

Taveion Hollingsworth a shooting star at WKU, one that got away for UK

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(Photo: Steve Roberts-USA TODAY Sports)

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. — Looking back, Kathy Sweatt realized something was wrong when she began hearing several times a day from her son, who had gone to college a couple of hours away.

For Taveion Hollingsworth, as far as the public knew, his first year of college couldn't have gone much better. He rapidly became a basketball star at Western Kentucky University, earning national acclaim during what was statistically the best freshman season in the program's history.

Off the court, however, was different.

"The roughest year ever," Sweatt said.

The oldest of Sweatt's three sons had bouts of depression, his mother said, getting so homesick that he'd occasionally make unscheduled drives from Bowling Green back to his home in Lexington before returning to the demands of school and sports at WKU.

"It was only for a couple of hours," Sweatt said. "He had to get here. Just down, needing to see us. It was rough. ... Nobody knew he went through all that stuff."

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A first-year college student missing home is typical, of course, but Hollingsworth's situation as a freshman was not, and it's still not.

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There was much more to it for him.

And her name is Aubrey.

Hollingsworth's baby daughter will turn 2 next July. About the time she arrived, he was leaving town. Aubrey was born soon after Hollingsworth, at age 17, departed Lexington to begin his basketball career at WKU.

Life has “changed a lot,” since then, Hollingsworth said. “She’s made me mature. You can’t be a kid trying to take care of a kid.”

But the problem has often been that Hollingsworth hasn’t been able to be there to help take care of her. FaceTime calls from two hours away and occasional visits “whenever possible” can only accomplish so much.

“I try to keep that to myself,” he said. “I don’t want to bring emotion to anybody around me or to the team. But yeah, it hurts. I see pictures, videos, just everything. She’s growing up, growing teeth, a lot of things. It hurts me that’s happening while I’m not there. But I know everything is going to be OK in the long run.”



Western Kentucky basketball star Taveion Hollingsworth poses with his daughter Aubrey. The photo, posted to Hollingsworth's Instagram account, notes that daddy-daughter time for him is "the only pain reliever." (Photo: Contributed photo)

Growing up, Hollingsworth never planned on leaving Lexington for college. Even before it became clear at Paul Dunbar High School — where he’d win a state championship in 2016 and the state’s “Mr. Basketball” honor in 2017 — that he had a future in college basketball, he knew where he wanted to go.

Of course, he was a University of Kentucky basketball fan. Of course, he saw himself playing for the hometown Wildcats.

“All my life,” Hollingsworth said. “I grew up saying that I would get that offer (from UK).”

Only he never did.

Technically, Kentucky did recruit Hollingsworth, who averaged 28.3 points per game as a senior at Dunbar and finished his prep career as Lexington’s all-time boys’ basketball leader with 2,495 points. But the Wildcats never offered their local standout a scholarship.

More: [Examining full state of UK recruiting after losing nation's top player \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/kentucky/2018/11/20/kentucky-basketball-recruiting-james-wiseman-picks-memphis/2049605002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/kentucky/2018/11/20/kentucky-basketball-recruiting-james-wiseman-picks-memphis/2049605002/)

They “wanted other players,” Hollingsworth said, which is why Kentucky’s coaches asked him to wait and see what was available after other prospects higher on the list made decisions, according to Sweatt.

“That was it right there,” Sweatt said. “He was no longer worried about (UK) anymore. He could have waited. They would have offered him at the end of the year. But when you feel like you’re just as good as the people that they are recruiting, who wants to wait?”

It wasn’t just Kentucky’s coaching staff, to be fair, responsible for a large chip that Hollingsworth carried on his shoulder to Bowling Green. Recruiting services only had the 6-foot-2 guard as a three-star prospect, fifth in the state for 2017, according to 247 Sports’ composite ratings.

He ultimately signed with WKU over UAB prior to his senior prep season, choosing not to wait on Kentucky.

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Louisville had shown even less interest in him, he said.

“It doesn’t really bother me,” Hollingsworth said. “That was their choice, and I know if I play good and do what I have to do, they’ll regret not offering me. From this past year, my mom sent me a lot of stuff that people in Lexington were saying and all that. I always told her, ‘You’ve got to get over it. There’s no point anymore. It’s their fault. I made the decision I made,’ and like I said, they’re going to regret it.”



Western Kentucky guard Taveion Hollingsworth celebrates as he walks by West Virginia guard Chase Harler during this season's Myrtle Beach Invitational (Austin Anthony/Daily News via AP) (Photo: Austin Anthony, AP)

Sweatt said she is asked frequently in Lexington why her son isn't playing down the road in Rupp Arena.

"Especially last season. All the time," she said. "People will reach out to me all the time and be like, 'Kathy, did y'all go and did (John) Calipari try to talk to Tay?' People want to know why he's not there. ... I just tell them the truth. It was a slap in the face, him not being there. It was. Because that's where he should have been."

Rick Stansbury didn't recall the exact moment he knew, but he did realize what he had in Hollingsworth long before the recruit averaged 13.3 points per game last season, breaking Courtney Lee's freshman WKU season record with 506 points.

Perhaps it was in the summer of 2017, when Stansbury would get updates from WKU's conditioning coaches that Hollingsworth was winning every sprint and leading every drill as an incoming freshman.

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"I wanted to play," Hollingsworth recalled. "So I'm going to do what I have to do."

Or maybe it was back when Stansbury first arrived at WKU and heard that Dunbar had a player he needed to see.

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The scouting report on Hollingsworth was that he maybe wasn't the best 3-point shooter, but he had a creative and remarkably effective mid-range game on offense, "which is something you don't see a lot," Stansbury said.

"He's got floaters. He's got different ways around that rim to score," Stansbury said. "He can score a lot of different ways, which makes him difficult to guard."

Or maybe it was later in 2016, when Hollingsworth actually opted at one point to drop the Hilltoppers from consideration in his recruitment.

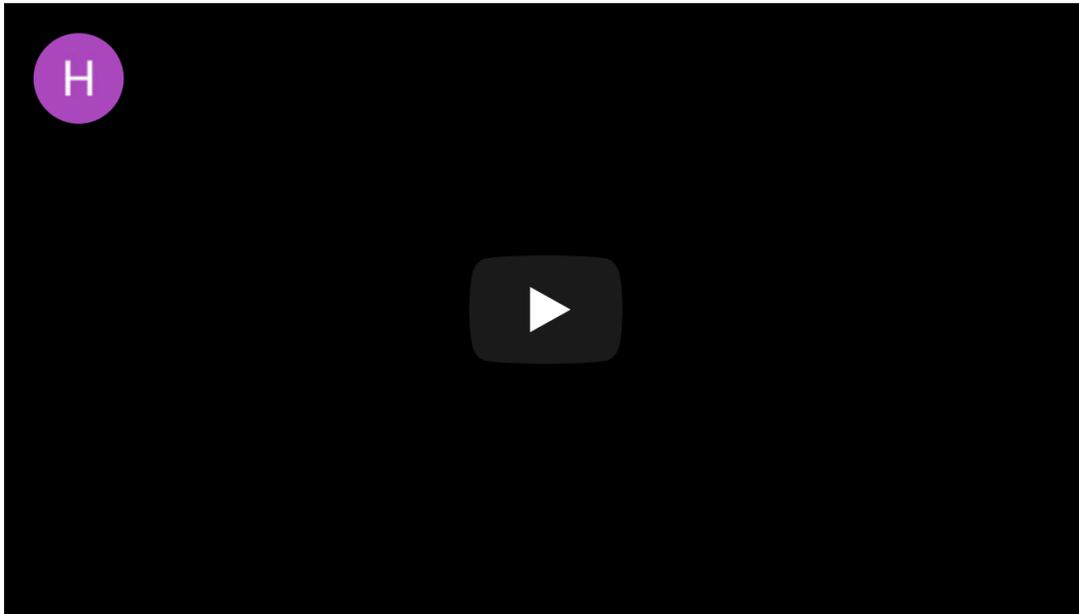
In response, Stansbury immediately drove to Lexington to stress to Hollingsworth how much he needed him to help build the program he wanted in Bowling Green.

“I had cut WKU off my list,” Hollingsworth said, “and coach wasn’t really having that. So he came to my practice and had an individual meeting with me and my mom. He said he was going to take over my recruitment. I liked that he actually came to the gym to say things to me and let me know that he really wanted me. That had me locked in.”

Hollingsworth signed in November 2016, ending his recruitment while joining Stansbury’s second WKU team, one that would eventually win 27 games and reach the NIT Final Four. Hollingsworth started all 38 games and played nearly 35 minutes per game.

You may like: [UK basketball signee Dontaie Allen draws large crowds across Kentucky \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/kentucky/2018/12/14/kentucky-basketball-uk-fans-across-state-embrace-signee-dontaie-allen/2258076002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/kentucky/2018/12/14/kentucky-basketball-uk-fans-across-state-embrace-signee-dontaie-allen/2258076002/)

“It was a perfect match for us right off the bat,” Stansbury said. “Not many freshmen get inserted and play the amount of minutes he was able to play last year. And to be the all-time leading scorer as a freshman in the history of this place, that’s a pretty good stat too. He’s been terrific for us.”



In his third college game, Hollingsworth scored 24 points. He scored in double-figures in 10 games in a row at one point, and in an NIT Tournament win at Oklahoma State, he scored 30, tying his own career-best from earlier in the season.

So far as a sophomore, Hollingsworth is leading WKU’s team with 15.9 points per game. He has topped 20 points in four of 13 games, including 22 in Saturday’s 83-76 upset of then-No. 16 Wisconsin.

Stansbury said Hollingsworth is his best perimeter defender and is improving as a 3-point shooter and in becoming a more vocal leader to help guide teammates that already look to him for leadership.

“We want good players that give us a chance to compete against the best in the country,” Stansbury said. “That’s who we think we are, and that’s who we want to be. Now are there kids in Kentucky that can help us do that? Absolutely. ... I love Kentucky guys, because they understand the value of basketball and what basketball means. Any time you can get a guy in-state that’s good enough to help you win and has got the kind of character you want, I think it’s a plus for everybody.”

Away from basketball, things have gotten easier. During his freshman year, Hollingsworth was able to see his daughter on FaceTime calls, but as a newborn, she couldn’t communicate much in response.

“But now, she’s on the move, doing it all,” Sweatt said. “And she looks just like him.”

That has helped smooth some of the rough patches from Hollingsworth’s first year at WKU. Aubrey and her mother have visited Bowling Green for games.

“I appreciate that she’s here,” Hollingsworth said. “She’s a blessing. She drives me to go harder.”

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This season's WKU team opened with high expectations, as Hollingsworth would be paired with five-star freshman big man Charles Basse.

Consistency, however, has been difficult to find for the Hilltoppers (7-6) who've beaten Wisconsin, West Virginia and Arkansas but lost to Missouri State, Indiana State and Troy.

There is a long way to go yet for this season as conference play begins, though, and confidence isn't in short supply, for the Hilltoppers or one of their stars, a sophomore from Lexington who grew up Big Blue and instead is with Big Red.

"I knew if I came here we'd be just as good a team as anybody else in the country," Hollingsworth said.

"We're not scared of anybody. We can beat anybody. And I like that."

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