

Hopewell's Shatori Walker-Kimbrough finding new ways to shine at Maryland

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COLLEGE PARK, Md. — Shatori Walker-Kimbrough sat courtside in a nearly empty Xfinity Center, baseball cap pulled low over her eyes, and talked about consistency.

Just an hour before, Maryland fans watched as the Terrapins defeated Michigan 76-56 for their 26th win of the season. Maryland used a strong second half to pull away, outscoring the Wolverines 25-14 in the fourth quarter to cruise to a victory, just like they had so many other times this season.

Walker-Kimbrough, a junior guard who leads the team with 19.5 points per game, has been a big reason why night in and night out. But on that evening, she didn't live up to the standards she set for herself, standards that made her a WPIAL champion in not just one but three sports during her time at Hopewell.

For the first time this season, Walker-Kimbrough was held to single digits, scoring nine points and playing just 26 minutes when she averages 30.9. And so afterward, in Maryland's quiet arena with Final Four banners hanging over her head, Walker-Kimbrough laid out what she demands from herself. She seemed to make a silent vow what happened that night would never happen again.

It was easy, in that moment, to believe it.

"That's one thing I don't think I did tonight was be consistent," she said, voice quiet and low. "But that's something I want in the future and I wanted before. I want to be consistent and I want to be counted on."

Walker-Kimbrough doesn't have to worry about that. Whether she's scoring a career-high 41 points in a win at Purdue — "Once I hit the last three, I knew it was a lot," she said. "I just didn't know how many." —

or leading the Terrapins with 19 points and 10 rebounds in the Big 10 tournament championship game, Walker-Kimbrough has firmly established herself as one of the top players in the country.

And she's been well on her way for a while. Walker-Kimbrough has been contributing since she was a freshman, playing a large role on back-to-back Final Four teams. This season, she'll be looking for a third. And her success stretches beyond Maryland. In the spring of her sophomore year, she was selected to USA Basketball's Pan American Games Team. She averaged 10.2 points as the team took silver, and she started the final three games.

"She's always wanted to be really, really good at what she does," said her mother, Andrea Kimbrough, "and be the best. I've never seen such a hard-working person before. I guess it's in order for her to be the best. I can't even describe it or put it into words. I never expected this. Never at all. I never did.

"That's just Shatori for you."

'Just Shatori' set out in the off-season to elevate her game for her junior season. That meant hours in the gym and, she said with a smile and a chuckle, "reps after reps after reps." She's always been more of a driver, excelling when she gets the opportunity to attack the hoop. But that was clogging up the lane for center Brionna Jones, so she decided to evolve.

And, as her mother and her teammates and her coaches will all confirm, when Walker-Kimbrough sets her mind to something, odds are it's going to happen. She's hard to bet against.

Hopewell coach Jeff Homziak can remember her beginning the transition to jump shooter during her senior year of high school. It toned down her aggressiveness slightly, but, he said, she's still "faster with the ball than most players without the ball."

Last off-season, Walker-Kimbrough's days in the gym were spent working to correct a problem that's lingered since her time starring for the Vikings: Having her toe on the line when she shot a 3-pointer.

"We always used to joke if she wore a size 11 instead of a size 12," Homziak said, "she'd probably make threes more."

So, during her workouts, Walker-Kimbrough made sure her foot was behind the line. She put up 3-point shots, deep ones, so that when she drifted forward during the game she'd still be behind the line. And she didn't just shoot standstill jumpers, either. They were game-like shots. Shots Walker-Kimbrough knew she'd have to hit when it counted.

She wanted to become a more efficient scorer, not just a high-volume shooter.

"She was always in the gym, she was always working," said Maryland senior Malina Howard. "I know sometimes you can go in the gym and ... not be thinking about taking shots that are realistic for the game. But she's always getting shots that are realistic for the game and getting muscle memory for shots she's actually taking in the game."

This season, Walker-Kimbrough is first in the country in 3-point percentage, shooting a staggering 54 percent from beyond the arc. That's a 20 percent improvement from last year, but good luck finding anyone who's surprised.

Howard's not. It didn't take her long to realize just how much time Walker-Kimbrough would be spending in the gym. When she stepped on campus as a freshman, it seemed like that's the first place she went. And then she didn't emerge all summer.

"She doesn't like to mess up," Howard said with a laugh. "She doesn't like to make turnovers, so she does whatever she can to minimize that. It's all in her competitive nature. She doesn't want to do anything to make it harder on her teammates. She doesn't want it to be her fault."

"She still has that drive not to fail," Homziak said. "She doesn't want to disappoint anyone in her family is a big thing. Every game that she steps on that floor, she doesn't want to disappoint her mother or her grandparents, and I think that really shows."

Walker-Kimbrough's transformation this season goes beyond the style she brings to the floor. When last year's talented senior class graduated, she knew she would have to take on a different role for this group, but vocal leadership doesn't come easily.

A dominant presence on the court, Walker-Kimbrough would just as soon stay in the shadows off it. She's soft-spoken, shy and has never been one to enjoy striking up a conversation with strangers. But her time at Maryland has brought out a different side of her.

Her mother has noticed the difference more than anyone.

"She's maturing," Kimbrough said. "When she first went to Maryland, she was very quiet. And now just to see her, to see her blossoming. She's such a mature person. It's such a beautiful, beautiful thing."

"She's more vocal," Howard said, "and I know that's something she says is outside of her comfort zone, so it's awesome to see her developing that being that she's not comfortable with it. She's a leader by example. She leads with her voice."

Part of the reason for the change was her to desire to help guide the Terrapins' freshman class. She remembered coming in as a first-year player, how scared she was. Nobody, she said, knows what to expect in that position. When freshmen hit the almost inevitable wall, it's harder to bounce back in a new environment.

Three years ago, Walker-Kimbrough had Alyssa Thomas and the rest of that year's senior class to help guide her. They weren't that vocal — something Walker-Kimbrough can relate to — but they set the tone by example. Walker-Kimbrough set out to emulate them this season, and it's paid off in a big way for Maryland.

"Just being a voice, being that leader, giving confidence to my teammates," Walker-Kimbrough said. "Freshmen need that. Not just freshmen, people need that. And knowing you have confidence in them goes a long way. I'm starting to learn that."

That confidence goes both ways. The night of the Michigan game, Walker-Kimbrough watched, often from the bench, as her teammates picked up her slack. It's not often that they have to — and Walker-Kimbrough responded by averaging 22.7 points in the last three regular season games — but it's good for her to know they can. And part of that is because of her.

Walker-Kimbrough, Howard said, brings out the best in all of them.

“Every team needs somebody like that,” Howard said. “You need someone like that who is always going to be pushing to be that competitive, who always wants to win no matter what the deal is.”

“Her desire to not lose,” Homziak said, “is unlike any other player I’ve coached.”

On the night of the Michigan game, Walker-Kimbrough helped the most from the sideline. She was the first person off the bench at every time out, running to halfcourt to greet her teammates as they walked off. When Jones drove the lane late in the third quarter, drawing a hard foul, Walker-Kimbrough leaped to her feet, her scream of “Yes!” echoing across the court.

Afterward, she talked about how good it was to see Maryland feed the hot hand, about her her teammates told her not to worry, that she would bounce back. It’s easy to have that kind of faith in Walker-Kimbrough. No matter how good she gets, how much she scores, how much she wins, she’ll never be satisfied.

“Shatori is very disciplined, very driven. I’m not shocked because Shatori has always been a person that when she puts her mind to something, she makes it happen. She’s a very, very driven person,” Andrea Kimbrough said, then chuckled, “and I don’t know where she gets that from.”