younger guys what it means to wear the uniform and play in the ACC. We go against the best of the best each and every game, so it's getting them to understand that."

Those players looked good as a group in the 12-minute period they matched up with the Blue team in Friday's scrimmage, jumping to a 17-4 lead and finishing the period up 24-15.

The players switched up sides over the final two 12-minute periods of scrimmage play.

Overall, Roach scored 22 points by making 6-of-9 shots from the field and all eight of his free throws. His five assists tied with Goldwire and freshman guard D.J. Steward for tops over the 36 minutes of play.

Roach has quickly proven he's adept at scoring and running the offense.

"It's fun," he said during a Zoom news conference last month. "Just to play fast and to know you've got guys on the wing and the bigs that you can kick to, you can dump off to and they'll make plays, too. You've got guys like Jalen Johnson, Wendell Moore Jr. and Matt Hurt on the wing. It's just crazy to play with guys like that and it's fun to play with that kind of talent."

James likes Roach's play-making ability.

"He's such a dynamic guard," James said. "He controls the game. He's terrific in the ball screen. That's something that we really haven't had in a while. Just him having the ball and allowing him to make plays, he's really separated himself from that aspect. He's also shooting the ball at a high clip."

The 6-foot-7 Coleman and Patrick Tapé, the 6-foot-9 Charlotte native who came to Duke as a graduate transfer from Columbia earlier this year, were both solid inside and are pushing for playing time. Coleman had 17 points and 10 rebounds, while Tapé finished with 14 points and 10 rebounds.

"I thought Henry Coleman gave us some positive minutes," James said. "You really feel him out on the court with his energy, his effort, his defense. And that same goes for Patrick. Big Pat has really established himself as a defender, rebounder and is terrific in the ball screen defense. He's trying to do everything we ask him to do."

Among the expected starters, Hurt and Johnson will be counted on for points and rebounds inside while they also have the ability to make things happen on the perimeter.

Hurt averaged 9.7 points and 3.8 rebounds as a freshman last season, playing in 22 games with 31 starts. But his play was inconsistent.

He's added 20 pounds to his frame in the offseason and, now at 235 pounds, he's playing with more confidence.

"I feel like it's going to impact a big part of my game because a knock on me was I was a little lighter," Hurt said last month. "Guarding the four (power forward), people would try to take advantage of me down low, but I feel like this year, especially on defense but also on offense, just attacking it, being stronger with the ball and taking contact and finishing over taller defenders."

At 6-foot-9 and 220 pounds, Johnson arrived at Duke from Milwaukee rated as the nation's No. 13 overall incoming player in his class by ESPN.

Duke's coaches are finding Hurt and Johnson can play together well, with Hurt's ability to play inside and out and Johnson's play-making skills.

"Matt is a pretty good interior post scorer himself," James said. "He won't be just shooting 3s and floating on the perimeter. He's probably our best post guy. So we'll look to get him the ball some (inside) but obviously his biggest weapon is beyond the arc. We believe he and Jalen can play together because Jalen really wants to pass the ball. He's great at creating and driving and dishing. So to have those two playing off each other, we think that could be an explosive combo."

Duke's schedule is set to be announced Tuesday morning when the ACC reveals its full schedule. The Blue Devils are expected to open the season at home on Nov. 25 in nonconference play.

Getting the team accustomed to playing in Cameron with no screaming fans behind them due to the coronavirus pandemic is a big challenge the players and coaches are working through.

"It's very foreign and an unusual thing to do," James said, "to be excited and pumped up for a performance and there's no one in the stands."

Blue Devils to host MTE honoring legendary Duke doctor

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (November 7, 2020)

DURHAM - After the coronavirus pandemic caused the Battle 4 Atlantis basketball tournament's cancellation, Duke will instead play its own multi-team event at Cameron Indoor Stadium next month.

The Blue Devils have organized the Duke Classic, which it is co-hosting with Howard. Bellarmine, a former NCAA Division II power now in its first Division I season, and Elon round out the four-team field.

Duke is scheduled to play Bellarmine on Dec. 4 and Elon on Dec. 6. Howard, coached by former Blue Devils player Kenny Blakeney, will also host two games on its Washington, D.C., campus, playing Bellarmine Dec. 6 and Elon on Dec. 8. TV coverage and game times have not been set.

Mako Medical, which has supplied and processed Duke's COVID-19 tests, is sponsoring the event. The event also honors the late Dr. Onye E. Akwari, the first African-American surgeon on Duke's faculty who died in Durham at age 76 last year.

"Dr. Akwari not only did amazing things medically for Duke University, but he really helped our program, starting in the 1980s when I arrived," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said in a statement. "Dr. Akwari was a mentor to some of our young men like Tommy Amaker, Johnny Dawkins, Billy King and many others. He is one of the great human beings in the history of our university and although he has passed, his wife Anne remains a vibrant member of our Duke and Durham communities."

NCAA scheduling rules allow teams to participate in one regular season, multi-team event per season. Duke normally participates in neutral-site tournaments, like the Maui Invitational in Hawaii, the Battle 4 Atlantis in the Bahamas or the 2K Classic or the NIT Season Tip-Off, which both conclude in New York.

Duke hasn't played its own multi-team event at Cameron since the Iron Duke Classic was held three consecutive seasons from 1979-81.

Though the Blue Devils will not face Howard in this year's event, Krzyzewski still wanted that HBCU program as a co-host for the Duke Classic to continue spotlighting racial injustices, in addition to the ties between the two coaching staffs. Blakeney has two other former Duke players on his staff in assistant coach Tyler Thornton and director of basketball operations Thomas Hill.

"Howard University, coached by one of our former players, Kenney Blakeney, is a co-host, and we felt it important at this time to have one of the great historically Black colleges and universities," Krzyzewski said. "It gives us and the other teams an opportunity for two additional games, and gives all an opportunity to honor such a great man in Dr. Akwari."

Blakeney, one of 10 of Krzyzewski's former players who's a Division I head coach, said Dr. Akwari influence him during his time at Duke in the early 1990s.

"The connections for so many of us trace back to our time at Duke, and to those who invested in me not only as a player, but as a person and as a man," Blakeney said in a statement. "Dr. Akwari was one of those people who showed incredible kindness and support while serving as an exemplary model, scholar, administrator, and African-American male. I welcome the opportunity to extend his legacy by expanding those roots from Nigeria to Duke and now to Howard, often referred to as 'The Mecca.' I believe Dr. Akwari would be proud to see myself, as well as fellow Duke alums Thomas Hill and Tyler Thornton together at Howard while training the next generation of student-athletes in a similar fashion."

The remainder of Duke's schedule has yet to be announced. The Blue Devils are expected to open the season at Cameron Indoor Stadium on Nov. 25, the first day the NCAA is allowing teams to play games in the pandemic-altered season.

The ACC has yet to finalize its basketball schedule, which is expected to include 20 league games for each team.

Honors keep coming for Duke's Nolan Smith, a leader both on and off campus

By C.L. Brown, Raleigh News & Observer (October 30, 2020)

DURHAM - Chris Kenan expected to come up short as he took inventory of equipment before another Safe Zone Friday. The events target some of Durham's underserved kids, and this one was at Hoover Road.

Kenan, the organizer of Building Leaders for a Solid Tomorrow (BLAST), was wondering how he would make do with his supplies when an unexpected visitor pulled up.

Nolan Smith brought Kenan more than enough basketballs for the event – one less thing to worry about.

Smith, who is Director of Basketball Operations on Coach Mike Krzyzewski's Duke basketball staff, previously told Kenan that he couldn't make it. But seeing him wasn't a total surprise. As Kenan has learned, even when Smith doesn't have the time, he shows up for those in need.

"He comes wherever we at – and we're in these neighborhoods – we're not at downtown Durham," Kenan said. "This is somebody who is with Coach K at two o'clock. And at four o'clock he's with some of the baddest kids in the city, some of the poorest kids in the city. In an hour's time, he's leaving Duke and he's coming to McDougald Terrace or Oxford Manor."

Kenan, a football coach at Neal Middle School, and Smith did not know each other until this summer. Smith was one of many former star athletes in the area who Kenan contacted to march in Durham after George Floyd's death in Minnesota. Shortly following his participation, Kenan said he and Smith just started brainstorming different ways they could make a positive impact on kids in the community.

BLAST is just one of the outlets Smith is involved with that helps extend his connection with the community far beyond Duke University and Cameron Indoor Stadium.

NOLAN SMITH, THE 'PEOPLE'S CHAMP'

Smith played on Duke's 2010 NCAA national championship team. After his professional playing career ended, he returned to join Krzyzewski's staff in 2016.

His involvement with basketball gave Smith a bigger platform, especially in the Triangle.

"I will never take that for granted, because I know how far that goes with a young child," Smith, now 32, told The News & Observer in an interview. "In our community here in Durham and Raleigh, and in North Carolina as a whole, the fact that they love Duke basketball players and North Carolina basketball players, we are looked at as role models. So I think it is our duty to give back to the community and to love our communities. And that's really where it all begins."

Smith was recently named a George H.W. Bush Points of Light Inspiration honoree for "his activism and community outreach efforts during the recent social justice movement," according to a news release.

For his work on and off the court, he is The News & Observer's Tar Heel of the Month for October, which honors people who have made significant contributions to North Carolina and the region.

Of course, it's the wrong name for a former Blue Devil, but this is why he's the people's champ. When informed of the distinction, Smith simply said, "It's an honor" and that he appreciated being recognized.

Krzyzewski said he recruited Smith to serve on the board of directors for the Emily K Center, the nonprofit that the coach founded, because of how he connects to young people. The center has a program to help youth from low-income families reach college.

Smith said Krzyzewski has been one of his biggest supporters. In August, Smith organized a rally on campus after Jacob Blake was shot by police in Wisconsin and NBA players declined to play their scheduled games. At the conclusion of the rally, he also helped put together a voter registration drive.

Krzyzewski marveled at how far Smith had come since when he was a kid first enrolling at Duke.

"They still think he's the mayor here of Duke from when he played – the people's champ," Krzyzewski said on a video call. "He's done an amazing job during this pandemic and with all the social unrest. Actually, we have a Brotherhood Zoom (Wednesday) with all of our former players. The stuff that we've done as a result of that, Nolan kind of started that. In our community, he's like the Pied Piper."

Jon Scheyer played with Smith at Duke and is also on Krzyzewski's staff as a co-associate head coach. Scheyer said what the public is now seeing from Smith isn't really new to those who know him best.

"Even when he was in college, he's always been a guy who loves to give back," Scheyer said. "It's been about more than basketball for him. He's a guy that not only talks the talk, but he walks the walk. And that's not a recent thing. That's been ever since I've known Nolan."

MORE WORK TO DO

Smith's work in coaching is being recognized far outside of Durham. University of Memphis coach Penny Hardaway recently attempted to woo Smith away from Duke to take an assistant coach job on his staff with the Tigers. It would have been a bit of a promotion for Smith.

In his current position as a director of operations, he is limited in the amount of coaching he can do. As an assistant coach, his responsibilities would have expanded into recruiting and on-floor coaching. Krzyzewski said those opportunities will keep coming for Smith and predicted he'll be a head coach soon.

An undervalued reason why Smith turned down Hardaway and Memphis was he wanted to see some of the community projects he's been working on come to fruition.

"It played a huge role, a huge part of my decision to stay here," Smith said. "Obviously, I am home and I've called Durham home for a long time. But with everything going on, the work that is being done here, it really wasn't the right time."

Mayor Steve Schewel, who is a Duke alumnus twice over, said he first met Smith at a church event when Smith was a youth leader. But the two really got to know each other more during the summer. Schewel called Smith a "real leader" during the protests in Durham, calling his voice "positive, powerful and constructive."

Schewel said what makes Smith so special is his presence. He added that he couldn't remember the last time someone in Smith's position was out in the streets on the frontlines with protesters.

"It's very unusual, and I've lived in this town for 50 years," Schewel told the N&O. "Our coaches do a lot of great things – I was really proud of Coach K's comments, supporting black lives matter – but Nolan is different. Nolan, in his ability to relate to young people, has been extraordinary."

BLAST began a program this week called "Training in the Trenches" to give kids access to sports trainers to put them through workouts. That will rotate locations between Eastern and Twin Lakes park in Durham. Smith's larger goal is to help establish more community centers.

Where he grew up in Prince George's County, Md., community recreation centers were a fixture of every city and town, he said. They were open to all and helped keep kids off the street and safe in an active learning environment.

One place in particular, Bowie Gymnasium, was like his sanctuary when he was 8 years old and his father died of a heart attack, Smith said. Derek Smith, Nolan's father, played on the University of Louisville's 1980 national championship team and nearly a decade in the NBA before becoming an assistant coach with the Washington Bullets.

"I go home now, and some of the coaches who worked the door are still there," Smith said. "It puts a smile on my face to see them because I know that as a community they are there and they're taking care of the kids. There's nothing better than knowing that your kids are going to a place where there's a community leader that loves and takes care of your child. And I'm blessed and fortunate that I had that."

For Smith, it's only right that he passes that on, even if it means being recognized as a Tar Heel.

‘We’re good’: Coach K says Duke is ready for what’s next in 2020

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (October 29, 2020)

It doesn't feel like almost eight months since the last time we heard from Mike Krzyzewski – mostly because the concept of time in 2020 has been rendered moot – but somehow it has been. Crazy as it is to think about, the last news conference Krzyzewski held was on March 7, the night Duke beat North Carolina to end the regular season. He extolled Justin Robinson's late-season emergence, his pride at his team rounding into form. You know: pre-pandemic, pre-cancellation of the NCAA Tournament.

“Hopefully you and your families are doing well,” Krzyzewski said during a Zoom session on Wednesday, less than a month away from the start of the college basketball season. “As a program and my family, we’re good. In fact, really good.”

That’s reassuring to hear. Because as it pertains to the basketball program the run-up to this season undoubtedly will be unlike any other in Coach K’s prior four decades in Durham. It already has been: Duke delayed bringing athletes back to campus longer than any of its ACC counterparts to ensure proper COVID-19 protocols were in place. No one is allowed on campus without wearing a mask. Once players did return on Aug. 1, they were promptly sequestered in their own miniature “bubble” at the Washington Duke Inn. They went from one-on-one sessions with the staff to small groups, and lately, to full five-on-five practices.

So it’s been a slow progression, but not necessarily a negative one.

“Actually, to be quite frank, I think we’re prepared better than we usually are because our kids have been in a bubble,” Krzyzewski said. “They’ve gotten a lot of individual instruction because they’re kind of in their own bubble.”

Multiple players, as well as associate head coach Jon Scheyer, have echoed that sentiment in the last few weeks. Considering only four rotation players return from last season’s roster – Jordan Goldwire, Joey Baker, Matthew Hurt, and Wendell Moore Jr. – it’s been a blessing to have individual time to get the newcomers up to speed.

Those newcomers were one of the main topics Krzyzewski touched on, but certainly not the only one. Still, they represent a strong starting point for our takeaways from Coach K’s news conference:

1. Given the makeup of the roster – namely, seven newbies – expect a deeper rotation than Duke usually uses.

Duke’s six-person freshman class was rated No. 3 in the nation, per 247Sports, with several five-star talents in the mix. Among them are guards Jeremy Roach and D.J. Steward, wing Jalen Johnson and big Mark Williams. Couple that quartet with fellow freshman forwards Jaemyn Brakefield and Henry Coleman, plus grad transfer Patrick Tapé, and it’s nearly a whole new lineup from March.

That isn’t a bad thing, though. The talent some of these guys possess is off the charts. In the last few weeks, we’ve heard various teammates celebrate Steward’s shooting, Johnson’s passing, Coleman’s defense and any number of other attributes. Point being, this is a deep, versatile group.

What it isn’t is a clear hierarchy. Recruiting rankings are fine as a measuring tool, but with games a month away? Throw them out. By now – and especially as the season progresses – these freshmen won’t be evaluated on how many stars they had or their place on the top 100 list. They’ll be evaluated, as every player is, on their production. And through the first few weeks of practice, there hasn’t been a clear delineation in who might be able to produce the most.

“(We have) a lot of good pieces, so we’ll be playing more people than we’ve normally played,” Krzyzewski said, “but that doesn’t mean it’ll be equal playing. When you get separation, the guys who separate, some need to play more and they will.”

In the past, Krzyzewski has shown a preference for keeping a shorter bench. From 2016 to ‘19, only seven or eight players played at least 12 minutes per game. (Last season, 10 did.) But given the youth on this squad, coupled with the already delayed

start time, it’s not unfathomable to think 10 or even 11 players could see decent minutes in the early goings.

Another contributing factor: the versatility of so many of the players on the roster. Johnson, for example, realistically could play four positions. Coleman could fit at least three. But not needing to rely heavily on one guy to fill one spot all the time opens up the possibilities for Krzyzewski and his staff.

2. Speaking of separation, one key returnee has stood out...

And it’s the same guy everyone in the program has identified early on: Hurt.

“Matt Hurt, he’s been terrific,” Krzyzewski said. “He’s 20 pounds heavier. Confident. He doesn’t look like he should be as quick as he is, but he is.”

It’s the same positive feedback we’ve heard about Hurt from everyone else in the program. Now, the former five-star recruit was good as a freshman, but inconsistent. His shooting prowess immediately translated from high school, but he struggled defending stronger defenders down low as well as quicker wings on the perimeter. Those 20 pounds he gained? The hope is the added muscle will give him the strength needed to compete in the post on a nightly basis.

If Hurt can do that without sacrificing his 3-point shooting, he has the potential to emerge as one of the alphas on this team. Scheyer couldn’t have been more accurate than when he called him a “mismatch.”

Hurt isn’t the only one creating some separation either, according to Krzyzewski.

“In the last two weeks, Wendell has really taken another huge step forward,” the coach said. “Goldwire has been outstanding, and he was outstanding last year. A kid that’s really come on, especially this week, is Jeremy Roach – but all of them have.”

Krzyzewski also noted that Baker, Steward and Williams have been good at various points. It’s not a coincidence those seven are projected to play as much as anyone else on the roster, save potentially Johnson.

3. Duke has an outline for its 27-game schedule, but it’s liable to change.

So much for the plans Duke had for this year’s schedule. Open the season in Krzyzewski’s Chicago hometown with the Champions Classic? Not anymore. A holiday tournament in the Bahamas? Scrapped.

The Champions Classic is still expected to be played, although not in Orlando, after the news this week from Seth Davis of The Athletic that Orlando no longer will be hosting many of those season-opening events. But as for the Battle 4 Atlantis/Sioux Falls, Duke will no longer be participating. Instead, Krzyzewski confirmed what has previously been reported: Duke will be hosting an on-campus multi-team event, or MTE.

“We actually have formed our own because we had to,” he said. “It’s crazy.”

The reason for that, Krzyzewski explained, is because the NCAA stipulated that teams can only play the maximum 27 games allowed this season if two of them come in an MTE. Rather than allowing all teams to play 27 games and schedule accordingly, that condition created something of a mad rush among teams. “Once you cut down from 31 to 27, you should’ve just given everyone an opportunity to schedule,” Krzyzewski said, “and not worry about the MTEs.”

Still, Krzyzewski said Duke has “pretty much what we think is a 27-game schedule,” but that was liable to change. The holdup, according to ACC sources, has been the conference’s delay in releasing league dates. With teams potentially playing three of their 20 ACC games in December, schools have had to wait to schedule nonconference games so as not to interfere with ACC competition. The ACC was supposed to deliver league dates to schools by late October, but now sounds like it will come after Nov. 1.

‘We’re good’: Coach K says Duke is ready for what’s next in 2020 (cont.)

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (October 29, 2020)

One other complicating factor has been the lack of consensus testing protocols across the leagues. “Hopefully by the time we do play, there will be national protocols medically so that everyone who’s playing against one another will be under the same medical protocols,” Krzyzewski said, “which I think are essential to the safety of these kids.”

4. Nolan Smith’s influence and importance to the program continues growing – and there’s more to come.

There isn’t a more publicized director of basketball operations in the country than Nolan Smith, and for good reason. Smith, a cornerstone of the Blue Devils’ 2010 national championship team, is once again proving his tremendous value to the program – only now in more of a coaching role. Smith has been one of the more vocal members of the college basketball community in acting against social injustice and racial inequality, including detailing his own painful personal experiences for The Athletic.

Smith has worked with officials and social groups in Durham to promote policy changes that would create greater equality in the city. He led Black Lives Matter marches and organized an on-campus demonstration in Krzyzewskiville for Black athletes and coaches to share their thoughts. His star has been rising, and the communities he has interacted with are better for having worked with him.

And that doesn’t even touch his impact on the court. Smith, as a former championship-winning guard, is a great asset for Duke’s numerous young guys; Roach said this week that Smith has been helping him with various elements of his game. It’s only a matter of time before he becomes an assistant in title – and Krzyzewski expects that.

“It’s unlimited, the potential for him. He’s going to be a real early head coach at a college or university, or I could see him being in the pros too. He’s just got it,” Krzyzewski said. “Not just talent, he has it: the personality, the people skills, the organizational skills.”

Smith has been approached by various programs about potential assistant jobs – including at Memphis under Penny Hardaway this summer – but has elected to stay at his alma mater. The next time someone on Krzyzewski’s coaching staff makes a move, Smith seems like the shoo-in choice to fill that spot.

“He’s gotten a lot of offers already from different people,” Krzyzewski said, “and I’ve said, ‘Just hold tight.’”

5. Pandemic time away didn’t dull Krzyzewski’s competitiveness; if anything, it enhanced it.

Early on in the pandemic, there was a thought that time stuck at home would do one of two things for major college coaches: Show them how much they liked their personal time and potentially push them to pursue that lifestyle more quickly... or the complete opposite.

Not that there was really any doubt, but Krzyzewski clearly fell into the second bucket.

“When our guys got back and started working out, even my wife said, ‘Boy, you’re different.’ I said, ‘Yeah, it’s exciting,’” Krzyzewski said. “You know, I’m around 18- to 22-year-olds who believe in us, and believe in me, and they’re working their butts off, and they’re having fun. Not bad. Not bad.”

And although Krzyzewski’s interactions with the players were somewhat limited on the court until the official start of practice, he was still able to regularly communicate with them on Zoom. Not ideal, but of course the winningest coach in college basketball history was going to find a solution.

He didn’t say so specifically, but it’s interesting to consider how the end of last season might have influenced Krzyzewski’s motivation. As he told former Blue Devil

J.J. Redick on a podcast, Krzyzewski held a Zoom with the entire team – in a suit and all – on the planned day of the national championship game. He delivered a speech, told the players they could have been competing that night for Duke’s sixth title.

Sounds a lot like someone extra motivated to get back to work, no?

“The best is when a staff gives energy, and players give energy back – and we’ve got that going really, really well now,” he said. “Not well, like, it’s been crazy good in that regard. I look forward every day to being with these kids.”

Early returns encouraging for Duke hoops freshmen from Virginia

By David Teel, Richmond Times-Dispatch (October 29, 2020)

Three of the most revered players in Duke basketball history – Tommy Amaker, Grant Hill and J.J. Redick – have deep Virginia roots. But no recruiting class in Mike Krzyzewski's four decades leading the Blue Devils has been as tied to the commonwealth as 2020's.

Forward Henry Coleman III, center Mark Williams and guard Jeremy Roche constitute half of the six-man class that Rivals.com rated second to Kentucky's – Duke also added Columbia graduate transfer Patrick Tape. And with the season less than a month away, early returns are encouraging.

They need to be. With multiple Duke players declaring early for the NBA draft most years -- Vernon Carey, Cassius Stanley and ACC Player of the Year Tre Jones did so last spring – precocious rookies often are paramount for Krzyzewski.

A graduate of Paul VI in Fairfax, Roche is the heir apparent to Jones at point guard. Williams played at Norfolk Academy before transferring to IMG Academy in Florida and is an old-school presence in the low post. Coleman, from Richmond's Trinity Episcopal, has boundless energy.

"You guys have heard it before, but with us, seven of our 11 scholarship players are new," associate head coach Jon Scheyer said, "and so that's going to be something for our guys [where] the first game they play in compared to the 20th game or a couple months later, I think we're going to be a completely different team. It's going to be fun to see how we develop and progress throughout the year."

Sophomore forwards Matthew Hurt and Wendell Moore project as Duke's core, but Krzyzewski sees a narrower talent gap than usual among his scholarship players. That could portend a rotation similar to last season, when Jones was the only Blue Devil to average more than 30 minutes per game, and 10 averaged at least a dozen.

Among the freshmen from Virginia, Roche is likely to have the most immediate impact, with Krzyzewski entrusting him to quarterback the fast-paced offense Duke ran for two seasons with Jones at the point. The Blue Devils' 72 possessions per game in each of those years ranked 34th and 20th nationally, respectively, according to Ken Pomeroy's advanced metrics.

"It's fun," Roche said on a recent Zoom. "Just to play fast and to know you've got guys on the wing and the bigs that you can kick to, you can dump off to and they'll make plays, too. You've got guys like [freshman] Jalen Johnson, Wendell Moore and Matt Hurt on the wing. It's just crazy to play with guys like that, and it's fun to play with that kind of talent."

Williams is among those big men. His sister, Elizabeth, is a WNBA all-star and former Blue Devils All-American, but Mark casts a unique shadow at Duke.

"Mark Williams is somebody that we've never really had," Krzyzewski said. "He's young, and he's always had some tendinitis knee problems, but he's 7-1 with a 7-5 wingspan."

Williams is the first Rivals five-star 7-footer to arrive at Duke since Brian Zoubek in 2006, but Williams is far more nimble and springy than Zoubek. The leading rebounder on Duke's 2010 national championship team, Zoubek never averaged more than .8 blocks per game, and Williams is capable of far more.

Playing for Boo Williams' Hampton Roads team, he averaged more than two blocks per game on the 2019 Nike spring/summer circuit.

"Mark Williams has been protecting the rim at a high level," Scheyer said. He's a lob threat at all times and just seeing the way he's moving has been very good.

"I will tell you what, though – Henry Coleman III has done a heck of a job. I don't know if I'm surprised – I wouldn't say that – but he's been very impressive with what he's done in practice up until this point. He really runs the floor hard, he's a versatile defender, he's got a great attitude, he comes ready every day, a great

motor, great energy and his skillset is improving. He can get a lot better still, but Henry has been terrific for us so far."

Basketball players returned to Duke on Aug. 1, and by month's end, Coleman was already well-known on campus. Sports was not the reason.

On Aug. 27, director of basketball operations Nolan Smith organized a Black Lives Matter event outside of Cameron Indoor Stadium. Smith, Krzyzewski and women's basketball coach Kara Lawson were among the speakers, after which Coleman went to the microphone.

Our Eric Kolenich chronicled Coleman's impassioned speech exceptionally well, and Wednesday I asked Krzyzewski about the moment.

"Henry – he's a freshman – he goes up, and he doesn't just knock it out of the park, it's a grand slam," Krzyzewski said. "The family he comes from – it doesn't surprise me. This kid is even a better player than I thought, but as a person, he's been our most energetic and he's kind of loud, really, in a good way. He's not like your typical freshman."

"But for him to just say that extemporaneously and with the emotion that he did shows we're very lucky to have him. And you know what? His time at Duke: I hope I'm around when he's stopped playing to see who he becomes, not just as a player. I just think he's going to be a very special guy in our country. He's that good. This kid, he's that good."

Coach K: National protocols needed in pandemic-altered season

By Steve Wiseman, Raleigh News & Observer (October 28, 2020)

DURHAM - As of Wednesday morning, when he spoke with reporters during a preseason news conference, Mike Krzyzewski is preparing his Duke team for a 27-game schedule.

He admits – heck, expects – though, it all could change.

“Right now we have pretty much what we think is a 27-game schedule,” Krzyzewski said. “But we’ll just wait until tomorrow. And the next day. And the next day. And then you have to adjust accordingly.”

The worldwide coronavirus pandemic that wiped out the ACC and NCAA tournaments last spring continues to wreak havoc with college basketball, even with the new season set to begin on Nov. 25. Duke, like other ACC teams, has yet to announce a finalized schedule.

The 73-year-old Krzyzewski’s 41st season at Duke was originally supposed to begin in his hometown on Nov. 10, where the Blue Devils would have played Michigan State in the Champions Classic at Chicago’s United Center. The pandemic eliminated that plan.

This season still reminds Krzyzewski of those long ago schoolboy days in Chicago, when his buddies from his neighborhood Columbus Park schoolyard court would take on whichever teams from other parts of the city were available that day.

“On a Thursday we could schedule a game with the guys from Riis Park on Saturday and maybe the guys at Humboldt Park on Monday,” Krzyzewski said. “Who knows? But I’m gonna check on those Riis Park and Humboldt Park guys to see if they are available in case we get any cancellations. Crazy. It’s crazy.”

Duke has had no basketball players, coaches or staff test positive for COVID-19 despite undergoing daily testing, Krzyzewski said. That continuity of practice time puts the Blue Devils in a good position to prepare for the season.

One thing Krzyzewski believes would calm the craziness with scheduling are universal health and safety protocols for all teams nationwide. As it is now, individual conferences are setting guidelines for their schools to follow to be able to play games.

“Hopefully by the time we do play,” Krzyzewski said, “there will be national protocols, medically, so that everyone who is playing against one another will be under the same medical protocols, which I think are essential to the safety of these kids.”

Though he, North Carolina’s Roy Williams and Syracuse’s Jim Boeheim are all Hall of Fame coaches aged in their 70s and thus susceptible to serious health implications if they are infected by the virus, Krzyzewski said the focus should be on the players’ health first and foremost.

“The key thing is we should have sensitivity to the kids playing the game,” Krzyzewski said. “That’s the key thing in all of this, the sensitivity to the kids playing the game and making sure it’s a safe environment and that everyone is doing it the same way medically.”

This year’s Duke team features four returning contributing players in senior guard Jordan Goldwire, junior guard Joey Baker and sophomore forwards Wendell Moore and Matthew Hurt. They’ve been joined by another stellar crop of incoming freshman, including 6-9 forward Jalen Johnson, 7-1 center Mark Williams, 6-8 forward Jaemyn Brakefield, 6-7 forward Henry Coleman, 6-1 guard Jeremy Roach and 6-2 guard D.J. Steward.

Duke also added 6-10 graduate transfer forward Patrick Tapé from Columbia.

“These kids are really together and we are athletic,” Krzyzewski said.

Hurt has shown tremendous improvement from his freshman year, Krzyzewski said.

He’s added 20 pounds to his frame and is playing with more confidence. Moore has also started to separate himself from the group over the last two weeks.

Roach, expected to be the team’s starting point guard, is also progressing.

“A kid that’s really come on this week is Jeremy Roach,” Krzyzewski said.

So, as usual, Duke is gearing up to contend for ACC and NCAA championships. Just what path the Blue Devils will take to get there has yet to be determined.

Duke's Jeremy Roach learning what it takes to lead as a point guard for Coach K

By Rodd Baxley, The Fayetteville Observer (October 28, 2020)

Jeremy Roach is learning what it takes to be a point guard under Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski.

Over Krzyzewski's four decades with the Blue Devils, that role as a floor general has proved vital in helping Duke hang five national championship banners inside Cameron Indoor Stadium.

Roach, Duke's first commitment in the class of 2020, brings a wealth of talent with him as a five-star prospect from Paul VI Catholic High School in Fairfax, Virginia.

But as the latest rookie expected to take the reins for the Blue Devils, the 18-year-old guard knows that talent alone won't be enough if he wants to be an extension of Coach K on the court.

"You just gotta be very confident, communicate, and you gotta be very vocal," Roach said Tuesday during a 16-minute Zoom call with media members.

Those traits helped the likes of Bobby Hurley, Jay Williams and Tyus Jones lead Duke to the peak of college basketball's mountain.

"You've gotta lead the team, direct everybody, make sure they're in the right spots," Roach continued. "Just be the leader on the team and basically that extra coach on the floor."

Ahead of last season, for the first time since the 2013-14 campaign, the return of Tre Jones meant Krzyzewski didn't have to worry about breaking in another young point guard.

But after being named the ACC's Player of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year as a sophomore, Tre Jones is now preparing for the NBA draft.

That leaves Roach and Jordan Goldwire, the lone senior in the rotation, as the top options to assume the lead-guard role for the Blue Devils.

"Just being vocal," Roach said, has been Krzyzewski's "biggest thing" throughout the preseason.

"He's definitely been on me (about) just talking," Roach added. "I think I'm doing a pretty good job of it, but I could definitely still get better."

As the latest Duke player from the "DMV," an area that covers the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia, Roach has the benefit of being guided by a pair of lead guards that came to Durham by way of the place that has produced a plethora of accomplished basketball players.

Nolan Smith, Duke's director of basketball operations and player development, and Los Angeles Laker guard Quinn Cook have helped Roach along his path.

Both of those players won national titles with the Blue Devils.

"We've just been close throughout the years and I've just looked up to him," Roach said of Cook. "He's definitely one of the reasons why I came to Duke."

In addition to Cook's encouragement, Smith has offered Roach tips on what to expect in the ACC and as a player for Coach K. Some of that has to do with Roach's ability to break down defenders, but even more to do with learning to find his voice as a leader.

In addition to those factors, Roach will take the court as Duke's smallest freshman point guard since Tyus Jones in 2015, a season that ended with the Blue Devils cutting down the nets as national champions in Indianapolis.

"I think my body's coming along great since I've been down here. Been getting stronger, been getting bigger," said Roach, who is listed on the roster as a 6-foot-1, 175-pound guard.

"Coach (Krzyzewski) has definitely been on me about my weight. ... I'm adjusting pretty well."

If his prep career is any indication, Roach could be the ideal fit as a winner and facilitator for the Blue Devils. After missing most of his junior year with a torn ACL, he led Paul IV to the Virginia Independent Athletic Association D-1 state title as a senior. Ahead of his first collegiate season, Roach said his body is "definitely close to 100 percent."

"Just some little ticky-tacky things I gotta fix, but definitely getting close," he added.

During his high school career, Roach often showed an incredible ability to knife through defenders in transition before finishing layups over would-be shot blockers, using the rim as an ally or shifting the ball in his hands to find an opening.

He's working to "get that consistency" with his jump shot, but feels "it's coming along."

"I'm a scoring guard," said Roach, who averaged 19.1 points, 6.3 rebounds, 2.8 assists and 1.9 steals per game as a senior.

"I get my teammates involved, lead the team, and play defense. Just do anything that it takes to win."

Defensively, Roach possessed the skill and aggressiveness to harass a team's primary ball-handler. In that respect, he's similar to Goldwire, who carved out a niche for the Blue Devils with his energy and ball pressure over the last two seasons.

"He's been a big part of why I came here and just a big part of my success here," Roach said of Goldwire.

Despite challenging Goldwire for the starting nod, Roach added that both have spent time in the same lineup during practices.

"We definitely got a lot of reps in together," Roach said.

"It's fun playing with him. He can bring it up, I can bring it up. He can defend full court, I can defend full court. It's really just a fast-paced game when we're in the game together. That's my type of game, so I'm ready to play with him."

And he's learning all of he can about Goldwire's tendencies as a one-on-one defender.

"Definitely one of the toughest defenders I've played against," Roach said. "I'm trying to pick up on techniques that he does, just the little things that he does that makes him such a great defender."

Despite the challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic, Roach said Krzyzewski's message throughout the offseason was to "stay ready, don't get ready."

"I feel like when we got down here, everybody started rolling," Roach added. "I think we're at a pretty good level right now for the season."

And with just under a month until the Blue Devils are scheduled to open their season against Gardner-Webb, Roach is hoping to earn Krzyzewski's trust as a reliable starting point guard.

"He always told me that the spot would never be given," Roach said.

"He said (for me to) work my butt off and if it's right, then he can give me the starting spot. It's never going to be a locked starting five. We have so many guys that can play and be on the floor at the one time, so just take it one game at a time."

Jeremy Roach gearing up for whatever role Duke throws his way

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (October 28, 2020)

Oh, to have Jeremy Roach's daily to-do list.

As an incoming freshman on the Duke basketball team, Roach runs through a number of on-court drills daily: shooting, passing, ballhandling, you name it. Then there's the conditioning – all that running to brace for the rigor of an ACC schedule – and the academic obligations that come with being a Blue Devil. Yet none of those things are Roach's primary priority.

Instead, the No. 1 thing Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski has preached to his five-star freshman point guard?

"He's definitely been on me just about talking," Roach said on Tuesday during his first Zoom call with reporters. "That's his biggest thing: just being vocal."

Which makes a ton of sense, especially considering where Duke was last season and how it's positioned for the future. In Tre Jones, the reigning ACC Player and Defensive Player of the Year, Krzyzewski had a guarantee at point guard for every game. He knew Jones knew what to do, but more than that, that he was capable of doing what needed to be done. Now Jones is off to the NBA, though, where he's projected to become a first-round pick.

Which leaves a not-so-easy-to-plug hole for Krzyzewski and his staff.

The hope, of course, is that Roach is that guy. As the 23rd-rated player in the Class of 2020, per 247Sports, Roach represents the program's clear point guard of the future. A better question, though, is if he's also the point guard of the present.

How vocal Roach can become will help answer that slightly trickier question. You see, Roach's primary competition at the position, Jordan Goldwire, is Duke's lone four-year scholarship senior. In practice, Goldwire has been initiating the offense and taking on challenging defensive assignments – sort of like Jones did last season. And while Goldwire is by no means a chatterbox, the fact he's also growing into being an outward communicator is encouraging for Duke's prospects this season.

"Definitely one of the vets. Just a guy who has gotten me acclimated here," Roach said. "Showing me the ways – showing me how practices go, showing me how day-to-day Duke life goes. So he's been a big part of why I came here, and just a big part of my success here."

It would be tough for Roach to have a better mentor than Goldwire, whose work ethic and dedication to defense helped him grow from three-star recruit to valuable backcourt cog. But now the line Krzyzewski and his staff must walk is utilizing the experienced Goldwire while simultaneously prepping Roach to succeed him.

Roach and Goldwire both understand what's going on. And while Roach did say one reason he chose Duke was Krzyzewski's willingness to start a true freshman point guard, he also knows it isn't guaranteed.

"He always told me that the spot would never be given," Roach said. "He said I've gotta work my butt off, and if it's right, then he can give me the starting spot."

And even more than Goldwire versus Roach is the overall team dynamic. As associate head coach Jon Scheyer said recently, and as Roach confirmed, the starting lineup is likely to vary from game to game as much as any point in recent memory. Krzyzewski used 14 sets of starters last season, after all, and it's not out of the question the same happens this year.

Regardless, Roach figures to be a key figure in the rotation – whether as a starter or a key reserve. This summer his high school coach told The Athletic that Roach gets to another level when the game is on the line, channeling all of his motivation into production.

That can manifest in many ways too, considering Roach's deep tool bag. His reputation is as a savvy passer, strong driver, selfless decision-maker and tenacious defender. Roach acknowledges his 3-point shot is still "coming along," but given the myriad other deep threats around him, he won't be forced to rely on that part of his game.

Arguably the best role Roach could play as a true freshman? Something sort of like what Goldwire just did.

Goldwire played the fourth-most minutes of any Blue Devil last season – even more on a per-game basis than returnees Matthew Hurt and Wendell Moore Jr. – while starting 15 games. And while his stat line wasn't overwhelming (4.7 points, 2.3 assists, 1.5 steals per game), he became increasingly important as the season went on. He handled the more difficult defensive assignments to allow Jones to exert more energy on offense, while also draining wide-open 3s. He was a steady primary or secondary ballhandler, someone capable of getting Duke into sets without making grave mistakes.

And if Roach can do all that – whether alongside Goldwire or independent of him – his freshman season would be considered a success.

"We're learning to play together," Roach said. "Like Coach says, there's not gonna be one lineup. It can be different guys in different spots, so just learning to play together. Learning to play off the ball and on the ball."

With a month to go before the season begins, Roach still has plenty on his plate: perfecting offensive and defensive sets; continuing to rehab his body after tearing his ACL as a high school junior; and of course, nailing finals around Thanksgiving.

But tops on that list is still talking, which Roach is very aware of.

"You've just gotta be very confident and communicate," he said. "You've gotta be very vocal; that's one of (Coach K's) main things. You've gotta lead the team, direct everybody, make sure they're in the right spots. Just be the leader on the team."

He will be one day. Possibly even sooner than that.

How the Blue Devils plan to play ‘good old fashioned Duke basketball’ this season

By Chip Alexander, Raleigh News & Observer (October 26, 2020)

Jon Scheyer was doing a Zoom interview late last week when he dropped in the phrase “good old-fashion Duke basketball.”

If anybody knows about that, it’s Scheyer. He played at Duke. He’s an associate head coach at Duke under Mike Krzyzewski. He won a national championship ring and has been a part of many victories, large and small.

But what is old-fashioned Duke basketball?

“A lot of drive and picks, shoot a lot of 3s and go get the offensive rebound,” Scheyer said, adding, “I think that’s how we’re looking to play this year.”

As Scheyer said, there is no Zion Williamson. There is no Marvin Bagley or Vernon Carey, Jr., where Duke could, as he said, “Just throw it inside and most of the time we’re going to come away with two points, maybe three points.”

The Blue Devils do have post players. There’s 7-foot freshman Mark Williams and 6-9 Patrick Tape, a graduate transfer. But this Duke team, Scheyer said, will have the paint open in many cases in the half court, all the better to let players use their quickness to slash and break down the defense and present a lot of options.

And players who can fit into many positions.

Freshman Jalen Johnson, for example. He’s 6-9 and 220 pounds, can run the floor in transition, create shots, go inside and hit the jumper. He’s listed as a small forward but he’s not locked into that position.

“There’s no question he’s got the ability and the talent,” Scheyer said. “I think Jalen is figuring it out because he can do so many things. It’s not like he’s exactly a four or a three or a five. I think his thing is just figuring it out, ‘What’s my core? What’s my base? What’s are my go-to’s?’

“He’s refining that and he’s working on it every day. He’s going to be a guy who can play everywhere for us, really.”

Scheyer also noted Johnson, a five-star recruit from Milwaukee, is a good passer, saying, “If you’re Joey (Baker) or DJ (Steward) or whoever you like being on his team. He’s going to find you.”

The hardest decision for Krzyzewski, Scheyer and the Duke staff will be deciding who plays and who sits. There are 11 players capable of getting good minutes. Seven are freshmen. All want to play.

“It’s not going to be just a starting five,” sophomore forward Matthew Hurt said. “It’s not going to be one or two guys off the bench. It’s going to be a whole team collective effort for us to win games this year.

“Our strength, I think, (will be) just getting stops and getting out in transition. We have a lot of athletic guys on our team.”

Judging by Scheyer’s comments, Hurt will have a spot in the lineup. He’s the leading returning scorer off last year’s 25-6 team and he returned to Duke 20 pounds heavier.

“Matthew Hurt has been our leading scorer, if not every day, most days,” Scheyer said. “He’s played with an incredibly high level of confidence.”

The practice time has allowed the Blue Devils take a long look at the players and allow the new guys to blend in, and all can only hope the 2020-21 season begins as scheduled next month.

“It’s going to be a completely different team,” Scheyer said. “It’s going to be fun to see how we develop and progress throughout the year.”

Bulked-up Matthew Hurt hopes ‘aggressive mindset’ leads to bigger year with Duke

By Rodd Baxley, The Fayetteville Observer (October 21, 2020)

Duke’s Matthew Hurt is looking to bring out the competitor in himself on a more consistent basis this season.

To better understand what Hurt hopes to accomplish in his sophomore year with the Blue Devils, look no further than a play he made against Florida State at Cameron Indoor Stadium in February.

On that play, the 6-foot-9 forward skied above a group of Seminoles to snag a one-handed offensive rebound in a one-possession game with 11.7 seconds left to play.

The rebound led to free throws and, ultimately, a top-10 win for the Blue Devils.

After adding 20 pounds of muscle to his frame in the offseason, the now 240-pound Hurt is hoping to make more of those game-changing plays this season with his not-so-scrappy build and a different level of aggression.

“Last year, I don’t think I competed in the way that I should and the way I’m capable,” Hurt said Tuesday during a Zoom call with media members.

“I think showing some glances with that rebound was a good example of showing the younger guys what it takes to get a rebound in the ACC. ... Just the little plays that add up to big plays that Coach (Mike Krzyzewski) is emphasizing. The offense rebound, I thought, was one of my best plays last year.”

Hurt said the coaches always highlight a couple of clips from practice that involve charges or deflections. Often overlooked on highlight reels, those plays can be the difference between a win or a loss.

With that in mind, Hurt attacked the offseason with an attitude and edge he hopes will lead to more consistency in his second year with the program.

“My mentality changed a lot since last year,” he said. “I think just being aggressive, just trying to be the best player on the floor each time.”

After leaving Duke in mid-March due to the coronavirus pandemic, Hurt returned to Minnesota with a plan to change his eating habits and improve his workout routine in the gym and with his weightlifting program.

“I think it was more like being motivated to get better and to see feedback from my coaches,” Hurt said. “Just trying to get better during quarantine.”

With help from Will Stephens, Duke’s head sports performance coach, Hurt accomplished his goals and arrived on campus in August as a better version of himself.

“I feel like it’s going to impact a big part of my game because a knock on me was I was a little lighter,” Hurt continued.

“Guarding the four, people would try to take advantage of me down low. But I feel like this year – especially on defense but also on offense – just attacking it, being stronger with the ball and taking contact and finishing over taller defenders.”

Prolific at times as a scorer, Hurt was inconsistent at others, struggling with the speed and strength of some opponents in his rookie campaign.

But there’s no questioning the skill or upside of Hurt, who started 22 of Duke’s 31 games last season, averaging 9.7 points and 3.8 rebounds. He knocked down 39.3% of his 3-point attempts, which was the 10th-best three-point field goal percentage by a Duke freshman in program history, to finish with a team-best 42 treys.

He also recorded three 20-point performances but his playing time waned over Duke’s final three games of the shortened season. Hurt averaged 10 minutes of action and didn’t score in two of those games.

While most pundits point to Hurt’s offensive potential as a stretch four, he believes the path to more playing time starts with improving his lateral quickness on the defensive end.

It’s a skill that can help Duke’s defense as a whole because of the ability to switch multiple positions without giving up a mismatch.

“Getting stops and keeping my guy in front,” Hurt said of his defensive goals. “Getting rebounds and, offensively, just being aggressive and having that aggressive mindset.”

In addition to improving his agility and ability to defend without fouling, Hurt has a chance to be Duke’s centerpiece in the frontcourt. With Vernon Carey Jr. no longer anchoring the post, Hurt could garner even more post touches and opportunities around the rim this season.

“Coach has been using me in a lot of different ways on the perimeter and the blocks if there’s a mismatch,” Hurt said.

“Just trying to be in attack mode all game.”

Fayetteville’s Joey Baker, a junior wing for the Blue Devils, said Hurt has looked “great” and is scoring at an “elite level” in practice.

Freshman DJ Steward agreed, saying Hurt has “definitely gotten a lot better, according to what Coach K has said.”

With an improved confidence and comfort level, along with support from his teammates, the bulked-up Hurt continues to hammer home his desire to compete without ceasing and stay aggressive.

“Last year didn’t go as expected for me, but I feel like everyone has their own path,” Hurt said.

“... I just tried to take the weaknesses last year and make them strengths during the offseason.”

Why this Duke forward gained 20 pounds 'of muscle' during the pandemic

By Chip Alexander, Raleigh News & Observer (October 21, 2020)

Duke's Matthew Hurt, like a lot of folks, said he has put on a few pounds during the pandemic.

Hurt does add a two-word caveat: "Of muscle."

As a freshman at Duke last season, Hurt soon learned that going inside the paint to bang bodies often left him feeling, in a word, light. The 6-9 forward did weigh 220 pounds but that didn't seem to be enough, especially in bruising ACC games.

So Hurt hit the weights soon after the 2019-20 season was abruptly called off in March because of the coronavirus. He returned to Duke in early August with the same shooting skills – the big kid can shoot the 3 – but with the determination to be more of an inside factor this season, defending and with the ball.

He's 240 now, he said. Bigger, tougher, stronger. All that.

"I feel like it's going to impact a big part of my game because a knock on me I was a little lighter," Hurt said Tuesday in a media call. "Guarding the 4 (power forwards), people were trying to take advantage of me down low. But I feel like this year, especially on defense but also on offense, just attacking it, being stronger with the ball, taking contact and finishing over taller defenders.

"Just try to be in attack mode all game."

THE FIVE-STAR RECRUIT FROM MINNESOTA

That wasn't the case last season. Hurt was a five-star recruit out of Rochester, Minn., but also found himself in Durham, a thousand miles from home, in a program with a Hall of Fame coach and players with just as good a basketball pedigree. He admits to being a bit lost at first at Duke, like many college freshmen.

"Just navigating everything," he said.

It showed in his game. There were times when Hurt was hitting his shot and streaky good, then very quiet games when No. 21 wasn't very visible or effective while a Vernon Carey Jr. or Tre Jones or Wendell Moore Jr. were the Duke stars – Moore's last-second putback to win at North Carolina was one of the season's most memorable moments.

But then there was Duke's game against Florida State. Hurt's moment.

With 12 seconds left and the No. 7 Blue Devils protecting a 66-63 lead, Hurt fought through a physical boxout from FSU's Patrick Williams and into the lane to grab an offensive rebound. Fouled on the play, he knocked down both one-and-one free throws to seal a win over the No. 8 Seminoles.

"Last year I don't think I competed the way that I should and the way I'm capable," Hurt said. "Little plays can add up to big plays. That was one of my best plays last year."

That was two days after the emotional 98-96 overtime win at UNC. That was at Cameron Indoor Stadium. Hurt had 12 points in the game but his hustling rebound and his get-the-ball desire on the play showed another side of his competitiveness.

That's what Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski and the staff want to see more of this season from the sophomore.

"Last year didn't go as expected for me but I think everyone has his own path," Hurt said. "Just try to get better. That's the main goal."

Hurt said he worked on his lateral quickness, for example. All the better, he said, to guard smaller players if called on. He also worked on getting his shot off, as he put it, "a lot quicker." He does plan to get his shots.

HURT TOLD TO SHOOT LOT OF 3'S

"Just having an aggressive mindset," he said. "Coach is telling me to shoot a lot of 3's this year and just attack the rim and show I'm a versatile player."

Hurt averaged 9.7 points a game last season, fourth-best on the team, and finished at 48.7 percent from the field. He was a 39.3 percent shooter on 3's, hitting 42 of 107 from behind the arc, and shot 40.8 percent in ACC games from 3.

But that was last year. This is a new team and this year's freshmen, Hurt said, have impressive individual skill sets, giving a quick scouting report on each:

Henry Coleman III ("Energy, rebounding, brings it every day), Mark Williams ("Shot blocker, can finish, really good lob threat"), Jalen Johnson ("Out in transition, very special"), Jaemyn Brakefield ("Really can shoot it, can defend, can drive"), DJ Steward ("Can really shoot, can really handle, really get to the rim"), Jeremy Roach ("Really good point guard, really calm.")

As for Hurt, his plan for the new season is simple.

"Just be aggressive and try to be the best player on the court each time," he said.

Bigger, stronger and a year wiser, Matthew Hurt looks to lead at Duke

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (October 21, 2020)

Matthew Hurt had a choice to make this summer: Be honest with himself. Or not.

He picked the former, which is no easy feat for a 20-year-old rising sophomore. And remember this too: Hurt is a former five-star recruit, someone who arrived at Duke with the lofty billing of a potential one-and-done star. But for as commonplace as that path has been the last decade in Durham, it's not automatic. Anything but.

Last season, when two of Hurt's fellow freshmen, Vernon Carey Jr. and Cassius Stanley, declared for the still-yet-to-happen NBA Draft, Hurt didn't. Nor did he consider transferring. Instead he met with his coaches and evaluated himself. His future. His goals.

And the resulting epiphany?

"I feel like," Hurt said Tuesday, "everyone has their own path."

Indeed they do – and now Hurt has a clear vision of his. Much clearer, for example, than this time a year ago, when he was still finding his way around campus and through Mike Krzyzewski's practices. Now with a year under his belt, he knows how things work. He knows what works. Which, on the flip side, means he also knows what doesn't.

He knows, for example, his defense didn't cut it. Against larger, stronger opponents, Hurt was outmuscled in the post. Against smaller, quick ones, he didn't have the lateral foot speed to keep up. Not an easy realization to make, but a necessary one if you want to get better. Hurt did. Still does.

"I just tried to take the weaknesses last year," he said, "and make them strengths in the offseason."

That meant bulking up considerably, without the hands-on guidance of Duke's strength and conditioning staff. So while Hurt would check in three or four times a week with Will Stephens, Duke's head sports performance coach, he also had to do the work himself. The lifting. The conditioning. Even the eating, although that may not sound like a job.

It all paid off: Hurt added some 20 pounds, a gain that will be most notable in his base.

For a team that lost a lot of experience and production in the post, that's of critical importance. Now closer to 6-foot-9 and 240 pounds, Hurt has the size to play the four or the five, depending on lineup. Regardless, he'll be asked to be a more constant rebounding presence this year (only 3.8 per game as a freshman) and interior offensive threat.

Per Synergy, Hurt scored an impressive 1.571 points per possession on cuts last season; 1.295 in transition; and 1.125 in spot-up situations – all of which rated in the 89th percentile or better. But with offensive put-backs? That efficiency dropped to 1.036 points per possession, or the 39th percentile.

The added bulk should help address that, making Hurt a legitimate inside-outside threat. Or, as associate head coach Jon Scheyer recently told The Athletic, "a problem to match up with."

"I feel like it's gonna impact a big part of my game, because a knock on me was I was a little lighter," Hurt said. "Guarding the four, people would try to take advantage of me down low. But I feel like this year, especially on defense and also on offense, (I'll be) just attacking it, being stronger with the ball, taking contact and finishing over taller defenders."

Already the results are backing that up. Scheyer said Hurt has been the leading scorer in pre-practice scrimmages. Multiple teammates, including freshman D.J. Steward, singled out Hurt as one of the guys who has most impressed them. And then there's Hurt himself, who spoke Tuesday with a renewed sense of confidence.

"Coach has been using me a lot of different ways, on the perimeter and the blocks," he said with a subtle smile. "If there's a mismatch, just try to be in attack mode all game."

The mental side of things shouldn't be overlooked in Hurt's growth either. The pressure of living up to five-star status isn't easy. Neither is doing so at a place such as Duke, which churns out lottery picks with assembly-line regularity. So to struggle with both those things, and then not falter? Credit to Hurt.

Of course, adopting that mindset a month before games are played is one thing. But if Hurt can maintain this level of confidence and self-belief, he can singlehandedly raise the trajectory of this year's team. At his best, he's that good.

"I don't think I competed in the way I should or the way I'm capable of, so just showing some glances," Hurt said. "My mentality, I think, changed a lot since last year. Just being aggressive and trying to be the best player on the floor each time."

Now that isn't to say mentality and reality will always align. Hurt will be among Duke's leading scorers this season, but given the overall depth – especially on the wing – he doesn't have to be the best player on the floor every night. That's what Jalen Johnson and Wendell Moore are there for. What Hurt does have to do is contribute consistently, and not have games where foul trouble and defense get him run off the floor.

Hopefully, the added weight and experience he has gained will allow that. But of course, there's no way of knowing until the season kicks into gear. Maybe he takes the next step. Maybe he still struggles some and has to do another round of growth.

In any event, he has done what he needed to this summer. More, one could argue. And that alone says a heck of a lot.

"I'm just trying to take that next step," Hurt said. "Trying to let the guys know that everything here is important."

Imagine winning the 2020 NCAA basketball championship. Duke's Coach K can.

By Chip Alexander, Raleigh News & Observer (October 15, 2020)

The coronavirus kept the 2020 NCAA basketball tournament from being played but Duke's Blue Devils had that championship feeling.

Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski saw to that – “One Shining Moment” and all.

Krzyzewski, appearing this week on “The Old Man & the Three” podcast hosted by former Duke star J.J. Redick, explained the dejection and sadness of his players – and many others in college basketball – when the NCAAs had to be canceled this year. There initially was some hope after the ACC Tournament was canceled that the NCAAs might be held, even a few months later, but that hope quickly was quelled as the pandemic spread.

What to do? Coach K had an idea, which he explained on the podcast.

Feeling that the players on last season's team needed proper closure, Krzyzewski said he FaceTimed each player on the Saturday of the scheduled NCAA Final Four in Atlanta, asking them to imagine being there and playing in front of 75,000.

And the Blue Devils “won” the semifinal game, he told the players. By 25 points, Coach K said on the podcast.

On the Monday of the national championship game, he said he held a team meeting via Zoom. He said he wore a coat and tie and he gave a pregame speech, Coach K being Coach K.

“Now you're in the moment that you dreamed of, playing for the national championship,” he said he told his players. “Let's go out and be national champions.”

PLAYERS SHOWN 2020 CHAMPIONSHIP BANNER

Two hours later, Krzyzewski said, the players were shown a 2020 national championship banner. And, of course, there was “One Shining Moment.”

Coach K, on the podcast, said the players and staff last season put together their own video version at a team meal before leaving campus in the spring. That was played again, just as CBS does each year to cap the NCAA Tournament.

“Those kids deserved that and it was really good for me to do it,” Krzyzewski said on the podcast.

Redick, a former national and ACC player of the year at Duke, is a 14-year NBA veteran who plays for the New Orleans Pelicans. “The Old Man & the Three” podcast with co-host Tommy Alter began in August.

Krzyzewski and the Blue Devils have won five national titles although Redick, despite his collegiate success, noted he was not on a championship team at Duke.

Grin and share it: D.J. Steward gives Duke fans plenty of reason to smile

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (October 14, 2020)

How D.J. Steward ended up with a constant smile on his face is, well, sort of up in the air.

"I really don't know," Steward said Tuesday in an introductory Zoom call. "Probably my mom? My mom is always happy and positive, and I'm pretty sure it just rubbed off on me."

Fair enough. Parents, right? (And yes, Steward said this through that kilowatt grin of his.) What's much clearer is why he now has so many reasons to smile: because of where he is and the opportunity in front of him. Steward makes up one-sixth of Duke's massive freshman class, rated the No. 3 incoming group in the nation per 247Sports. A five-star combo guard out of Chicago, he's well-known for superb shooting and the ease with which he explodes in the open court.

And, of course, that smile.

"How I move in life, I just move positively," Steward said. "Just always smiling."

As for opportunity? Well, that's just another reason to flash those pearly whites. Despite being listed at just 6-foot-2 and 163 pounds, Steward has a chance to make a major impact for the Blue Devils, potentially even as a starter. He said in practice – which officially begins Wednesday – he has been paired in the backcourt with senior Jordan Goldwire. Considering J-Gold, as he's affectionately known, started 15 games a season ago, that's a pretty good sign for Steward.

Now, starting is certainly not the end-all-be-all at Duke, nor should it be. Last year, due as much to opposing matchups as to roster composition, Mike Krzyzewski started 14 lineups in 31 games. What's more important is that Steward is a potential closer for Duke, given his proficiency for putting the ball in the hole.

Asked to explain his game for the uninitiated, Steward said: "Combo guard. I can play on or off the ball. I can shoot it pretty well, and attack and play-make. Play great defense."

That sound you hear? That's Coach K checking box after box after box.

Steward slots in as one of this team's true sharpshooters. The summer before his senior year of high school, he made more than 41 percent of his 3s for Team MeanStreets on the Nike EYBL circuit, averaging 24.1 points per game. That's a strong quantitative sample, on par with the effusive praise he has earned from teammates Joey Baker and Henry Coleman. It doesn't hurt having the pedigree of being a Chicago guard, either, considering Duke has two from the city on its coaching staff: Krzyzewski and associate head coach Jon Scheyer, Steward's lead recruiter.

Oh, and the last Blue Devil to come out of Whitney Young, Steward's high school? None other than Jahlil Okafor, the center on Duke's 2015 national-title team. That pedigree, and Okafor being in his ear, certainly didn't hurt Duke's chances when Steward was making his college decision.

But back to the present. Steward's real value to this team won't be solely in his shooting. It'll be how that shooting complements a roster otherwise built around lanky, athletic wings who can attack the rim.

Case in point: Steward was asked about the potential of having himself, Baker and sophomore Matthew Hurt on the floor at the same time. Baker and Hurt, at least by the percentages, were the two most-reliable 3-point threats in the rotation last year. Steward's response?

"That would be very lethal," he said, again flashing that big ol' smile.

And he's right, but not just about that part of the hypothetical. So let's say Steward, Baker and Hurt are on the court at the same time. (Not exactly unlikely, given the increasing importance of the 3-point shot in the college game.) Obviously, 3-point looks would be bountiful in that situation. But then let's consider one of Wendell

Moore or Jalen Johnson, two slashing wings, being on the floor alongside the trio.

Steward already understands what the mere threat of his shooting will do for the offense. "That would also open up great driving lanes for the other great players on our team to just go and attack the paint," Steward said. "Because the help side won't be able to help off of us, so that would actually be great having three shooters on the court."

Admittedly, that's not a complicated offensive theory. But it's encouraging he already understands it. And more important, that he understands his value as a shooter doesn't just come when he is shooting the ball.

For a team that lacks a singular superstar – even less so than the Tre Jones-Vernon Carey Jr. pairing from a year ago – that understanding will be crucial. The Blue Devils won't reach their lofty championship goals on the back of an alpha alone; they'll need complementary pieces who play off one another and create chances for teammates.

Well, that's exactly what Steward just described.

Steward also said Krzyzewski has used him on and off the ball, whether as the primary ballhandler or teamed with another true point. That he's flexible positionally only means he'll have a greater understanding of how to set up his teammates.

With about six weeks until the start of the season, Steward has plenty of time to continue to get acclimated. More time to drain 3s in practice, to work on his body and his ballhandling – and hopefully to set up an oft-discussed 3-point contest with Baker and Hurt.

Steward said he feels like, with the work of the coaching staff and strength coach Will Stephens, he's getting better every day. That in itself is a reason to smile.

But thinking about the possibilities for this season, and what role he can play in the Blue Devils' success?

"We're gonna be able to make," Steward said, still smiling, "a lot of shots."

Coach K, Blue Devils open practice with freshmen aching to play

By Chip Alexander, Raleigh News & Observer (October 13, 2020)

Duke's DJ Steward is one of those guys who never seems to lose his smile.

"Unless," he said, "I'm really, really locked in."

For Steward and the Blue Devils that will come Wednesday when the first official basketball practice of the 2020-21 season begins and it's locked-in time. Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski will have a team that should have impressive speed and versatility, not to mention freshmen such as Steward aching to get their minutes and play.

Krzyzewski will make the call on who plays and who sits and he'll have myriad options with this team. For every Jordan Goldwire, a senior guard who started 15 games last season, there's a Steward or a Jeremy Roach pushing to get on the court.

Goldwire, Wendell Moore Jr., Matthew Hurt, Joey Baker – they've been there, been hardened by playing in ACC games, in the national spotlight. But there are the freshmen – Steward, Roach, Jalen Johnson, Mark Williams, Jaemyn Brakefield, Henry Coleman III. There's Patrick Tape, the graduate transfer who played at Columbia.

"It will definitely be fluid," Steward said Tuesday on a media call. "There's 11 players who can play, potentially play big minutes. The starting lineup can pretty much change game to game. You just never know."

"We're a deep team that can pretty much play in transition. We can play really fast and also make shots, as well. We're going to be able to make a lot of shots."

And the advice from the upperclassmen?

"That the competition rises," Steward said. "When we start practice the competition level is going to rise."

"Every game is going to be hard. We're the hunted. So we also have to be hunting at the same time because we'll always have an 'X' on our back. We have to always go out there and work hard and try to be the hunters."

For Steward, coming to Duke from Chicago has meant moving into the Washington Duke Inn. It has meant entering what amounts to the Blue Devils' basketball bubble during the pandemic.

On a Duke-produced day-in-the-life video, Steward showed off his many pairs of basketball shoes – although noting Moore's shoe game was better and "extremely crazy" – and the meaningful items sprinkled about his room.

Framed are the four words "Work hard, stay humble" that Steward said have been instilled by his mother, Katicha Jackson-Williams. By his bedside was a notebook that says "Think Big, Believe Big and the results Will Be Big." On the door to his room: "Blessed."

Steward was recruited out of Whitney Young High in Chicago, which also produced former Duke star Jahlil Okafor. A five-star recruit, the 6-2 combo guard was a McDonald's All-America and ranked the No. 2 player in Illinois by ESPN, and Steward said he also played wide receiver and safety on the football team as a freshman, toughening him up a bit, he said.

A lot of schools were after him – North Carolina, Louisville, Indiana – and Duke got him. And no, it did not hurt that Okafor played for Coach K and won the 2015 national championship.

Steward said two players who have stood out during Duke workouts have been Hurt and Goldwire. He called Hurt "an amazing shooter and amazing scorer" and noted Krzyzewski has mentioned how much the 6-9 sophomore forward has improved, and said Goldwire has been a leader, rugged defender and handled the ball well.

"He's also been pretty much leading me on the court and telling me where to go and let me know how Duke is going to be and how we're going to play," Steward said.

The Coach K way. That's how the Blue Devils are going to play in Krzyzewski's 41st season.

"It's going to be very intense and I know he's going to help me learn the game well," Steward said of the Hall of Fame coach.

Baker, in a recent media call, said this will be a Duke team that a lot of people will enjoy watching. Steward seconds that.

"We have a lot of people who show emotion on the court," he said. "Positive guys. There are a lot of guys who smile when they play."

DJ Steward always being one.

Can Duke's depth and versatility carry it to another championship?

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (October 13, 2020)

You don't win five national championships or more than 2,000 college basketball games without a healthy dose of competitiveness – and "healthy" is doing a lot of heavy lifting in that sentence.

Like, Zion Williamson-in-the-weight-room level lifting.

But it's true. Competitive drive is as defining for the Duke men's basketball program as stunning Gothic architecture is to the campus at large. Saying it's "essential" barely begins to cut it.

One problem, then – or really, the problem: COVID-19. It's the pandemic that cost Duke a chance to play in any postseason game last spring, and even a realistic shot at a sixth title. The pandemic that hijacked the program's schedule, forcing its star-studded freshman class to delay actually arriving in Durham by months. And now, months later, the same pandemic that's forcing the Blue Devils to alter how they express their competitiveness. With limited five-on-five time right now, players and coaches still need ... something.

"I will say, I have the best Zoom background of any of the guys," associate head coach Jon Scheyer tells The Athletic. "I have many, many different ones. You gotta switch it up. Nolan (Smith), from time to time, has really good ones as well, but I like to think I have the best Zoom background game."

Duke's creative director Dave Bradley gets the assist there, but the point remains. Is there any better representation of competition in the year 2020 than competing Zoom backgrounds?

But extrapolate that effort out of virtual meeting and into the practice gym, and there's no drop-off. If Mike Krzyzewski's coaching staff – all of them former players – is showing that much spirit, imagine the team itself.

"Communicating with them a lot when they were at home, they just couldn't wait to get back here. All of our guys I know were hungry for this season, so they worked hard," Scheyer says, "and it showed when they came back."

That's both the returnees, of whom there are few even by Duke's standards, and the newcomers, of whom there are many. But as has been the case in Durham practically since Scheyer suited up, this is no rebuild. It's a retool, with the same realistic goal in mind: championship No. 6.

The big question

Duke's greatest strength might also be its greatest question mark this season.

That strength is obvious: depth and versatility. The regular rotation will feature three guards 6-foot-3 or shorter and nobody else under 6-foot-5.

"It's a team that we feel like can really wear you out. We don't know who's going to start, but we know whoever does, we're going to have a deep bench," Scheyer says. "Just like anything, because that's your strength, it can also be your weakness – we're still trying to figure out who are our go-to guys. Each night it might be somebody different."

That's something the Blue Devils will know much more about as the season nears and more five-on-five action has been played, but it's surely something to think about. Last year Krzyzewski started a staggering 14 different starting lineups, both due to injuries and opponent matchups. Is it possible the same thing happens again this year? Very much so, for multiple reasons.

One, Duke doesn't have a slam-dunk, bona fide No. 1 option – or at least it doesn't yet. Maybe Jalen Johnson or Matthew Hurt or Wendell Moore turns into that guy as the season progresses, but as things stand now, there isn't. That means Krzyzewski can toy with who starts based on the opponent, tailoring lineups to present mismatches. Secondly, the later start date for Duke's No. 3-rated freshman class means some younger guys may not start right off the jump. One example: Jordan Goldwire and Jeremy Roach. Roach, a 5-star stud, is clearly the Blue Devils' point guard of the future, but Goldwire is the senior who started 15 games last season. It would make a ton of sense for Krzyzewski to roll with Goldwire earlier in the year as Roach acclimates, and then slowly consider making that transition.

And thirdly, this very important reminder: Who starts games matters much less than who finishes games.

That's what Scheyer means, though. It'll be a work-in-progress determining both, as well as minutes in general. And given the depth of the ACC, Duke is going to have its fair share of close games. Figuring out who finishes out those games is crucial, and arguably the difference between a good season and a truly special one.

Roster analysis Guards

It was never going to be easy replacing Tre Jones, last year's ACC Player of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year. But Duke has two points well-positioned to initiate the offense, one of whom played alongside Jones the last two seasons.

That would be Jordan Goldwire, the lone senior in the rotation. Goldwire arrived at Duke as part of the Marvin Bagley-Wendell Carter Jr. class and has steadily improved over his three years in Durham. Last season he only averaged 4.7 points and 2.3 assists per game, but he played the fourth-most minutes of anyone.

"He's the most experienced player on our team and it's shown so far," Scheyer says. "He knows how to play. He's been a great defender, and his shooting has continued to improve every year he's been here, so we've loved what we've seen out of him so far."

Given Krzyzewski's connectedness to his point guards over the years, as well as the young roster he's working with, it wouldn't at all be a surprise for the former three-star recruit to open the season as the starter. The other option is freshman Jeremy Roach, a dynamic defender and heady playmaker. Roach is finally back at nearly 100 percent from an ACL injury sustained early in his junior year of high school. "People still haven't seen the real Jeremy Roach until this year," Scheyer says.

At shooting guard, the Blue Devils have options. Given the aforementioned roster makeup, there are going to be a number of wings playing down at the shooting guard spot, but freshman D.J. Steward is probably the closest thing here to a true two. "He's a really, really, really good shooter," junior Joey Baker says. "He can score the ball, and he's just a pleasure to be around." Steward already has earned praise from numerous teammates and coaches for his shooting ability. Steward also was a decent ballhandler in high school, and could be pressed into situational point duties.

Joey Baker might be better listed as a wing, given his 6-foot-6 size, but his best skill fits here: shooting. Baker hit 39.4 percent of his 3-point tries last season, but only attempted 2.5 per game. He spent the offseason working on perfecting his already-excellent mechanics, but also his defense and all-around game. Without a gym, Baker says he spent most of the summer working out in his garage and driveway at home.

"It felt good to just kind of get back to the basics," Baker says. "We have incredible facilities here at Duke, and we're taken care of at an extremely high level, so just being able to get into the grit a little bit in my driveway, where there's sticks and pinecones and stuff like that, in the heat, it felt good to get back to that."

Wings

Scheyer laughs when he's asked about the 85 wings on the roster, but it's the Blue Devils' deepest position. Without exaggerating, Duke has about six guys capable of playing anywhere from the two through four. But it all starts with Wendell Moore, one of two highly rated sophomores returning to Durham.

Moore had a busy offseason, leading Black Lives Matter protests near his Concord, N.C., hometown, as well as being named to the National Association of Basketball Coaches Player Development Coalition. Considering Moore is just one of 11 Division-I players selected, that's a huge sign both of Krzyzewski's trust in him and his own evolving leadership qualities. Now the trick is carrying that over to the court. "I think his biggest thing is just to translate the work he's put in," Scheyer says, "because we believe in him. He's got the ability; now he's just gotta go do it."

Observers have been impressed with Moore's jump shot since returning to campus, which was his biggest shortcoming as a freshman. But if he can incorporate that more, he'll truly be a do-everything piece. He's already promising as a ballhandler, defender – especially on opposing power forwards – and driver; boosting his 41.6 shooting percentage and 21.1 3-point percentage would make him much more complete.

Then there are a trio of freshmen who all should see time: Jalen Johnson, Jaemyn Brakefield and Henry Coleman. More on Johnson later, who projects as a one-and-done lottery pick, but Brakefield and Coleman each have specific skills to contribute now while also developing for the future.

Scheyer notes the 6-foot-8 Brakefield has been encouraging as a shooter in practices, and he's powerful finishing near the rim. With his size, he's also an ideal candidate to slide up and down positionally based on the lineup. Need a quicker lineup but can't completely give up size? He can slide up. Need a bigger lineup but without abandoning shooting? He can slide down.

Can Duke's depth and versatility carry it to another championship? (cont.)

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (October 13, 2020)

Then there's Coleman, whom Scheyer says "is still developing his skill level, but he's productive." Because of his strength and savvy, Coleman offers that same lineup flexibility Brakefield does, but to a larger extent. "He's defending everybody one through five," Scheyer says. And with his bulk, he has been an adept rebounder even against taller competition. Baker, a similar height but about 30 pounds lighter, puts it well: "He should be playing football. He's so strong."

Biggs

There's big, and then there's Vernon Carey big. Carey was a mountain as a freshman, winning All-America honors and smartly shipping off for the NBA Draft. So while Duke doesn't have another "Tank" coming in to fill his place, it does have another style of big worth equal excitement in Mark Williams.

The younger brother of former Duke women's star Elizabeth Williams, Mark offers the same skill set his sibling now earns her keep with: defense. Elizabeth was just named to the WNBA's All-Defense team, and it's not unreasonable to expect Mark to disrupt opposing offensive game plans.

"I think it was the first time we were playing fives, and I don't know who was driving, but they just kind of threw the ball up to the rim, and Mark just dunked it like it was nothing," Baker says. "And I didn't really realize how big and long he is around the rim, so that's going to be valuable for us this year."

Scheyer offers similar praise, which paints a picture for how the Blue Devils will use Williams.

"He's a different animal, man," Scheyer says with a chuckle. "His length really bothers people on the defensive end, and his length in being able to be a lob threat and a vertical threat on offense – guys throw the ball up to him and he goes and gets that thing."

Williams may not start every game, but as he continues developing his body, Krzyzewski and Co. should be able to rely on him more and more. There's also Patrick Tapé, whose name will forever go down as a trivia answer – the first graduate transfer Krzyzewski ever took at Duke. Due to COVID-19, the coaching staff wasn't able to see the Charlotte native in person before offering him a scholarship, but trusted his strong rebounding and post experience for Columbia in the Ivy League.

Scheyer says Tapé may have been a little rusty in his first few weeks on campus, simply because he missed last season due to a toe injury, but the big man is acclimating well to a higher level of play. "He's been as good of a rebounder as we've had," Scheyer says. "Plays incredibly hard, plays his role to the fullest."

And last but certainly not least, arguably the biggest wild card on the roster: sophomore Matthew Hurt. A five-star prospect a year ago, Hurt was a beast at times as a freshman but inconsistent at others. His shooting and stretch-four potential carried over from the high school level, but he also struggled with foot speed and stronger opponents. This offseason he bulked up with good weight and enhanced his overall conditioning – and the results have been just what Blue Devils fans want to hear.

"He's made an incredibly big jump, even from last year," Scheyer says. "He has been our leading scorer. He's scoring the ball from all over, shooting the ball with really great efficiency. He's going in the post – I mean, he's showing everything. And our thing for Matthew is just to take that jump mentally, where you believe you're as good as anybody, because he is. And he's been showing it. He's been terrific."

Scheyer says he anticipates Hurt will spend more time in the post than he did last season, but without sacrificing the perimeter spacing that makes him so valuable. Frankly, Hurt has the freedom to make those reads depending on who opponents have on the court. "He's a problem to match up with," Scheyer adds. "He's able to drive and shoot on bigger guys, and he's able to post on any wings or smaller, quicker guys that are on him. So that's something definitely to exploit."

Spotlight on: Jalen Johnson

It isn't just that Johnson is Duke's highest-ranked recruit; as Blue Devils' fans know, rankings certainly don't mean anything.

What's much more important are Johnson's skill set and body – one that's tailor-made to dominate at the college level and as a professional. At 6-foot-9 and 220 pounds, Johnson has the body of a forward with the passing and shooting abilities of a guard. Comparisons can be a tricky business, like recruiting rankings, but the shades of Paul George in his game are nearly impossible to ignore.

"When he gets out in transition," Scheyer says, "he's special to watch in the open court."

Johnson probably won't lead this team in 3-point percentage, but his athleticism and versatile skill set make him as likely as anyone to develop into Duke's No. 1 option. Also, because he's adept as a passer and ballhandler, he could play some minutes as a sort of point forward. "Jalen's passing is incredibly special," Scheyer says. "Whether it's in the halfcourt or in transition, it's really, really good. And we've continued to see that more and more as time has gone on."

All that makes Johnson the ultimate chess piece on this roster, someone capable of playing four positions at an elite level. He isn't likely to be in Durham for long, just because he's exactly the type of player the NBA craves, but he'll make plenty of splash plays while he's here.

Recruiting

Like every other school in the nation, Duke has had to dramatically alter its recruiting methods in the face of COVID-19. But "alter" and "stop" have entirely different meanings – and the Blue Devils have done anything but stop recruiting.

"You've gotta adapt to the situation, and we've done a good job of that," Scheyer says, "and we will continue to do so."

In fact, the momentum has almost picked up despite everything operating at a distance. This summer Duke landed a commitment from Paolo Banchemo, the No. 9 player in The Athletic 40 – a ranking of the 40 best high school players regardless of class. This came after securing the services of the No. 8 player on that same list, A.J. Griffin. Between those two, Duke has a set of future lottery picks on the wing who will rival any perimeter in the nation.

Here's the scary thing, though: Duke isn't done. When all is said and done, this class could conceivably end up even better than the legendary 2018 group, which featured Zion Williamson, R.J. Barrett, Cam Reddish and Tre Jones. Process that for a second. That's just a stupidly absurd level of talent that could all be coalescing in Durham at once.

To get to that point, though, the Blue Devils will need to land some of the highly sought-after players they're in the race for. Chief among those is Patrick Baldwin Jr., the top player in the class according to 247Sports. Baldwin has long been projected to land with the Blue Devils, but only if he eschews playing for his father, the coach at Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Baldwin, listed at 6-foot-9 and 190 pounds, would add to Duke's arsenal on the wing. The program is hot on two others as well:

- Five-star shooting guard Trevor Keels, the No. 16 player in the class per 247Sports. Keels has been linked to the program for some time now, especially given that he was high school teammates with Roach. Keels is listed at 6-5 and 210 pounds.

- Five-star forward Caleb Houston, the No. 8 player in the class per 247Sports. Houston, who reclassified to 2021, recently released his final four: Alabama, Duke, Michigan and Virginia. The Athletic's Brian Bennett has an awesome update out now with insight from Houston's mother, emphasizing how similar Houston's career has been to Barrett's. *cue the eyes emoji*

It would take some scholarship manipulation, but if Duke were to land everyone, we're talking about the No. 1, 3, 6, 8 and 16 players in the country teaming up. Talk about a new Fab Five.

Schedule analysis

Until the ACC releases its league dates, it isn't easy to sort out exactly who anyone plays. Schools are permitted to play 27 games only if they participate in an MTE. That has complicated things, including for Duke.

The Blue Devils originally were scheduled to play in the Battle 4 Atlantis in the Bahamas, but that tournament is moving to South Dakota. Sources say Duke is unlikely to participate in that event and would instead reach that 27-game threshold by hosting its own on-campus MTE. That event probably won't yield the same level of competition, but would prevent Duke from traveling as far in the midst of the pandemic.

Otherwise, Duke is scheduled to take part in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge, as well as the season-opening Champions Classic, where it will play Michigan State. So factoring in those two games, two games in an MTE, and 20 league games, that leaves a few openings on the nonconference slate. But again, until the ACC sets its dates – at least two such games are expected to be played in December – it's difficult to set up those final matches.

Can Duke's depth and versatility carry it to another championship? (cont.)

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (October 13, 2020)

The ceiling

Hurt turns into the best version of himself, the ideal stretch-four who shoots 3s and collects rebounds. Moore and Baker's shots both come along, and Steward's game translates from high school, giving Duke multiple consistent perimeter threats. Williams is disruptive defensively, and the point-guard pairing of Roach and Goldwire helps both stay fresh. Johnson is the alpha he's capable of becoming, with few college teams having a defensive equal for his blend of size and speed. A mixture of old and new develops over the course of the season, and the Blue Devils peak right when they need to in March – and the program comes away with the national championship it didn't get to compete for last spring.

The floor

Goldwire is heady at the point, but not dynamic enough that he stresses defenses. The delay in getting freshmen on campus on time means they gel less quickly and never get in sync with one another. Moore's shot doesn't hold up, and neither does Hurt's conditioning, leaving the team with two talented-yet-incomplete cornerstones. There's far too much skill and natural ability on this roster not to make the NCAA Tournament, or even to miss out on a high seed, but chemistry issues and roster imbalance lead to an early ouster in March.

Final report

It has not been the easiest past few months for anyone, but Duke's delay in bringing back athletes may have been for the best.

Yes, you read that right.

With less group time, the program's large freshman class has had more individual sessions with coaches, which Scheyer says has been doubly beneficial. "It's given us a chance to get to know these guys on a personal level," he says. "You know, on a one-on-one where you just get to know them better. And you get to know their game, their personality, and how to coach them. So that's been a great advantage through this whole thing."

The five-on-five work has been coming along gradually, and it has empowered players to go their hardest now that they're with teammates. "I don't know if people realize, but if you're not comfortable with your team, it makes it more difficult to perform on the court," Baker says. In that sense, taking longer to return – in addition to, you know, just being safer – has in a roundabout way forced the Blue Devils to more actively work at developing.

The sting of not competing in last spring's postseason is still raw around the program, but rather than bitterness, that competitive spirit has filled the void. And if the team carries it all the way through March, it very well might end up with the national championship trophy it never got a chance at.

Think about how good that would look in a Zoom background.

How good can Duke basketball be this season? Joey Baker has an idea.

By Chip Alexander, Raleigh News & Observer (October 8, 2020)

As a junior, Duke's Joey Baker is older, wiser, more experienced ...

Baker even has a beard. Pretty fresh-faced his first two years at Duke, he looks almost professorial and the 6-6 forward now qualifies as one of the "old heads" on the basketball team.

Duke has been a program in flux the past few years and it's no different in the year of the pandemic. There's a mix of older and new, with guys like Baker, Wendell Moore Jr., Jordan Goldwire and Matthew Hurt showing the way for freshmen such as Jalen Johnson, Jeremy Roach, DJ Steward and Mark Williams.

"We have a deep team," Baker said Tuesday during a call with the media. "We've obviously reloaded with a good freshman class. Those guys have been great. They bring it every day. They have enthusiasm, they compete."

Mike Krzyzewski demands that. The Blue Devils coach has done that for more than four decades. And this year's team, in particular, could be one where the minutes are divided among those who compete the hardest for the longest, given his options.

There is no Zion Williamson on this team, a bigger-than-life, ready-for-NBA-stardom kind of player. But the talent is there, Baker said.

"I think we're deep, we're versatile and we're athletic," he said. "We'll get into teams and we'll play fast. We have a lot of good players that bring different things to the table and I think Coach will let that be seen. It'll be a fun year."

CORONAVIRUS AND BASKETBALL'S UNCERTAINTY

The NCAA has approved the start of basketball practice for Oct. 14, with a Nov. 25 start to the 2020-21 season and a 27-game regular-season schedule. All that is tentative, as college football coaches quickly learned this fall.

The Blue Devils were ranked 10th nationally, had a 25-6 record and were about to face N.C. State on March 12 in the 2019 ACC Tournament in Greensboro when the tournament was canceled. At the time, Duke president Vincent Price suspended all athletic competition because of concerns about health and safety during a burgeoning coronavirus pandemic, and that was that.

ACC commissioner John Swofford declared Florida State the champion and everyone quickly left Greensboro. Other conferences canceled their tournaments. The NCAA tournament was a no-go and everything came to a halt.

The months since has been filled with uncertainty. As Baker put it, "It's been an entirely different world in terms of what we're able to do compared to a normal year."

BAKER WANTS TO LEAD AND IMPROVE

Baker, a Fayetteville native, has had to earn his minutes the first two years at Duke. He has the smooth jumper and is dependable from 3-point range, which Duke will need, and No. 13 never lacks energy on the court. But he has been streaky and wants to have a more consistent, complete look to his game as a junior.

"I think all areas of my game needed improvement and they still do, but I'd say defensively I wanted to improve a lot," Baker said. "Being able to defend and stay on the court for long periods of time without fouling - that was a big area of focus over the quarantine and the time we had off."

Baker also wants to be more vocal this season. Speak up, lead. He knows what Coach K wants and expects. He knows what it takes to win in the ACC and is willing to be seen and heard.

"Working hard every day, competing every day, bringing enthusiasm when talking and kind of showing what needs to be done on a daily basis," he said. "Obviously, as an older guy, there's times when I need to be a leader in a way that I haven't been before."

"I'm learning, as well, how to show the younger guys how everything works on and off the court here. That's been an awesome experience for me because I've grown from it as well."

Even grown a beard.

Scouting report: Joey Baker on what he expects from himself, Duke teammates

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (October 7, 2020)

The word is the same now as it was on March 13. So too is the emotion with which it's said:

"I think it's fair to say it was heartbreaking," Duke junior Joey Baker said Tuesday of the spring's canceled NCAA Tournament. "And obviously, we weren't the only team that felt that heartbreak, but just not knowing if we would've been able to win it."

Those emotions are still raw for Duke's returners, but on the whole, the team today looks drastically different than the one from seven months ago. Three stars – Tre Jones, Vernon Carey Jr., and Cassius Stanley – opted to leave school early and enter the NBA Draft. Junior wing Alex O'Connell transferred to Creighton. And a trio of Blue Devils big men (Javin DeLaurier, Justin Robinson and Jack White) all graduated.

Which leaves... not a lot of returning faces.

That means those who are back, namely Baker, will be tasked with even more responsibility than in seasons past. That includes on the court, but in the locker room as well.

As far as on-the-court matters are concerned, there's reasons to be optimistic about Baker's outlook for his junior season. He's the epitome of Duke's roster in 2020-21: a good-sized, versatile wing who can slide up and down the lineup. Baker was known as something of a sharpshooter coming into college, and last season he finally got to show off glimpses of that talent. But this offseason, in addition to perfecting the mechanics and shootwork of his shot, Baker worked on becoming a more complete all-around player. Specifically, he stressed his defense, rebounding, and getting to the free-throw line as areas he concentrated on.

"I think if I add those," Baker said, "it'll help our team a lot and it'll take me to a different level than I've been at before."

Off the court, the departure of Jones and the team's other seniors has left something of a vocal leadership void. But Baker said he, along with sophomores Wendell Moore and Matthew Hurt, have all been stepping up to fill that role.

Those three, as much as anyone else on Duke's roster, will be key to the program winning its sixth national championship this season. There will be more introductions as the season nears, but for now, Baker has thoughts on each of the other players on Duke's roster.

Jordan Goldwire

Size: 6-2, 184 pounds

Experience: Senior

"J-Gold, he's our veteran point guard, and he's run the show beautifully in practice. Setting people up, and then obviously we know what he does on the defensive end. He's continued to get better. I think he's going to be very important for us this year."

Patrick Tapé

Size: 6-9, 233

Experience: Grad transfer

"Pat's been good for us, as well. He's a strong body, mature post player. So he's going to bring some good minutes for us this year, too."

Wendell Moore

Size: 6-5, 216

Experience: Sophomore

"We know what Wendell can do: a little bit of everything. He's versatile. He can handle the ball, he can score it. But one thing that definitely impressed me when we got back to campus was his shot. His shot looked a lot better, more consistent. So continuing to get better at that will be huge for him."

Matthew Hurt

Size: 6-9, 235

Experience: Sophomore

"Matt Hurt has looked great. He's shooting the ball, scoring the ball at an elite level."

Jalen Johnson

Size: 6-9, 220

Experience: Freshman (No. 11 overall recruit in 2020 class, per RSCI)

"We have Jalen, who's a high-flyer. On the fast break, running with the offense (laughs)... He's gonna be really, really good for us."

Jeremy Roach

Size: 6-1, 175

Experience: Freshman (No. 20 recruit)

"Jeremy, he can score the ball, set people up. He's a good defender. And he's a winner, he just wants to win."

D.J. Steward

Size: 6-2, 163

Experience: Freshman (No. 24 recruit)

"D.J., he's a really, really, really good shooter. He can score the ball, and he's just a pleasure to be around."

"D.J.'s been awesome. He's a hard worker. He comes every day and competes, and he's always getting extra work. Like, I was in the gym last night shooting, and he walked in, and we talked for a little bit. But he's just always putting in that little extra work, and I'm really excited to see what he does here."

Mark Williams

Size: 7-foot, 243

Experience: Freshman (No. 25 recruit)

"Mark, anything around the basket for the most part, he's able to get his hands on it. Deflections, block shots. Even if he doesn't block the shot, he's altering it because of his presence alone."

"I think it was the first time we were playing fives, and I don't know who was driving, but they just kind of threw the ball up to the rim, and Mark just dunked it like it was nothing. And I didn't really realize how big and long he is around the rim, so that's going to be valuable for us this year."

Jaemyn Brakefield

Size: 6-8, 216

Experience: Freshman (No. 33 recruit)

"J-Brake, Jaemyn, he's phenomenal as well. He's versatile, does a little bit of everything on the court."

Henry Coleman

Size: 6-7, 229

Experience: Freshman (No. 49 recruit)

"Then we have Henry – he's a big body. He should be playing football (laughs). He's so strong. But he's been great, too. He's finishing around the rim, hitting outside and mid-range jump shots, defending. And all these guys are learning as we're going, so they're going to continue to get better."

Duke mailbag: Practice intel, how the schedule is coming together and more

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (September 25, 2020)

We have a date. We (sort of) have a plan. We (at least think) we know where we're going. And even with all those conditionals, what a relief this realization is: College basketball is coming.

The NCAA Division I Council set Nov. 25 as the season starting date – for now, at least – which means the hidden gears of the hoops machine have spun back to life. Scheduling calls are aplenty, five-on-five scrimmages are happening. Nature is healing.

As far as how that all looks on the individual school level? At Duke, it means several things. You all have questions about players, schedules, and a whole lot more, so let's dive straight in. I'm going to try to keep answers a bit shorter than normal so I can get to everyone. And as always, a hearty thanks to those who submitted questions and loyally interact with all The Athletic has to offer:

What are you hearing from practices so far? Who is standing out? – Jeremy S.

Jeremy, I can't tell you how glad I am to get this question. Because to me, practice intel is as clear a sign as any that yes, we're on the brink of basketball season. I'll include both things I've heard and seen here, because Duke has been pretty good about releasing practice clips and recently even a nine-minute scrimmage video.

First, what I've heard: As is customary in the preseason, a lot of guys look "improved." Joey Baker is a great example. Here's a guy who already had a technically great shot, but his release is even quicker and more consistent than in years past, and he's evolving into more of an all-around player. Where Baker may have been viewed a bit more as a shooting specialist last season – and not that his shooting won't remain a tremendous asset – there's growing confidence in his offensive game becoming more well-rounded. Along the line of returnees, I've also heard Wendell Moore and especially Matt Hurt are stronger than they were last season. More on Hurt later, but that's a good sign.

As far as new guys, there's also a lot to like. I'll dive more into some of the specifics further down, because people had questions about individual players, but I've heard especially good things about D.J. Steward. Sounds like his shooting ability is translating immediately, which would be a boon for the Blue Devils. Two other guys who may not have gotten adequate hype are Mark Williams and Jaemyn Brakefield. Williams is so long that even though his offensive game still needs some refining, he's going to offer immediate value by disrupting shots inside and finishing lobbs. And Brakefield is explosive. I'm not sure I realized the power he plays with, but he's going to be hard to keep on the bench.

How do you see D.J. Steward's impact coming in? Do you see him being a number one option? Do you think he will play as a combo guard? – Pierson

Steward, as I mentioned above, is probably the one guy I've heard the most about. Note: I don't think that means he's the "best" recruit Duke has coming in; in my opinion, that still goes to Jalen Johnson, both because of the position he plays and his physical tools. But Steward as the second-most influential? Yeah, I can buy that.

Duke officially lists Steward at 6-foot-2 and 163 pounds, making him the lightest player on the team. The physical limitations make it tough to see him as a true No. 1 option, although he plays bigger than that, especially when you consider the flair he has finishing around the rim. And again, the shooting. Last season the Blue Devils had a lot of good shooters, but none that were truly great. (At least not over a larger sample size: Baker would be the closest thing, having made 39.4 percent but on only 71 attempts.) So if Steward can lock into that role while playing both on and off the ball, I see him as a part-time starter and a double-digit point scorer.

Not bad, considering how much talent Mike Krzyzewski will be working with in the backcourt.

What do you think of Jalen Johnson? Highly touted recruit coming out of high school but things have fallen off the rails with respect to how he's perceived in national media. I know there are a lot of intangibles in what went on, but what are your expectations/comparisons for Jalen? – Mohnish R.

Mohnish, I don't know if "fallen off the rails" is a completely fair assessment of how the basketball community views Johnson. He ended up the No. 11 player in The Athletic 40, a ranking of the 40 best high school players in America regardless of class, and No. 13 overall in the 247Sports Composite rankings. Everyone knows the kid is a future NBA player; the talent isn't in dispute.

I think what you're referring to by "intangibles" is the school-hopping he did throughout high school, highlighted by never playing a game for IMG Academy. There were rumors at the time that Johnson could consider trying to enter the draft, but I never made much of that. What I've heard about why he left IMG was more a family thing than anything else. I wouldn't be worried about his character is what I'm saying, and that the rumors of anything more nefarious are just that.

As a player, phew. Johnson is gonna be a show. The dude is listed at 6-foot-9, 220 pounds – that's "built-in-a-lab" size. It's exactly what you'd want from a wing, at the college and pro level. Johnson is a capable shooter, a dangerous driver, a violent finisher off dunks and lobbs, switchable defensively to guard multiple positions. I mean, he can sort of do it all. I don't know that this roster will have a truly dominant No. 1 player, rather than a collection of very good ones, but if I had to pick someone to fill that role, he'd get my vote.

Any word on Matthew Hurt's (hopefully) improvement? – Dylan R.

As I reported a little more than a month ago, Hurt is definitely bigger and stronger than he was last season; he is now listed at 235, about 20 pounds heavier than he was as a freshman. A lot of that, by the looks of things, came in two main areas: his upper body and his core. To me, upper body strength helps with grabbing rebounding and finishing aggressive drives inside; core is for interior defense against stronger opponents, as well as stouter screens. I love Hurt's potential as a pick-and-pop screener, so we'll see if he's used more that way.

Those were the things Hurt needed to work on. The shooting prowess that made him a five-star recruit was already there. His body needed work, though, both in terms of quicker foot speed and more strength to hold his own in the ACC. Now? He'll be one of the top offensive options, and, Duke hopes, someone capable of floating between the paint and the perimeter.

What is the buzz on Patrick Tapé? Has he impressed enough to predict he will start? – Jon K.

Before I say anything about Tapé, let me add a quick qualifier about Duke and "starting": It doesn't have to be consistent, nor should it necessarily be. Starting is cracked up to be this big deal, but I'd rather be one of the five guys who finish a game. Coach K knows that starting a bigger or smaller lineup might be dependent on the opponent, so he'll do exactly that. Last year the team used double-digit starting lineups, and while I wouldn't count on quite that many, it'll be a handful again in 2020-21.

As for Tapé, he could start some, but I wouldn't count on it consistently or immediately. Remember that he didn't play at all last season at Columbia due to injury and then redshirting before his transfer, so there's going to be some rust while he acclimates. Also, it's a jump from the Ivy League to the ACC. I see Tapé as a valuable rotation player – someone who can rebound, show off a few post moves and pumps, rough up opposing drivers – but not as a regular starter. The team likes Mark Williams' potential, and given he's more of a long-term investment than Tapé, I'd expect him to get the first look.

Hey, Brendan, is there any concern – or more accurately, speculation, since there would be justification – from the staff that top players may opt-out of the season due to the coronavirus? – Brian M.

There isn't, Brian, or at least none that I've heard of.

Guys are all on campus, working out together, getting to know the coaching staff and new faces and their roles. If there were going to be any opt-outs, I would've imagined they would have come before kids got to campus. Also, Durham has been pretty strict about COVID-19 guidelines. Between that and players already living in their own on-campus "bubble," I wouldn't be too worried about the risk of opt-outs.

Duke has had a routine for their schedule for a long while now (exhibition vs DII champ, early-season tournament, a few cupcakes sprinkled about, a usual trip to the NYC area). How is the program handling this schedule chaos? – Ben L.

Great question, Ben, and one that led me to make some phone calls. Here's what I've gathered: As is the case at every other school in the country, it's a mess.

What I've found to be helpful in thinking about schedules is working backwards. So teams can play up to 27 games if they participate in a multi-team event. Twenty of those are going to be conference games, with 18 coming after Jan. 1; two will be played at some time in the five weeks before then. Then you factor in prior commitments: the Champions Classic in New York, the Atlantis tournament in the Bahamas, and the ACC/Big Ten Challenge. Per sources, Duke is unlikely to play in the tournament previously scheduled for the Bahamas (now slated for South Dakota) and instead is trying to pull together its own MTE on-campus. Still, two other nonconference spots are filled. Then factor in, say, two more games for the at-home MTE, and you're up to 24. That potentially leaves one to three (but most likely two) other nonconference spots to be filled.

Considering the lost revenue the athletic department is likely to incur due to the lack or absence of fans, it makes sense that Duke doesn't want to be flying all over the place and spending money for those games. Also, the pandemic is still going on last I checked. So I'd expect more buy games against lower-level opponents, who come to Cameron and collect

Duke mailbag: Practice intel, how the schedule is coming together and more (cont.)

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (September 25, 2020)

their check. Duke gets games, small schools get some necessary financial reimbursement. Win-win, no?

It's all up in the air, though, and scheduling anything out-of-conference is a little hard without league dates. ACC basketball administrators met Thursday, and the hope is that league dates (even if just for the months of November and December) will be scheduled in about a week or so.

Also, with respect to the 2021 class. If we can pull off a commitment from Patrick Baldwin Jr., how would the top three recruits (Patrick Baldwin, Paolo Banchemo, A.J. Griffin) compare to the three-headed monster of R.J. Barrett, Cam Reddish and Zion Williamson? – Mohnish R.

I know everyone talks about that three-headed monster in 2018-19, but might that hypothetical '21 class be even better? It's not unreasonable to think that.

I guess it probably depends on how you define "better," Mohnish. It's unfair to ask or expect anyone to be Zion Williamson, so even for as good as Griffin, Banchemo, and Baldwin are, I don't expect any of them to be Zion. He's just a one-of-a-kind physical freak, a truly generational player. But overall I think I'd take the talent level of Griffin-Baldwin-Banchemo over Williamson-Barrett-Reddish. All three are legitimate future top-10 NBA draftees, but they've been more consistent than Barrett and Reddish were as high schoolers.

Baldwin also isn't a Duke lock yet. The sway of playing for his dad at Milwaukee, I've heard, is mighty influential. But yeah, it would be a silly class talent-wise.

Talk some lax with me, Brendan! Duke ranked No. 1 in latest poll... – Jack G.

Not my specialty, Jack, so I reached out to a few people smarter than I am for help. Sounds like Michael Sowers, the transfer from Princeton, is the key to everything, though. He has a very real chance of winning the Tewaaraton, the Heisman Trophy of lacrosse, and will be the engine driving things offensively. Not that he's alone. Dyson Williams and Owen Caputo are capable of being top options in their own right, and will be devastating complementary pieces. Brennan O'Neill coming in just adds to the embarrassment of riches.

If the offense clicks like it's supposed to, I'd bank on John Danowski doing what he usually does: getting his team to reach its peak later in the year, then riding that momentum to a championship run.

Any behind the scenes info on The Brotherhood Votes video? What was the impetus? – Lea C.

Love this question, Lea, and left it for last so it wouldn't get lost in the basketball shuffle.

Back in June, in the wake of George Floyd's killing at the hands of Minneapolis police, Coach K and his staff held several Zooms with a large group of former players. I was lucky enough to learn more and write a story about those calls, how they came to be, and how essential they were to Krzyzewski's powerful Black Lives Matter video. I'd urge you to read that for some good background on the subject.

But basically, the voting committee that came out of those Zooms – led by assistant Nate James, as well as Reggie Love (former special assistant to President Barack Obama) and Todd Singleton (Microsoft executive) – had several conversations over the summer. The consensus was that launching the website and putting together a subsequent video would be the most effective way to create change. Then those three leaders worked with David Bradley, Duke's creative director, to fine-tune the ideas that were most important to them and put them into video form.

But please read the background behind those Zoom calls. It was one of the most meaningful stories I've gotten to write in quite some time, and the point hasn't changed: Vote. Let your voice be heard. Support and lift other marginalized voices, and help to create a better nation that values its citizens equally. "Black Lives Matter" is the slogan, but "matter" should be the bare minimum.

Nolan Smith is staying at Duke, turning down assistant coach job at Memphis

By Chapel Fowler, Raleigh News & Observer (September 11, 2020)

Nolan Smith is staying put at his alma mater.

After interviewing with Penny Hardaway for an assistant coaching job at Memphis, Smith decided to remain at Duke, where he works as the director of basketball operations and player development, a Duke spokesperson confirmed it to the News & Observer.

"We're thrilled that Nolan is staying at Duke and look forward to seeing his career advance at his alma mater," team spokesperson Mike DeGeorge said in a statement.

Smith, 32, has spent four years on staff for the Blue Devils and his former coach, Mike Krzyzewski. He joined the team in February 2016 as a special assistant before being promoted to his current role in March 2018.

In a text to The Daily Memphian's Danielle Lerner on Thursday, Smith wrote: "I just spoke with Coach Penny, (and) I have decided to stay at Duke. Was an extremely tough decision as Penny is a great man and coach."

The Duke men's basketball Twitter account reacted to the news, too, posting an un-captioned GIF of Krzyzewski and Smith hugging after a game against Florida State. Former NBA All Star Hardaway was looking to fill out his staff with a third assistant after Mike Miller left in June.

Smith's decision and the team's statement both indicate a larger role for the former star guard down the line. Alongside Krzyzewski and Smith, Duke's coaching staff includes associate head coaches Nate James and Jon Scheyer and assistant coach Chris Carrawell. They, too, are all former players for Krzyzewski, 73, who's entering his 41st season at Duke.

Duke's last coaching shakeup came in March 2018. After then-associate head coach Jeff Capel took the Pittsburgh job, Krzyzewski and the program promoted Scheyer and James from assistant coaches to associate head coaches, promoted Smith from a special assistant to his current role and hired Carrawell from Marquette.

As a point guard under Krzyzewski, Smith earned consensus first-team All-America honors and was named 2011 ACC Player of the Year as a senior. He also started and played a key role on the 2010 Blue Devils, who beat Butler to win the school's fourth NCAA championship.

According to Smith's bio, his current roles as director of basketball operations and player development include overseeing the student manager program and creating/implementing the team's daily calendar and practice schedule. He also coordinates team meals and travel.

This summer, Smith has also taken an active role in racial injustice protests on and around campus. In June, after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Smith helped organize a march and met with Durham city and county leaders to discuss solutions to systemic racism.

And on Aug. 27, 500 people, including athletes, attended a peaceful protest Smith organized in Krzyzewskiville after the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

‘He’s never out of control’: What coaches think of Duke point guard Jeremy Roach

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (September 4, 2020)

Not an easy feat, being Coach K’s hand-picked point guard.

That’s because you’re basically tasked with acting as an extension of Mike Krzyzewski in-game. That means reading the floor, steadying your teammates’ demeanor after clutch shots and misses, making the right play at the right time, every time. Daunting doesn’t seem sufficient enough a word.

Yet that’s the situation facing Jeremy Roach, who is looking to become the next-in-line of great Duke guards. And the shoes he’ll be filling, those of Tre Jones, the ACC Player and Defensive Player of the Year, are significant. With Jones off to the NBA after a stellar sophomore season, the point guard perch will soon be Roach’s to claim.

And the people close to him can’t wait to see what he does with the opportunity.

“He’s a complete player,” says Glenn Farello, Roach’s coach at Paul VI Catholic in Fairfax, Va. “He just doesn’t have holes in his game.”

Roach displayed that throughout an impressive career at Paul VI, where he developed into a five-star prospect and the No. 23 player in the 2020 class, per the 247Sports Composite. The 6-foot-1 Roach will compete with senior Jordan Goldwire for the starting point guard spot right from the gun, regardless of what the depth chart is when the season begins, he’s the lead man of the future.

“He is a true point guard, but he’s a point guard who can score,” Farello says. “If you’re gonna be playing off and take away his facilitating, he’s not afraid to make sure he’s being aggressive looking for his shot. I go back to this: He can read the situation within a game as good as any player I’ve had over the years.”

The Athletic caught up with Farello and several high school coaches who faced Roach to get an idea of what sort of player Krzyzewski is getting.

When you hear Jeremy Roach’s game, what’s the first thing that comes to mind?

Gonzaga College High coach Steve Turner: Hell of a player. I have a lot of respect for him. Always have and always will. A kid I just think every year, he continued doing something new to perfect his craft, and it’s why he is where he is. Why he was one of the best players in high school during his four years.

St. John’s College coach Pat Behan: Glad that he’s no longer in the WCAC (laughs). He was such a good player for his time there; even when he came in the league as a freshman, he had a big impact. Offensively, he’s just super explosive, and it’s really dangerous when he gets out in transition. Over the years, I think he improved his range and shot it well. I think the most impressive part about him from a point guard standpoint is just you can’t really speed him up. He plays at his own pace, and he doesn’t really turn the ball over. So to be as explosive as he is, and to control pace in a game, that’s a major strength. He’s never out of control.

Archbishop Stepinac coach Patrick Massaroni: Obviously he’s a talented player. We had been off a little while before playing them, so we had some time to watch film, and they had actually beat IMG. I was like, well, shit. Because we had lost to IMG by about 11, and they beat ‘em. His craftiness, his speed, his build for his size. And then his ability to create his own shot was something that concerned us. I thought he was somebody that could really get to the rim and finish, and I also thought he was someone who could hit three, four 3s if left open.

How did he improve the most over his four years of high school?

Farello: Like with any point guard, developing his voice. He’s always had a great understanding of the game, high basketball IQ, but his willingness to share with his teammates and seeing things on the floor – and being able to communicate that – I think that’s one of the things he’s really grown with the last few years.

Turner: Just becoming an all-around point guard. In middle school, Jeremy was probably more noted for being the scorer. But his ability to adapt to the position,

he was able to truly be just a point, was really good. His ability to make other guys around him better, but also to take over a game when he had to do that. He knew how to turn it off and on when he needed to to make sure he got everyone involved and made everybody happy.

Behan: His range, he definitely improved. Early on, I’d say if you had to take something away, you’d rather him shoot it from 23 feet than being in the paint. But as time went on, he got more and more consistent with that and comfortable in being able to make that shot. I’d expect him to be strong in that category.

How did you try to defend him, and was one strategy more effective than another?

Behan: Transition defense is so important, so we would always try to have a set defense in front of him. We felt like if we were ever kind of side-by-side with him or backpedaling, it was probably too late. So we tried to make him play more in the halfcourt. And what we would do with their ball screens would vary, but we just did everything we could to stay in front and make him take contested shots and try to keep him out of the paint as much as possible. Again, easier said than done.

Really, just not give him that advantage because he’s such an explosive player and makes such good decisions where, if he’s in transition, he’s gonna make the right play and you’re probably gonna be in trouble. Keep him in halfcourt, keep him in front. You can’t go under the ball screens, though.

Turner: Some of the time, we played him straight up. A lot of times, we would talk about different things to do in ball-screen action. When he gave the ball up, maybe we might X him out and prevent the ball from getting back to him, make other guys have to make plays. At times we guarded him 94 feet, tried to wear him down, make him have a little less in the tank come the fourth quarter. Sometimes we went with quicker, smaller guards. Other times we went with bigger, more physical guys. We tried to do a lot of different things I would say, never to completely stop him, but to slow him down.

He was definitely a tough out because of his ability not to be one-dimensional. I think a lot of times, the point guards now are becoming so score-first that it’s easier to guard those types of guys. Where Jeremy could be a guy who goes three quarters and could give you two or four points, and then fourth quarter, you sleep on him and he ends up with 25 for the game. That’s really what makes Jeremy special.

Massaroni: It was R.J. (Davis) vs. him and A.J. (Griffin) vs. Trevor Keels. The hype was just there. So many college coaches. Even Roy Williams had flown in. We put R.J. on him, and they battled. The Duke-UNC headlines, and they got after it.

We were really physical with him, and the officials allowed us to be. We hedged really hard, doubled as much of his ball screens, because they had done so much ball-screen action with him, and him being so talented. I think R.J. did a good job of trying to keep him to his weak hand as much as possible. As much as we did to contain him, he missed some shots, and that always helps when it goes your way. I would say the main strategy there was to one, be physical with him, and two, try to eliminate what his strengths were. His strengths were going to his right hand, finishing at the rim. So how much could we force him left? How much could we force him to shoot a pull-up instead of setting up for a 3 or getting to the rim? And how much could we take him out of his comfort zone of using those ball screens? That was big for us.

What was the most impressive thing you’ve seen him do?

Farello: In the state championship game this year, we were up one with about a minute and a half left, and we had the ball, and I called timeout and brought them over. I just sat ‘em down and looked at them and said, “OK, what do you wanna run?” And Jeremy was quick to run a play we’ve had success with a little bit, and he suggested it, and I said, “All right, we’re going with it.” And he banged a 3 coming out of the timeout, and it was a well-executed play, but he had it in his mind and knew exactly what was right for that moment. I was happy to give him that opportunity, and he

'He's never out of control': What coaches think of Jeremy Roach (cont.)

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (September 4, 2020)

took ownership of it. Looked over at me as he was running back, kind of like, Yup, was it ever in doubt the ball was going in?

Turner: He never lets you see him sweat. You might have been in his head, you might have been under his skin, but you would never know it. If there was ever anybody that knew about it, it would've been in the locker room and he said, "Man, I can't stand this. I can't stand playing against that kid." But you didn't know it when he was on the court.

Behan: He hits big shots, man. I can say that. We've had a couple tight games against Paul VI and it seems like when we're a stop away, he's the guy that makes the play. Whether it's collapsing the defense and it looks like you're about to take a charge on him and he kicks one to the wing and someone drills a 3, or he's the guy who ends up with a loose ball and makes a 3. Like, he has a knack for making big plays, especially down the stretch.

Is there a player you've seen he reminds you of?

Turner: The old Illinois guard, Deron Williams. But a better athlete. That physical body, real shifty with his handles. He can pace you, and because of his physicality, he can keep off you and make the plays. Explosive enough to go to the rim and dunk on somebody. Knocks down shots. I like the body type and some of the attributes to a Deron Williams.

Massaroni: I've watched Kyle Lowry toward the end of his time at Villanova and his time with the Raptors, and I can see that comparison there. He's not the tallest guard, but he does have broad shoulders and he's strong. Right? He's strong for his size, and I always say sneaky athletic for shorter guys. I could see the Lowry comparison 100 percent on that front. He's a strong kid.

Farello: Of the players we've had in the past, he's all of them put together. So you take the best of Aaron Thompson, who's at Butler now. Then we have Anthony Harris, who's down in Carolina now. Even an Erick Greene, who was at Virginia Tech, and I think Erick led the country in scoring his senior year? So he has elements that Erick brought to the table, but if I look at Jeremy, he's kind of a combination of a lot of them. And then I go back to years ago, I had Delonte West. And Delonte's toughness, and just his basketball savvy and competitiveness, Jeremy has that kind of quiet confidence too.

How do you expect him to do at Duke?

Massaroni: I wouldn't worry about his size, of being a shorter guard. He's elite enough and crafty enough. For the next level and what he'll do at Duke, he'll probably be tasked with getting more guys involved than getting his own. I think he's gonna be successful. When you go to the elite of the elite across the country, there's always pressure of, Oh, is he gonna be one-and-done? I don't know the answer, but I know he's a bona fide winner. The kid competes, comes from a great program; I think that always has to be factored in, winning on the elite high-school level. He'll have a pretty high 3-point percentage, be efficient from 2, and get to the line when he can. And if not finishing above guys, at least he'll get to the line.

Turner: The ability to turn off being "the man," he's done that – even in a position where he was the man. And now you put him in a position like you saw with USA Basketball. Just his ability to keep guys happy and distribute and have the ball move. When you're going to Duke, when you have the weapons he's going to have at his disposal, I see this kid being even better than what we saw in high school.

People are going to love watching him in the ACC. Because now, he doesn't have to be the guy every night. He certainly will be the head of the ship, and I know how Coach is with his point guards down there in Cameron, but he's gonna have so many weapons at his disposal, he'll be able to turn it off and on when he has to on any given night. In the way they play, with all the ball-screen action, I see him being a 12-and-7 guy – where he can give you double figures, but also be close to double-digit assists because of his ability to get in the paint and draw people to him and then find other guys, make it simple for them.

Farello: He's not out there to boast or to show out for himself; he's much more comfortable being part of something bigger than himself. He tries to fit in more than stand out. And I think as a PVI guard, but also obviously as he transitions to going to Duke, I think that's a quality of his that will fit the culture the program has and that Coach has established there. He will fit into that culture, and he's truly excited about being part of the Duke family. And that takes all the responsibility of being the point guard and saying, "Hey, I have a job to do." He has the makeup to be able to handle the transition as smoothly as possible.

Richmond upbringing led to a powerful speech on race given by Henry Coleman

By Eric Kolenich, Richmond Times-Dispatch (September 2, 2020)

Henry Coleman didn't plan to speak at a racial injustice protest taking place on Duke's campus outside Cameron Indoor Stadium last week. But organizer Nolan Smith, the basketball team's director of operations, had asked if any of the players present wanted to share their thoughts, and Coleman had crafted a thoughtful statement the night before and posted it to Instagram.

It was 207 words and inspired by feelings of pain and anger. A Black man in Kenosha, Wis. named Jacob Blake had been shot by police just days earlier. It was seemingly yet another instance of police brutality on a Black person in the United States, and it made Coleman consider the big picture of race in this country.

So Coleman, an 18-year-old freshman and Richmond native, stepped onto the platform, held up his cell phone and took a deep breath.

"The tears, the pain, the uncertainty," he began. "This feeling of structural and interpersonal racism has manifested itself into generations of African Americans and has caused the hearts and souls to be crushed by a system and a nation who has failed to recognize the true racism that goes on."

Since Blake's shooting, professional and college teams around the country have staged protests and postponed games. The Duke and men's and women's basketball teams led a protest last Thursday that included a speech from coach Mike Krzyzewski.

In the days that followed, Coleman's speech was viewed 124,000 times on social media. It circulated among the staff at Trinity Episcopal, his high school. It brought his parents to tears.

Those who know Coleman best weren't surprised to see him speak his mind in front of a crowd and to do so with such poise. The charisma and confidence they saw that day, it's been inside him his whole life.

"That's Henry doing what he does," said Trinity Episcopal coach Rick Hamlin.

A leader from an early age

If you look at Coleman's parents, it's not hard to tell where his abilities come from. His mother, Cynthia, works for the United Way and knows what it's like to speak in front of a crowd or ask someone for a donation. His outgoing personality comes from her.

His father, Hank, was a football player at Virginia Tech in the Class of 1995, and Henry's killer instinct on the basketball court, Hamlin said, comes from Hank.

Coleman grew up in south Richmond, and at J.B. Fisher Elementary, teachers noticed how other kids gravitated toward him. By the time he got to middle school at Albert Hill, it was clear how good of an athlete he had become. His parents urged him to use his platform to speak his mind.

In the 10th grade, he transferred from Benedictine to Trinity Episcopal where he took Hamlin's honors American history class, which usually included a class discussion. Once, while discussing America's founding fathers, Coleman, who is Black, told his mostly white classmates that people who looked like him didn't have the right to vote. They weren't considered when the Bill of Rights was written. Coleman had a way of getting his message across without making others feel guilty or pointing fingers, Hamlin said.

As a student, he was interested in everything, from economics and science, to how people fit together in a society, said Rob Short, Trinity Episcopal's head of school.

When he became a senior, other students and a few teachers urged Coleman to run for student government president. He had never run for office before, but he was a natural fit for the job, Short said. Coleman was a servant leader. He was poised and a good listener. Coleman won. Then the pandemic hit, interrupting his senior year. He was named All-Metro player of the year for a second year in a row, and in the spring he graduated with a 3.7 GPA.

He never dealt with overt racism, Coleman said, but there were small "microaggressions."

After he was elected, a student said to him, "you're different than other Black athletes I know," his mother remembered. It wasn't common for a Black athlete to run for student body president. The comment wasn't meant as an insult, but it wasn't a compliment either. He was articulate, a good student, and why should those be uncommon attributes for a Black athlete?

"It's something you have to live with, and it's something a lot of African American people have to live with," Coleman said.

He still remembers being 5 years old, when Hank explained to him that a Black man had been shot and killed by a police officer. That's how, as a young boy, he began to conceptualize death.

But he grew up around law enforcement, too. His grandfather was a police officer, and his uncle is a U.S. Marshal. Each summer he'd see Hank's old Virginia Tech buddies, several of whom chose law enforcement as their career. So he developed a health understanding of a police department's place in America. He understood, Cynthia said, the honorable work they do and the concern she felt, and every Black mother feels, when her son got his driver's license and risked being pulled over.

When the Confederate statues along Monument Avenue were lifted from their pedestals and packed into storage in July, Coleman was still in Richmond. There were numerous conversations between Henry and his parents about what it meant for the monuments to come down. The talk consumed them for weeks.

What the protesters did to the Robert E. Lee statue, the only one still standing, Coleman called a work of art. Activists scrawled message in spray paint, covering every square inch of the statue's base.

"It was truly unbelievable to see what they did to that statue," Coleman said. "I was speechless."

His natural evolution

Cynthia and Hank were both working from home that Thursday afternoon when a text popped up on Cynthia's phone. Pull up Instagram. The Duke basketball team is live.

They clicked on the livestream in time to see Henry step onto the platform. They had read his statement the night before, but they had no idea he was about to say it again to the world.

It didn't take long for Cynthia to start crying. As parents, you always wonder if your messages are being heard by your children, she said. Near the end of his speech, Henry put down his phone and ad-libbed for a moment. He mentioned his mother and how she would look at him every night. He mentioned his father and how he explained death to him at a young age. At that moment, Cynthia and Hank realized their son had always listened.

"I'm so proud he did this, and it was so impactful," Cynthia said. "It's just overwhelming as a parent. It's so humbling."

As Coleman discussed his parents, his voice quivered. Teammate Jaemyn Brakefield put a hand on Coleman's shoulder, urging him forward. Then two more players added their hands to his shoulders.

That moment, Hamlin later said, was the natural evolution of who Coleman has become. His parents, his education, and the startling racial reckoning in America made him ready to speak in front of his team, other Duke students, and the world watching. They made him ready to deliver the simple, yet difficult, message that change is needed.

'We will demand change.' Duke's Henry Coleman uses platform for awareness.

By Madeline Coleman, Raleigh News & Observer (September 1, 2020)

"The tears. The pain. The uncertainty. The feeling of sorrow."

Those words lingered as Henry Coleman III furrowed his eyebrows and read a message he had written the night before "out of pain, out of anger." The Duke freshman forward was in front of a crowd of his fellow athletes, coaches and other members of the school's athletics department who were gathered for a peaceful protest at Krzyzewskiville on Duke's campus on Aug. 27.

"This country has had its knee on the necks of African-Americans for too long," Coleman, who's Black, told the crowd. "This country has had a dagger in our backs and has yet to even acknowledge the dagger, let alone try to pull it out."

As Coleman spoke, his teammates gathered around him on the stage as his emotions in his voice became more and more evident. He said that moment "almost felt like a security blanket." He hadn't planned to speak that day, but told the media Monday that his parents always told him to use his platform.

"They always tell me, 'You wouldn't build a house and not sleep in it,'" Coleman said. "So I just have to use this platform to continue to talk."

FACING MICROAGGRESSIONS

Throughout his life, Coleman said he has faced racism and microaggressions, ranging from people following him around in stores to people looking at him a certain way as he runs through his neighborhood.

"It's that constant feeling of you going out the door every day, 'Will I make it home?'" Coleman said. "It's just something that you have to live with, and it's something that a lot of people and a lot of African-Americans around this country have to live with."

During his speech in Krzyzewskiville, Coleman said he's "tired of it."

"Words cannot explain the numbness that me and my brothers and sisters are feeling right now," Coleman said, his voice trembling. "Words cannot explain the pain that my mother looks at me every night. Words can't explain the pain of my father and the shawl of the tremble in his voice when he talks to me about death."

His parents had many conversations with Coleman as he was growing up, some focused on not going down the street with his music playing loudly and not wearing a "certain type of clothing to certain types of events."

But those conversations got deeper over time. He said that before he had ever seen death in a movie, his father had to explain to Coleman why certain things were happening on the news and in the world.

"A lot of people try to hide themselves from the news," Coleman said. "And especially nowadays, when you have to explain, you have to explain what's truly going on."

Coleman took a deep breath and a long pause during his speech as two teammates kept their hands on each of his shoulders, squeezing from time to time in support. He continued, saying, "Change is needed right now."

ATHLETES RESPOND TO JACOB BLAKE SHOOTING

Across the nation, athletes are using their voices to advocate for change. The NBA's Milwaukee Bucks boycotted their playoff game against the Orlando Magic on Aug. 26 in response to the shooting of Jacob Blake, a Black man who was shot at by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Police shot seven times; four bullets hit Blake, who is now paralyzed.

The NBA then announced the postponement of two other playoff games that evening. Over the next several hours, three WNBA, five MLS and three MLB games were canceled as athletes, programs and leagues stood in solidarity. Over the weekend, more than seven NFL teams canceled practices.

"I saw a group of guys that were using their platform, like we talked about each day," Coleman told the media Monday, "to voice their pain and voice their opinion on people that oppressed us for a long time."

The cancellations and boycotts over police brutality against Blacks, social injustice and Blake's shooting didn't end with professional teams. Mississippi State football players went to Unity Park instead of practicing on Aug. 27. The next day, Ole Miss' football team marched from campus to Oxford Square. The Oklahoma football team walked in rows of three to the Unity Garden, holding a 57-second moment of silence in honor of the 57th anniversary of the March on Washington and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. UNC athletes led a march on Franklin Street on Saturday.

SPEAKING OUT FOR CHANGE

Coleman said he's felt the feelings he showed during his speech growing inside of him, but had mostly talked about the microaggressions and oppression with his friends and family. After the police shooting of Blake, he said, it was "the right time to say something."

As Coleman stood on that stage in Krzyzewskiville, the admitted fan of wordsmith Henry David Thoreau rocked side to side and made a plea for his peers, mentors and colleagues to repeat after him, pushing them to be louder.

"We will demand change."

"We will demand justice."

"We will gain equality."

"We will be great."

Henry Coleman is already showing Duke what kind of person (and player) he is

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (September 1, 2020)

All throughout his childhood in Richmond, Va., Henry Coleman III saw the statue.

He had to reconcile with it. He learned the history behind its construction – why Robert E. Lee, the commanding general of the Confederacy during the Civil War, had a larger-than-life monument erected of him. And over time, as he said in a Zoom call on Monday, “it was just kind of something you had to get used to.”

Only then, months before Coleman was set to enroll at Duke as part of a star-studded freshman class, George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer. Nationwide protests broke out. Monuments to America’s racially charged history, including others in Richmond, were taken down. The one of Lee, however, still stands – but is covered with graffiti condemning police brutality and promoting the Black Lives Matter movement. It’s that version of the statue, that indelible image, that Coleman last saw before departing for Durham.

Clearly, it resonated.

“It was unbelievable – truly unbelievable – to see what they did to that statue. I was speechless,” Coleman said in his first media availability as a Blue Devil. “A true work of art.”

It’s fitting, then, that the same could be said about Coleman’s first interaction with the Duke community. That came when he was the final speaker at a BLM protest organized outside Cameron Indoor Stadium. Mike Krzyzewski spoke. Kara Lawson spoke. Nolan Smith spoke.

And then came Coleman, barely 18 years old.

“The tears, the pain, the uncertainty,” he said as he began his speech last Thursday. “The feeling of sorrow. It has turned into a feeling of numbness that I’ve yet to even comprehend.”

Coleman continued on, reading what he had written from his phone, the hurt so clearly evident in his voice. At one point, when his voice briefly waned, his teammates stepped forward and put their hands on his shoulders in support. “It almost felt like a security blanket,” he said Monday. “It felt like I had people around me that truly cared and that really found the message with me.”

With Coleman’s conviction, it’s easy to see why teammates would. Especially considering that the sense of speaking out has always been within him.

Coleman explained how his parents always preached the importance of utilizing one’s platform to him when he was younger. “I built this platform,” he said. “They always tell me, ‘You wouldn’t build a house and not sleep in it.’” So the act of using his voice in this manner isn’t foreign.

But the circumstances certainly are new. After all, Coleman is only a freshman. He has been on campus just a handful of weeks. But already, through his own convictions and conversations with coaches, he felt comfortable enough to say his piece.

It’s one heck of an impressive introduction, that’s for sure.

And it bodes well for Coleman’s place at Duke, both as a leading voice on social activism and basketball. The 6-foot-7, 210-pound forward has already shown he’s thoughtful, well-spoken and influential – and that’s not even the main reason he’s here in Durham.

That would be hoops, in which Coleman is also (obviously) expected to have an impact. Ranked the No. 49 player in the 2020 class by the RSCI, Coleman almost certainly figures to be part of the Blue Devils’ perimeter rotation. It’s tricky sussing out exactly where – Coleman said Coach K hasn’t yet told him what his role will be, and just to continue improving – but you find a spot for guys with his motor and intangibles.

Coleman had previously said he’d like to bring a Justise Winslow-type impact to

the program, given the similarities in frame and downhill attacking style, and he expounded on that notion on Monday. “A lot of people kind of looked over how good of a leader Justise was and how he always just brought energy,” Coleman said, “whether he had three points or he had 30.”

Now, expecting Coleman to average a Winslow-like stat line as a freshman – 12.6 points, 6.5 rebounds, and 2.1 assists per game – is unrealistic. Despite his lofty recruiting ranking, Coleman is the lowest-rated member of the team’s six-player class. Returnees Matthew Hurt and Wendell Moore are ahead of him on the depth chart at both forward spots, and he’ll also have to fight for time with fellow newcomers Jalen Johnson and Jaemyn Brakefield.

Still, Coleman has clear gifts – beyond his speaking abilities – that will help Duke. Sturdily built, he’ll be an immediate rebounding presence for a team that lost four bigs from last season. He’ll help defending both forward spots too, one of the Blue Devils’ few defensive weaknesses a year ago.

He also has been working on his offensive game with associate head coach Nate James, he explained Monday, including two areas in particular: pick-and-pop 3-pointers and attacking from the wing or when trailing.

“(James) calls those his money spots: guys can really get paid a lot of money doing those things,” Coleman said with a grin. “Coach and I have talked about just continuing to be a consistent shooter. And I think for my game right now, that’s the biggest thing I need to work on.”

Again, that’s the self-awareness in Coleman coming out. In someone so young, it’s impressive to witness. But as was clear both at the protest and in Coleman’s introductory Zoom call, it’s not something that should be surprising.

After all, this is a kid who counts Henry David Thoreau among his favorite authors. There’s a maturity there.

The point is, expect to hear more from Coleman soon. And also far into the future. He said he plans to continue using his voice throughout his career at Duke, and then “whether or not I’m in the NBA.”

So maybe we’ll next hear from Coleman after his first breakout game in Cameron Indoor. Maybe, unfortunately, it’ll be after another racist incident or act of social injustice. But we will be hearing from him again. Make no mistake.

“There are other guys on this team that are way more experienced than me and that have way more knowledge, and I can just be a sponge and soak up all the knowledge they have to give me,” Coleman said. “But I have those leadership qualities.

“When I’m given the opportunity, I’ll use my voice.”

Athletics rally at Duke, organized by Nolan Smith, calls for social justice, change

By C.L. Brown, Raleigh News & Observer (August 27, 2020)

DURHAM - Am I next.

The words popped off Duke senior guard Mike Buckmire's cardboard sign in a way that wouldn't be expected from the son of a surgeon, who came up through private school. Yet there Buckmire stood at an impromptu, but not quite spontaneous gathering at Duke to protest police brutality, racial injustice and systemic racism on Thursday.

His anxiety is a familiar one, one that was also being felt as it transformed into an energy Nolan Smith felt compelled to act upon late Wednesday night. Smith was already fuming over the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin only to watch the subsequent killing of two protestors by a 17-year-old white male carrying an AR-15, who police passed right by after the shooting.

So as he watched NBA players refuse to suit up for Wednesday's playoff games and reportedly consider shutting down the rest of the season. And right there, at 11:30 p.m., he decided he was going to do something about it. The former Blue Devils' guard, who currently serves as the men's basketball director of operations, texted student manager Elijah Williams a short, but clear, message: "We're protesting tomorrow. How fast can you get the word out?"

"Whenever anything hits your mind, it hits your heart, you just have to act on it," Smith told the N&O. "I didn't want to wait for anybody. I didn't want to check with anybody to make sure it's okay. It was just like, we're doing this."

Williams spread the word among several student groups that he belongs to and Smith worked his phone to alert other coaches and teams. He also connected with Brandon Hill, a senior linebacker on the football team, who is a member of a campus group called United Black Athletes. Word of mouth and social media collectively led to a crowd of about 500 people gathered at Krzyzewskiville, the strip of lawn best known for student-filled tents camping out during the winter for basketball tickets.

Emotions were raw. Kara Lawson, Duke's new women's basketball coach, had about a 30-second pause to gather herself when she spoke about what it's like to be black in America. As her team surrounded her for support, Lawson continued:

"Equality, in theory, is a basic principle, but in practice, for our country, it's been very complicated," Lawson said. "It's been hard to rationalize for over 400 years. There's a lot of anxiety involved in it. Those who are African-American know what I'm talking about. Every day when you wake up, you feel anxious -- of every minute. Knowing that on your drive to school or your drive to work, going to a restaurant, sitting in your house or hanging out with your friends at a park, that that could be your last moment on earth."

Smith initially planned to use his public announcement system he bought on Amazon. But Duke's athletic facilities manager assisted in setting up a proper microphone and speakers. Mark Anthony Neal, a professor of African and African-American Studies was one of six people who addressed the crowd. Smith extended an open microphone to those present. Henry Coleman III, a freshman on the basketball team, initially didn't plan on speaking when the team met prior to the rally. Coleman was moved as the event progressed and nudged Smith asking for the opportunity. He read from words he said he wrote Wednesday night, "out of pain, out of anger."

"This country has had its knee on the necks of African-Americans for too long," Coleman said, as his teammates, nearly all wearing black t-shirts with "Black Lives Matter" across the chest, gathered around him. "This country has had a dagger in our backs and has yet to even acknowledge the dagger, let alone try to pull it out."

Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said in his discussions with players that it was important to have an "actionable item" come out of their talks. On Thursday, that took the form of the men's and women's basketball teams sitting at tables and registering their peers to vote.

"We need to have a display on Duke's campus where every student is registered and will vote," Krzyzewski said. "I'm not telling you who to vote for - but if we don't get

the proper leadership at every level in our country this is not going to go away. We look at and we can see the police brutality, but what you don't see are the amount of educational opportunities that are deprived young black kids; health and welfare opportunities; economic opportunities. These things can only be changed with proper leadership and organization. The first step in that is for all of us to vote."

Krzyzewski said since March the men's team has conducted Zoom meetings with more than 100 former players and managers participating and had focus groups discussing ways to fight systemic racism and social injustice.

"It's alright if you're white and your friend is black to talk about this," Krzyzewski said. "Ask each other how you feel about it, share feelings. That's what we're trying to do today. You feel deeply because of what's happened."

A common theme from those who spoke was to encourage students that there was power in letting their voices be heard. That was one of the messages Smith wanted to get out as he struggled to think of the best way to channel his emotions.

"I can't change the world, but damnit I can change Duke while I'm here," Smith told the crowd. "One thing coach K always says, leave every place better than when you got there. That's what I'm here to do."

Inside five-star recruit Paolo Banchemo's decision to commit to Duke

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (August 21, 2020)

Radio silence. Really, that's what it was. No rumblings, no whispers, no hush-hush conversations. Nada. In the moments before the bombshell, there were no indications it was coming.

Which, obviously, made the aftershock that much more dramatic. No less significant, but surely more stunning. And now as the dust begins to settle, so too does reckoning with one of the more significant college commitments of the year: five-star power forward Paolo Banchemo – despite rampant speculation he'd play for home-state Washington, or team with friends at Tennessee, or join Kentucky's NBA-in-training program – had committed to Duke.

"It's shocking to a lot of people," his mother, Rhonda, told The Athletic after the Thursday announcement, "but listening to him talk through it, it wasn't."

You see, Banchemo is a program-changer. He's rated the No. 9 player in The Athletic 40 – which ranks the top 40 high school players in America regardless of class – and the No. 3 prospect in the 2021 class, per 247Sports. At 6-foot-9 and 235 pounds, he's already a physically imposing specimen, the sort of ready-made big man every major program dreams of having.

Or, rather, dreamed of.

Naturally, the blue bloods all made their runs. And Banchemo, as he told his mother from the jump, wanted to handle it all. When the stream of calls flooded from every direction, he endured. He had, as his mother called them, "real, organic conversations" with the coaching staffs at each of his six finalists. Which was both a blessing, in that he was able to make the best decision for himself, but also a curse, because he knew he'd have to tell five other coaches no.

As for how he came to his decision, though?

Well, it was a conversation with Mike Krzyzewski about 3+ weeks ago that really got the ball rolling.

"I actually didn't know if he was going to take the call, but he did," Rhonda said, "and I think he's really happy that he did."

As for the specifics of the call, they're as top-secret as Banchemo's sudden announcement. But throughout the recruiting process, a number of things about the Blue Devils stood out to the big man.

First and foremost was the influence of Krzyzewski. Shocking, right? But although the allure of Coach K's basketball résumé speaks for itself, it was something else about the coach that Banchemo connected to. "Once you get to know him, he's selfless," Banchemo said on an Instagram Live on Thursday night. "As genuine a person as they come." And in that demeanor, Banchemo saw parallels.

"Coach K is a lot like a lot of the coaches he has now," Rhonda said. "Listen, they've got fire. They're definitely fiery, and they're gonna tell you what you need to hear. But just general demeanor, off the court, kind of calm. Little bit more quiet. Little bit more observant. His high school coach is that way. His dad's that way. And my dad, and my husband's father."

That personality struck a chord with Banchemo, but so did K's plan for how he'd use the elite forward.

For someone his size, Banchemo has exceptional passing abilities and court vision; that's why it was enticing when the Duke staff mentioned the possibility of playing something of a point forward role. "He likes to face the basket and go in the low post," Rhonda said, "and they were able to show us how we could do both." Nate James, Duke's resident big-man whisperer, has quite the reputation developing frontcourt players, having recently mentored (among others) Vernon Carey Jr., Marvin Bagley and Wendell Carter Jr. Not bad company to keep.

So the basketball elements were clearly there. And in addition to that conversation with Krzyzewski, Banchemo has maintained a strong relationship with the entire coaching staff, especially lead recruiter Jon Scheyer.

But as was the case with Coach K, it was the talks outside of basketball that helped Banchemo feel that unique connection.

He appreciated, for instance, that all of Krzyzewski's assistants are former Blue Devils. Banchemo has mentioned potentially wanting to get into coaching after his playing career, Rhonda said, and that tradition at Duke was enticing.

So was the staff's willingness to engage on social issues, including the Black Lives Matter movement. Nolan Smith, the director of operations and basketball development, for example, has been actively engaging Durham community leaders on ways to fight social injustice and

racism. Coach K's Black Lives Matter video from earlier this summer quickly became the most-watched social video in program history. And given Banchemo's own experiences – he spoke at a Seattle rally in June about being racially profiled after a concert in high school – that meant a lot to see.

"Looking at Duke, looking at the tradition there, the staff doesn't really have to do that. Like, they could just say, 'We're about hoops, that's what we're doing.' And they're good at it, and no one would question them," Rhonda said. "But they're choosing to do those things and put themselves out there, because they know it's for the greater good – and ultimately that's not something Paolo is going to talk about, but I know because of his own experiences and the social moment that we're in, it does matter."

And since that call with K, all those elements of his decision bubbled up in Banchemo's mind. Immediately after the call, he told his parents that Duke had started to rise to the top.

Rhonda, the highest-scoring player in Washington men's or women's history, knew the ebbs and flows of the recruiting process, though. She told her son to take some time. Let all the pitches simmer. Keep taking phone calls, keep thinking it through. And in two weeks, if he still felt like he was leaning towards Duke, then they'd talk again.

Two weeks later, the family reconvened.

Banchemo still had Duke on his mind, and for all the same reasons.

"It wasn't like it was one thing here, and then the next time it's the next thing here; he kept talking about the same things," Rhonda said. The play style. The reliability of the entire staff. The program-wide embrace of former players. Being able to play with A.J. Griffin, another top-10 recruit in the class.

It all just made sense.

Of course, other schools did too. Tennessee, where Banchemo could have played with close friend Kennedy Chandler; the two had talked about going to college as a package deal. Or Washington, close to home and where both his parents went. Or Kentucky, which has been a pipeline to the NBA.

About a week ago, Rhonda sensed her son was close to finalizing a decision. "He had been in his room a lot the last week, been in a bad mood. Kinda would come up to eat, and then go back down into his room," Rhonda said. "Knowing you're going to disappoint five schools, I think, was really weighing him down."

About that time, he told the Duke staff of his intentions. And then for a week, he told no one.

"Nobody really (knew)," Banchemo said on Instagram with a sly smile. "Just my family and then the coaches."

Close to the vest, certainly. And a bombshell decision? Absolutely.

So what now? What's left?

Hopefully for Duke, persuading a few other five-star talents to join Griffin and him. Banchemo said his two biggest targets remaining are small forward Pat Baldwin, the No. 1 player in the class per 247Sports, and shooting guard Trevor Keels. "I think we could really make a push," Banchemo said, "and win a national championship."

Even without Baldwin and Keels, that's the expectation in Durham with Banchemo on board.

And there's no way to keep that a secret anymore.

Duke mailbag: Matthew Hurt's progress, games with no Crazies and more

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (August 14, 2020)

College basketball has officially entered the chat.

With so much posturing over the impending college football season – namely, trying to salvage some semblance of it – college hoops has mostly taken a backseat. That is, until the Pac-12's announcement this week it was postponing all athletics competitions until at least the start of 2021. All of them. Yes, college basketball, you (again) are caught in COVID-19's crosshairs.

Of course, there are still many months before the season is scheduled to start. There's time. Time to develop solutions, plus backup plans for if (when) they're needed. But with the Pac-12's announcement, time is now very much of the essence, more so than even a week ago.

With all that said, understandably, your questions mostly focused on the nebulous state of the sport. The good news is this: Duke, and specifically Mike Krzyzewski, is so integral to college basketball that the school is certain to have its voice heard. When the NCAA and the NABC are seeking opinions, they have to make calls to Tobacco Road.

That seems like a good starting point for this week's mailbag. Let's dive into the deep end.

If I recall correctly, Duke was first to take a stand against playing the ACC tournament. How do you see the administration, the athletic department and/or Coach K using their influence on how the upcoming season plays out? – Bruce L.

Excellent question, Bruce, and bonus points for the good memory. Yes, prior to the cancellation of the ACC and NCAA tournaments, Duke sort of took matters into its own hands. Essentially, Duke president Vincent Price – the day after the suspension of the NBA season – called the ACC and said he was suspending all of the school's athletics programs. Yes, men's basketball included. That left the conference with two bad options: Play on without a top-10 team. Or call the thing off. Wisely, the ACC chose the latter.

Obviously, that was something of an unprecedented situation, and Price deserves credit for being willing to make that tough call. But any decisions made henceforth are going to be much larger than just a Duke problem. If Duke wanted to play but the ACC nixed or postponed the schedule? In that case, the Blue Devils would sort of be at the mercy of the conference.

But you bring up a good point, Bruce, that the school will absolutely be involved in any decisions. That's true from various perspectives too. From a 10,000-foot, high-in-the-sky lens, Price and athletic director Kevin White (who served as selection committee chair in 2020) will have a seat at the table as far as figuring out if a season, in whatever form, can be conducted safely. White will also help to formulate plans for the NCAA Tournament, including pushing dates or altering the number of teams invited. Then at a smaller level, if a plan is developed, Krzyzewski will surely be allowed to weigh in on what athletes and the staff would need to play. We're talking practice facilities, workout time, training rooms, locker rooms, the potential of playing back-to-back games and much more.

Point being, it's a little harder to envision Duke – or any school, for that matter – having the pull to change a conference's line of thinking. Yet the Blue Devils will have no shortage of influence in whatever decisions are made.

This is a conference question. Given the success so far of the NBA bubble, and if the ACC is facing no fans for basketball, should they look at using several neutral locations (pods) where they can bubble a group of teams and have them round-robin? And then move to the next location and repeat. – Rey E.

Rey, you're on the right track. As we've seen with the NBA and WNBA, basketball bubbles work! And bubbles might be the only thing that works sports-wise until we have a greater grasp on COVID-19. So, yes, bubbles are in play.

The best way to implement them, though? That's another story. Multiple proposals and ideas are being thrown around, and we're still too far away to have concrete plans.

One idea has been to convert campuses, or areas near them, into mini-bubbles once non-athletes leave campus at Thanksgiving. With campuses much more empty, if not entirely, you theoretically could play most of a nonconference slate from Thanksgiving to the start of the spring semester. A few of us on The Athletic's college basketball staff recently put together a plan for what nationwide pods might look like; I'd encourage you to check that out, and not just because I contributed.

One other theory being discussed is to have round-robin conference bubbles; basically, have two schools travel in tandem to another campus, play round-robin games that weekend, and then do it again the next weekend. For example, Duke and North Carolina could take a charter flight to Charlottesville, where Virginia and Virginia Tech would be housed. Duke would play Virginia on Thursday, Tech on Friday (with UNC playing the opposite schedule), rest Saturday, then play one of the two again on Sunday before returning home. It's a bit complicated, but it's meant to consolidate teams/travel/exposure in a cost-efficient way.

1. Given K's age, could it be possible that he might change the way he coaches to avoid contracting COVID? Many of the coaches in the ACC are more vulnerable, age-wise.

2. Is Duke considering bubble housing for its team? – Kenji K.

Interesting you bring up K's age, Kenji, as that has long been one of my biggest concerns about playing with the pandemic ongoing. In fact, my colleague Matthew Guttierrez and I investigated the very subject back in June. I'd imagine a lot of coaches take a similar approach to what the NFL is doing, in terms of coach safety: mandatory masks and/or face shields. The shields would probably work better, in terms of catching spittle. But as far as coaching from somewhere away from the bench? Tough to imagine. Without fans, however, there is the potential for extending the bench (or using seats behind it) to help coaches distance.

As far as bubble housing for players, you're really cutting to the heart of the amateurism debate that is inherently tied up in any of these plans. If you sequester players somewhere, you're inherently admitting they're not normal students. And if they're not normal students, it becomes a slippery slope for schools. Classes haven't started yet, but that's obviously the big dilemma here: What happens when athletes interact with the general population?

But no, assuming kids are going to classes as planned, bubbling players isn't realistic for those few reasons.

Have you heard anything about having fans (students) at the games during the season? – Jeffrey G.

Not at all. Now, my expectation would be a firm "no" at least through the end of the calendar year. Maybe by 2021, we've got a better grip on things nationwide. Who knows?

But we're still trying to figure out if games can even be played. With that said, fans aren't even a topic of conversation now. If we can figure out how to play safely first, then maybe we revisit the issue. But that's a big if.

Is it crazy to think that games with no fans would be an advantage for Duke? No team gets a more hostile reaction on the road, and no offense, but the Crazies have been a little stale recently. – Ben L.

I usually dig crazy, Ben, but yeah, this is. I have heard that criticism about the Crazies a decent amount since joining the beat in November, though. Still, have you been in Cameron recently? It is dumb loud still, to the point where the whole place shakes in the tensest situations.

Energy boost at the home > road hostility.

Brendan, you responded to this question not too long that you haven't seen him in person yet, so I'll ask again now: Has Matthew Hurt added size and strength? – Rey E.

Appreciate the follow-up here, even though I still haven't seen Hurt in person. He is back on campus, though, so I texted a few people in the program to get their impressions. One response: "Definitely stronger. Saw him today. 235."

Considering Hurt was listed at 6-foot-9 and 214 pounds last season, that's 21 pounds packed onto his frame. That's exactly what Duke fans should want to see and hear. Hurt's high-end shooting skills translated well to the college game, but he did struggle at times with the physicality of ACC play. (Again, he was a freshman; give the dude a break.) More bulk should seemingly mean we'll see him spend more time on the interior, where he proved to be a clutch rebounder. Hurt's future still projects best as a stretch four, but adding some muscle was what he needed to do.

It might be a little early to tell, but who do you see being Duke's most important player this season? – Hannah L.

Wrapping things up with a question from my partner, who is making her first foray into mailbag submission! Yay, supportive partners. Double yay for the fun question.

You could go a number of ways with this one. One argument would be for Jalen Johnson, Duke's top recruit and a most likely one-and-done lottery pick. He's ultra-athletic, does all the things you want a modern wing to do and is going to get more than his fair share of minutes. I could also easily see the argument for Hurt or Wendell Moore, two former five-star recruits who must bring some leadership to what is quite the young team; that's without mentioning their on-court contributions, of which there should be many. Heck, I'd even buy an argument for Jordan Goldwire, who not only will help fill the leadership void, but also has the daunting tasks of replacing Tre Jones and mentoring Jeremy Roach.

But if I had to go with one above all the rest? Hmm ... give me Moore. I think his leadership – as demonstrated when he led a Black Lives Matter rally near Charlotte this summer – is going to surprise people in a good way, and his versatility on the court will be immensely valuable. Realistically, he can play the two, three or four while acting as a secondary ballhandler.

Let's hope we get to see whether I'm right sometime soon.

How could Duke's rotation shake itself out? Version 1.0 of our projection

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (July 29, 2020)

There's just one teeny-tiny little problem with assessing potential starters or rotations for the Duke men's basketball team:

The players aren't even on campus yet.

So, yeah, that complicates our exercise. Players are scheduled to report on Sunday, at which time they'll be tested for COVID-19 before following Duke's other health protocols. Coaches have still been in contact with returnees and incoming recruits, but that doesn't exactly make this endeavor any easier. How do you start forming a rotation without, you know, seeing the players play? That's without mentioning Duke use a whopping 14 starting lineup combinations last season.

In other words, "starters" are anything but set in stone. Still, with players close to returning to Durham, we can't help entertaining the possibilities. Let's call this Version 1.0 of how Mike Krzyzewski's rotation may shake out; I'll update as coaches finally get the chance to work with the players. Projected starters are listed in italics:

1. Jordan Goldwire, Jeremy Roach
2. Jalen Johnson, D.J. Steward
3. Wendell Moore, Joey Baker
4. Matthew Hurt, Jaemyn Brakefield, Henry Coleman
5. Mark Williams, Patrick Tapé

Before anyone goes wild at the notion of both Roach and Steward – both five-star recruits, per 247Sports – coming off the bench: Krzyzewski's starters change based on the opponent and the game plan. Coach K won't, for example, start the same players against North Carolina's massive frontcourt as he would against Virginia Tech's small-ball lineups. Which, understandably, is why 10 players started at least two games for the Blue Devils last season. So don't get too caught up in that for now.

Also, both of those guys are freshmen. Not to say freshmen can't start – two others, Johnson and Williams, are pegged to do so above – but consider the makeup of this team and, more specifically, timing. Many high-major teams, including blue bloods such as Kentucky, are already back on campus. Guys have had some time to get to know one another, both on and off the court. They're integrating, albeit more slowly than in a normal summer. At Duke? Not to say guys are entering a situation behind the proverbial 8-ball, because they're not, but there simply is less time for new players to get acclimated before the start of the season.

Because of that, though, do you think Krzyzewski and his staff want to throw four freshmen into the starting fire with less preparation time? Or let them learn at a more normal rate, learn the system and expectations, and then assume those roles? Roach and Steward very easily could start before year's end, but there's no sense rushing them and potentially damaging their confidence.

One more important note: With such a young team, there's going to be a lot of experimentation. Only four players are upperclassmen, and only two of those – Baker (junior) and Goldwire (senior) – are returning rotation players. Considering that, standard positional groupings are a bit too rigid. A more nuanced assessment might group Krzyzewski's team as such:

Ballhandlers/combo guards: Roach, Goldwire, Steward
 Guards/wings: Moore, Johnson, Baker
 Post players: Hurt, Williams, Brakefield, Coleman, Tapé

Time to delve in deeper, starting with that first group.

Ballhandlers/combo guards

Tre Jones wasn't just Duke's undisputed leader last season; he was the team's security blanket, seemingly capable of kick-starting things whenever there was a lag at either end of the floor. That he won ACC Player of the Year honors validates that. His replacement, whoever that is, obviously has massive shoes to fill.

Realistically, though, no one player is going to replace Jones. Krzyzewski has two players on opposite ends of the experience spectrum – Goldwire, a senior, and Roach – who will split lead guard responsibilities, with each bringing a specific skill set to the position. As noted above, it wouldn't be a surprise for Goldwire to see more minutes early on while Roach acclimates to college ball. In 13 starts alongside Jones last season, Goldwire developed into a high-end on-ball defender and a respectable 3-point shooter (35.4 percent). Especially early, Goldwire represents a heady, low-risk ballhandling option who will set the table defensively. Putting him down for around his same 24.1 minutes per game as last season seems right, if not a starting point.

Roach is the more dynamic offensive option. At 6-foot-2 and 180 pounds, he doesn't have tremendous size, but he's especially comfortable and effective shooting off the dribble, not to mention crafty with finishes and floaters in traffic. Where Goldwire is a bulkier defender, Roach will need to grow into his frame some, but the physicality and ability to withstand contact is already there. By season's end he'll be good for 25 minutes per game – and K will want to get him those reps as the lead guard of the future – but around 15 is more realistic to start.

Steward is even leaner than Roach – he's listed at 6-foot-3 and 175 pounds – but has lightning speed that helps him finish around (and in front of) larger defenders. His handles are more than good enough to warrant lead guard responsibilities, but his scoring and shooting skills make him better suited to play off the ball and act as a secondary ballhandler. That said, he'll need a longer backcourt mate to help defensively, where he's more likely to guard opposing ones. Again, he and Roach very well could form the starting backcourt by season's end, but 10 to 15 minutes to start – split between both guard spots – is reasonable.

Guards/wings

You could include Steward here. And maybe Matthew Hurt? That's the sort of versatility Krzyzewski is going to have at his disposal. If he wanted, he could go for a bigger lineup like: Goldwire, Johnson, Moore, Hurt and Williams.

Or a super small one, like: Roach, Goldwire, Steward, Johnson and Moore.

Or an especially perimeter-oriented one, like: Roach, Steward, Baker, Johnson and Hurt.

We could do this all day. The point is, the options are limitless, and you could argue a number of other guys belong in this designation. But a few definitely belong here. Moore, who should assume a large part of Jones' leadership role, is one. At 6-foot-6 and 213 pounds, Moore is a natural wing, but with the versatility – especially defensively – to slide up and down the lineup. The opponent has a pesky, athletic power forward? Moore can guard him down low and on the perimeter. Is a supersized backcourt outmuscling your guards? Put Moore back there. Add in his slashing abilities offensively, and he's the sort of do-everything piece essential to the best teams. If he adds a 3-point shot to his arsenal (21.1 percent last season) and can cut down on his turnovers, look out. He should see 25 to 30 minutes per game.

Same for Johnson, Duke's other conventional wing. At 6-foot-8 and 215 pounds, Johnson is going to draw comparisons to past Blue Devil stars Jayson Tatum and Brandon Ingram – and for good reason. The dude can do everything: pass, drive, dribble, defend, shoot, you name it. He very well could be Duke's most dynamic passer from the jump, and with plenty of experience bringing the ball up the court, it wouldn't be a surprise to see him do so. He's tremendously athletic with great size, making him difficult to stop driving to the basket. If his outside shot is consistent, he has few holes in his offensive game. Defensively, his quick hands stand out, but sliding his feet better will make him a more complete defender. Still, Johnson's versatility and overwhelming talent mean he should see 25 minutes a game, if not more.

Then there's Baker, Duke's best pure shooter. Early last season, he seemed to be emerging as a constant deep threat, but his numbers (and playing time) went down as the season progressed. Some of that, though, was due to injuries. Baker has such

How could Duke's rotation shake itself out? Version 1.0 of our projection (cont.)

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (July 29, 2020)

a quick shot, with such an ideal motion, that it's hard to imagine him not developing into a steady role player. And as long as his shot stays consistent – he hit 39.4 percent of his 3s last season – he should easily rise from 12.1 minutes per game last season to the 15-to-20 range as a junior.

Post players

Again, there's overlap here. With how much Hurt is going to play on the perimeter, does it make sense to call him a post player? He's certainly a big, but that's a looser definition. How about Brakefield, who has the ideal body for a wing but more familiarity playing power forward? Again, fewer guys fit this group and this group only.

One of them is Williams, a five-star center. He's one hell of a big man, no pun intended: 7-foot, 230 pounds ... at 18 years old. Williams' offensive game isn't the most polished, but he has a tremendous motor (especially for someone his size) and can make things happen close to the basket. Defensively, though, is where he'll offer more immediate value. Both as a rebounder and shot-blocker, Williams has the potential to solidify the interior, something the team struggled with last season despite the presence of Vernon Carey Jr. There's also Tapé, who comes to Durham as a graduate transfer from Columbia. Tapé, with three years of college experience, is more advanced offensively than Williams, not to mention being a solid rebounder. There will be questions about how he adapts to playing in the ACC against higher-caliber players, but at the bare minimum, his experience will be useful for such a young squad.

The four spot, to me, is as interesting a role as any on the roster. Five guys conceivably could play there at some point: Hurt, Brakefield, Coleman, Johnson, and Moore. All should see some time, but Hurt is going to see the most, even after an up-and-down freshman year. Although his shooting prowess translated to the college level, he struggled some with the speed and physicality of ACC competition. After a summer honing his body, that should be less of an issue. Hurt is the ideal stretch four, and in a more perimeter-oriented offense, he'll be better equipped to handle a larger role. It'll be interesting to see how often, if ever, Krzyzewski runs Hurt at center in a shooting-heavy lineup. Regardless whether it's at the four or the five, 25 to 30 minutes aren't out of the question.

Brakefield and Coleman are both interesting backup options, but their minutes will be one of the main things ironed out during the preseason. Krzyzewski usually doesn't employ a particularly deep rotation, so it's not inconceivable for one of the two to see only five minutes or so a game. The other should be get more in the range of 5 to 10 minutes. My early money would be on Brakefield assuming the larger role, given his athleticism and size.

But, hey, these are good problems to have. You'd rather have too much talent and not enough minutes than the other way around.

Mike Krzyzewski and Roy Williams listened, then spoke out on Black Lives Matter

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (July 14, 2020)

First, Mike Krzyzewski listened.

Which was exactly what he'd intended to do. So on a recent Zoom call with some 115 former Duke players – everyone from Tommy Amaker and Elton Brand to Trajan Landon and Shane Battier – Krzyzewski, for once, wasn't leading the discussion. Rather, he was taking it all in.

During the course of a call that lasted more than two hours, he heard his former players, including director of basketball operations Nolan Smith, detail their experiences with racism and racial injustice. He listened to their stories, but more so, he listened to their pain and their plight. He tried to digest how three simple words – Black Lives Matter – had morphed from a cry for equality to what some outsiders perceive to be a political statement.

As the conversation flowed, the gears in Krzyzewski's head slowly started grinding. By the end of the call, the winningest coach in college basketball had some idea of what he'd like to say. And he wasn't going to beat around the bush:

Black Lives Matter.

Say it.

Can't you say it?

Thus begins what in less than 24 hours became the most-viewed video in Duke social media history. In two minutes and 46 seconds, Krzyzewski condemns the "plague" of systemic racism and social injustice that has existed in America for more than four centuries. He laments how Black people have been denied educational, financial and other opportunities. And he begins and ends with that same phrase: Black Lives Matter.

"He really wanted to start out strong," Smith told The Athletic, "saying those three words."

The number of eyes the video has attracted is staggering. Since being released on June 26, it has amassed more than 3.3 million views on Twitter and roughly 40,000 on YouTube; that's in addition to 735,000 impressions on Facebook and another 370,000 on Instagram. It not only dominated social media, but also the mainstream news cycle, with spots on every major network from ESPN to CNN. Overall, across all Duke channels, the video has been seen 4 million times.

The raw emotion in Krzyzewski's voice is part of what makes it unique – and gave it such visibility – but it's not the only powerful message emanating from Tobacco Road. Around the same time as Duke was producing its video, the very same process was unfolding in Chapel Hill. Two bitter rivals ... but united in one message: that Black lives absolutely matter.

So, why now? George Floyd's killing at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer came on May 25, almost exactly a month before Krzyzewski's video was released. In that time, seemingly everyone from the sports universe – Krzyzewski included – issued a statement or video supporting Black people and denouncing long-standing racism.

Only, anyone who knows Coach K understands a statement wouldn't suffice.

When Duke's communications staff helped craft comments for the coach in the midst of nationwide protests, K took a proverbial red pen to the whole thing. He started over, writing something personal and emotional. "No matter how much I love my current and former players and their families, I cannot feel the depth of what they are feeling right now," he wrote in that statement. "I have never experienced what it is like to be a Black man in America. So I find myself asking questions."

And there are a lot to be asked. Which is how Krzyzewski and his staff came up with the idea of hosting the larger Zoom calls. With the hundreds of Black players Krzyzewski has coached during his 40 years at Duke, the countless Black coaches

he has hired in that time, wouldn't those trusted voices be the exact people to hear from?

"You could just tell with every conversation, he was angrier, more emotional, more connected to us after listening to our feelings. And it was like, what can I do right now?" Smith said. "He wanted to put out a (video) statement right away. But we're like, you don't have to rush just to put out a statement; that's not always the best thing to do. Sometimes the best thing to do is to continue to listen, and he did that."

A second call followed. After that Zoom, Krzyzewski finally believed he understood enough to articulate his thoughts on video.

David Bradley, Duke's creative director, said that typically when he goes to Krzyzewski with an idea, the coach is up for anything. "The way things usually work with Coach with social," Bradley said, "it's sort of like the way things work with Coach on the court: Once you earn his trust, he kind of lets you go. He gives you freedom." For this shoot, however, things were dramatically different.

That was evident when Bradley spoke to Krzyzewski on the phone the day before the shoot.

"What you saw on the video, he basically did that to me on the call. Just one take, off the cuff, here's what I'm gonna do," Bradley said. "It wasn't like, what do you think? It was like, here's what I'm going to do."

By the time Krzyzewski got to campus for the shoot the following morning, he was already emotional, Smith and Bradley said. The coach even asked for the background to be dark during filming to keep the focus on his message, rather than Duke as a whole. Then he did the filming just as he had the day before over the phone – all in one take, with no interruptions, no prompter, and clearly no holding back.

"For me sitting there, I was damn near teary-eyed watching him do it," Smith said. "And when he finished, he was teary-eyed saying it to us."

After the take, Krzyzewski – the consummate perfectionist – immediately asked to see the raw video. "It was obvious to me it was different," Bradley said. "He had been thinking about this so much, and in his own mind, he had kind of put the whole thing together. And I know how he is: He had thought about it, said it to himself quietly or in his mind a couple times, and felt it deeply."

But maybe the most telling indicator of the video's impact?

"I got numerous texts from Carolina guys like, man, I've got a whole different level of respect for Coach K for that," Smith said. "And the main thing they kept saying was, that was real."

For as dynamic as Krzyzewski's video was, his counterparts down Tobacco Road made their own compelling compilation.

Like Krzyzewski, North Carolina coach Roy Williams put out an initial statement against police brutality and in support of peaceful nationwide protests. But also like his colleague, Williams wanted to do more. He spoke as part of the ACC's Black Lives Matter video, but while that video took time to produce, he too wanted to tap into his program's vast network of players.

Williams and his staff had several conversations about the best way to show their support for the Black Lives Matter movement, with director of operations Sean May and director of recruiting Kendall Marshall playing significant roles. The group decided on a script to be read by various former Tar Heels. "Coach was adamant about it being about the players," May told The Athletic. "He said, 'North Carolina has always been about the players. It's not about me.'"

The problem came in figuring out which players to ask to participate. It was a tough decision for Williams to make, and a solution he felt was best: to use players from

Krzyzewski and Williams listened, then spoke out on Black Lives Matter (cont.)

By Brendan Marks, The Athletic (July 14, 2020)

the program's national championship teams. May and director of player development Eric Hoots then quickly set out corralling players from the 1957, '93, 2005, '09 and '17 teams; Williams assigned himself the 1982 team, as he was an assistant for that group.

One other thing: May had to remind the not-so-technologically-savvy Williams that it would take longer than his requested 48 hours to contact everyone.

Videos gradually streamed in, including from Michael Jordan. "Systematic racism has to stop now," Jordan says in the video. "We must take the time to listen and educate our family, our friends, our children, on social injustice and racial inequality."

When the staff received Jordan's contribution, and then Williams' – which focused on Charlie Scott, UNC's first black scholarship athlete – it became obvious how to bookend the video.

"Once we got Michael's version back, it just made sense," May said. "Obviously it's MJ, but it was so compelling, just the way he said what he said. I didn't want to muddy that up."

Aside from Jordan, May helped split the rest of the script into sections. He said taking into account who said what was essential to the video's success.

"James Worthy saying, 'Stop killing unarmed black citizens,' I figure it's very impactful because of who James is, his stature. That felt more natural to me than Luke Maye saying it, right?" May explained. "The way Theo Pinson said, 'My skin color is not a weapon,' because knowing Theo really well, he would project that. All that matters when you're doing a video like this.

"Not everybody is gonna love it, and not everybody believes it. But for us, it felt right."

At both schools, the question is what comes next.

At UNC, May said Williams and the staff have continued having conversations about systemic racism and fighting racial injustice. He credits Marshall with regularly bringing those issues to the forefront in staff meetings.

"This isn't it for us," May said of UNC's video. "We wanted to do something impactful. A group of former players have gotten together on a few Zoom calls, but we want to make an impact on the community."

Accordingly, the current UNC team has plans to partner with the Hargraves Community Center in Chapel Hill for programming and educational sessions. Originally called the Negro Community Center when it was built in 1941, the Hargraves Center has long been a haven for Black children and families in the area.

And in Durham, Duke's staff has a number of ways it plans to continue advocating for equality. One major one is through the Emily Krzyzewski Center, founded by Krzyzewski and named for his late mother. The nonprofit, according to its website, serves as a college hub for Durham students, "propelling academically focused, low-income K-12 students and graduates toward success in college." Krzyzewski regularly donates to the center, including more than \$500,000 in the first half of 2019.

Additionally, Smith said those massive Zoom calls have resulted in the creation of two focus groups, if you will, among Duke alumni. The first, focused on voting registration and political influence, is led by Reggie Love; he played on the 2001 national title team and later served as an aide to President Barack Obama.

The second, of which Smith is assuming a leadership role, centers more on improving the Durham community. "Focusing right here, our own backyard," Smith said, "a place we all called home." With so many players scattered across the globe, it made more sense to hone in on one shared location, Smith said, to drive change together.

Different strategies, but the same goal.

A simple one, really: to educate the world on why the three words that start Krzyzewski's video do indeed matter.

"Coach came in there with a vision of what he wanted the world to see, and he knew it was gonna reach the world. He didn't care," Smith said. "It was as real as it gets."