

Grabbing the fruit: Virginia forward Mamadi Diakite works to put the ball back in Guinea's hands

• BY JOSH NEEDELMAN Mar 12, 2019

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Virginia forward Mamadi Diakite (right) smiles during the introductions before the start of a game earlier this season.
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS

Eyes open, the 14-year-old boy slapped his alarm clock silent. It was 5 a.m. He pulled himself out of bed, bounding into the streets of Conakry, Guinea, to run while the rest of the nation slept.

He ran because he had to. Because he needed to make up for lost time. Because if he wouldn't, who would?

“When I was young, I was observing everything, deeply. It bothered me,” he said.

A developing nation, Guinea has languished under the grip of corrupt politicians since declaring independence from France in 1958. Conakry is Guinea's capital, a port city known as the nation's cultural and economic hub. It is no Washington, D.C. Traffic lights are hard to find. While foreign investors have poured resources into building infrastructure in the nation's mountainous regions, where mostly interloper miners extract bauxite, the ore from which aluminum is derived, Conakry has been saddled by overpopulation.

And so the boy kept running, even when his breathing became labored and the miles added up. He ran through the streets he rarely trafficked in the daylight, streets stuffed with laborers scraping for work, hopeful to earn enough money to send their children to bed less hungry than the night before.

In a few years, he would earn a scholarship to play basketball at the University of Virginia. He would force himself into Coach Tony Bennett's rotation, bringing himself to the doorstep of his goal.

But first Mamadi Diakite needed to get through mile seven, which turned into mile eight, which gave way to mile nine. His legs grew heavy. A voice in his head piped up:

I got to make it. I got to make it.

He felt like stopping. With an NBA contract, Diakite believed, he could use his earnings to create infrastructure for sports programs and better education in Guinea. He could create opportunities for his people to be the masters of their own fates.

He could put the ball back in their hands.

The voice returned:

You're not done yet.

Like many Guineans, Aboubacar Sidiki Diakite and Aminata Kaba harbor a religious reverence for their country, a pride intensified by the constant churn of chaos perpetuated by outside forces.

Seeking to provide a counterbalance to their nation's ills, they both grew up to be doctors, and they expected their children, including their youngest, to find their own ways to give back to the impoverished nation.

It was on the first day of his first Ramadan that Mamadi Diakite realized his purpose. Muslims are obligated to fast from sunrise to sunset during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. And Diakite, then 13, couldn't do it. He cheated. His throat was dry. He chugged some water.

He was struck with a realization: "Wow, [people are] really going through that every day. I have like four meals a day."

Peeling back the cocoon of his comfortable life, where he had blossomed into a happy-go-lucky kid addicted to playing soccer and making friends, Diakite decided then he needed to do something to help his country.

One sport seemed the natural route to take. He had already been blessed with the right genetics. At age 14, the 6-foot-7 kid picked up a basketball for the first time.

His path was full of growing pains.

A lifelong soccer player, he found the mechanics of basketball vexing. Dribbling was fun, but that was about it. He struggled with proper shooting form: How, exactly, was he supposed to pull the funny orange sphere behind his head and throw it toward the basket?

Michael Jordan videos were his lone portal into the sport. He approached the game with wide eyes, thirsty to extract as much from his trainers as possible. That attitude rubbed some the wrong way. A doubter determined to put Diakite in his place challenged him to a game of one-on-one and emerged victorious.

Diakite wasn't the first Guinean to embark on this experiment, he said. Many had tried to use the sport as a vehicle to the United States in the past, only to fail and disappear.

But Diakite would not be dissuaded by the specter of irrelevancy. He kept training, pounding the ball into the pavement until his mother called him in for dinner. He worked on his jumper. Eventually, he challenged the same guy to a rematch.

"I beat him," Diakite said.

Experience level aside, Diakite possessed a pair of key basketball attributes: Height and athleticism. He needed to put on weight, sure, but he made opponents look like toddlers and the hardwood a trampoline.

The coaches at the Blue Ridge School in St. George, a boarding school home to many international students, deemed him a project worth undertaking. Two weeks before his 16th birthday, he boarded a plane for the United States. He enrolled as a second-semester sophomore in January 2014, despite being old enough to be a junior, so he could spend more time working on his English.

From the moment Diakite stepped on Central Virginia soil, he realized his preconceptions of America were greatly distorted. He had expected what he had seen in music videos: rappers parading through the streets, surrounded by pretty girls, dancing and, "getting money."

"People think it's like that. And when you come here: 'Oh! Hang on a second. Let me take a step back. What's going on here?'" Diakite said.

Playing in organized basketball for the first time, Diakite delighted in swatting the ball away from helpless, shorter opponents. But he also struggled to wrap his head around the intricacies of traveling. The rule book was vexing; referees' loose interpretation of it proved more so.

"He was like a baby giraffe," Blue Ridge coach Cade Lemcke said, "just put out there in the field."

The field was cavernous, sure. But it had its charms. One of Diakite's gifts was his buoyancy, his ability to pull people into his orbit. Lemcke got sucked in.

When his classmates left the boarding school for breaks, Diakite often shackled up with the Lemckes. He joined them on holidays and trips, for Thanksgiving and Easter Sunday. On a trip to California, Diakite joined the family for a day at Knott's Berry Farm theme park. The day was full of smiles, even though he exceeded the height limit for much of the rides.

Thousands of miles from home, Diakite's connection to his family was limited to phone calls and texts. In the Lemckes, he found unconditional support.

"[My kids] were 4, 6 and 8, when he was here, so they would tackle him and try to wrestle him like they would a big brother," Lemcke said. "He wants to have fun with everybody and enjoy that time. It was natural for him."

It was that charm that led to Blue Ridge soccer coach Matt Bennett asking him to join his team in the fall of 2014. A striker, Diakite was one of the Barons' top scorers and most popular teammates.

The coach saw a different side of Diakite when he invited him to speak to his history class. His spindly legs hanging off the edge of the auditorium stage, Diakite methodically recounted Guinea's brief political history, one brutal leader after the next.

"I just got a sense that his family instilled in him that, 'We're lucky and it's up to us. We're a very fortunate family,'" Matt Bennett said. "There's almost like a sense of duty to him to be a spokesman for his country."

After his second basketball season, during which he averaged 12 points, eight rebounds and four blocked shots, leading Blue Ridge to the Virginia Independent Schools Athletic Association Division II state championship, it was deemed Diakite was ready for the next step.

He passed his remaining classes at Blue Ridge in the summer of 2015 and reclassified to his original age group, so he could join Virginia for a redshirt season.

The transition proved challenging.

"I'm telling you, if you're not tough, you're going to give up," Diakite said.

His mind sometimes wandered there. The 200-year-old university founded by Thomas Jefferson, with its Rotunda and its Lawn and its ambitiously designed buildings full of high-achieving students, was a culture shock for the kid from Guinea.

So were the expectations of him as a Division I basketball player. He had to attend class, attend practice and be an active student. He pushed himself to mimic Isaiah Wilkins, the hyperenergetic Cavaliers forward who won ACC Defensive Player of the Year as a senior in 2018. He had to make sacrifices.

Diakite had grown up praying five times a day, but his schedule at Virginia didn't allow time for spiritual reflection.

"It was a challenge," former Virginia assistant coach and current UNC Charlotte head coach Ron Sanchez said. "I don't know if he knew what he was getting into."

He found a way. He started wearing a bracelet that read, simply, 'Guinea,' peering down at his wrist when he needed a shot of motivation.

And he found a mentor. Mamadi Diane, whose father is from Guinea, was a standout Virginia guard from 2005-09, and after a brief career overseas, returned to Grounds in 2017 to enroll in the Darden School of Business. During school breaks, he flies to Guinea, where he works for his family's company, Consolidated Mining Corporation, which aims to level the playing field in Guinea's bauxite sector by employing local workers.

That Diakite and Diane shared a first name was a fun starting point. That their fathers knew of each other from life in Guinea brought them closer together. That they shared a passion to help the West African nation succeed made them brothers.

In time alone with Diakite, Diane saw shades of the caring spirit of the Guinean people. In Guinea, Diane said, he once saw six drivers pull their cars over to the side of the road to help a man whose vehicle needed pushing. When the Diane family made a big pot of rice and sauce for the workers tending to their garden, the laborers called on their friends working at nearby locations to share the food with; never mind that they seldom consume three meals a day.

“When we talk about that attitude and [Diakite] being personable and fun loving, I think it comes from, [Guinea], where you see that,” Diane said. “The people there, even though there is so little, I think the people are happy and always willing to help people.”

That same spirit sometimes made Diakite late to class early on at UVa; he couldn’t walk through Grounds without stopping to say hello to passerby. And it’s also the reason why he attracted a legion of supporters dedicated to pushing him forward.

“He’s always had a real joyful, playful spirit about him,” Tony Bennett said. “It’s contagious.”

“The old adage is, it takes a village,” said T.J. Grams, the Cavaliers’ basketball team’s director of academics. “Mamadi has had a village at UVa.”

With Bennett running a program built on selflessness, Diakite found innumerable allies. Grams, for example, was tasked with organizing his daily class schedule. Sanchez worked to find ways to harness Diakite’s natural athleticism into the Pack Line defense. Diakite’s evolving grasp of English proved a barrier.

“We may say a certain thing and expect [him] to know it, and he’s looking at us like, ‘Coach, what does that mean?’” assistant coach Jason Williford said. “Just pull him aside and go, ‘Do you understand what a stagger is?’”

The staff’s patience paid off. After providing minutes as a reserve in his first two active seasons, Diakite has been a regular part of Virginia’s rotation in 2018-19. He started 17 of the team’s 30 regular season games, and at one point had blocked a shot in 20 consecutive contests, the longest such program streak since Cavaliers legend Ralph Sampson did it for 55 straight games from 1981-83.

Diakite is expected to stay at Virginia through 2019-20 for his final season of college eligibility. With redshirt senior Jack Salt moving on from the program, Diakite is likely to slide in as the team’s starting center next season.

“He has a chance to be one of the best defensive players in college basketball next season,” said Sam Vecenie, who covers the NBA Draft for The Athletic.

Diakite knows his stock is rising. He’s embraced his bigger role this season with a wide smile, as can be seen during his postgame media appearances. While many players slog through interviews, prioritizing brevity over substance, Diakite looks reporters in the eyes, taking his time to find the right words.

He can see the endpoint. With an NBA contract (the 2018-19 minimum for an NBA rookie is \$838,464), he said, he can help create infrastructure and feed his people: “With \$10,000 a month, I can take care of a lot of things in Guinea.”

The grind has worn on him, though. He can hear Guinea in his own voice, his accent carrying the sound of Conakry. But he misses his family. His father has seen him play at John Paul Jones Arena once. Sometimes, late at night, he’ll return to his room after a full day of school and basketball and feel consumed by doubts: *This is too much for me.*

“I have my family telling me. ‘Come on. Come on. You can’t be close to the fruit and not take it. You’ve got to seize it,’” Diakite said, grabbing at imaginary fruit. “Not many people get these kinds of opportunities back home. They’re all looking up to you, like [you’re the] president, in a sense.”

And then he’ll sleep his fears away, only to open his eyes the next morning and do it all again. Guinea is depending on him.

The ball is in his hands.

On the eve of another NCAA Tournament, Virginia guard Kyle Guy is taking back his story

• BY JOSH NEEDELMAN Mar 21, 2019

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Taped on the wall above Kyle Guy's bed is a reminder of defeat.

In the photo, snapped last March, Guy is deflated, hunched and with tears welling in his eyes. In the background, UMBC's players are joyous. They are hugging and screaming. Two players are preparing to chest bump, meeting for mid-air ecstasy, after the Retrievers became the first No. 16 seed in men's NCAA Tournament history to knock off a No. 1 seed.

The photo captures the magic of the NCAA Tournament in a frame. The underdog knocking off the top dog. The unrealistic made real.

For Virginia, however, the photo came to define failure. And for Guy, it cut even deeper.

What outsiders couldn't see was the pressure bearing down on Guy, two decades of doubts coming into focus in the form of public humiliation. A 6-foot-2, 175-pound guard, Guy doesn't look like a star basketball player. He's the anti-Zion Williamson.

If sports lets fans live vicariously through larger-than-life heroes, Guy seems to have slipped through the cracks, and people don't like him for it. The UMBC loss provided proof of his fallibility.

It also was Guy's breaking point.

He had been battling anxiety for much of the season, fighting through double teams and panic attacks, and after the UMBC loss, he burst into tears. He returned to Charlottesville after the tournament intent on finding the root of his anxiety, and that included owning what happened. He found a newspaper with that infamous image on the cover and purchased it, displaying it in his room so he'd never have to look far for motivation.

Friday afternoon, Guy and the No. 1-seeded Cavaliers kick off the 2019 NCAA Tournament at Colonial Life Arena in Columbia, South Carolina. On the other end of the court will be No. 16-seed Gardner-Webb, this year's Cinderella hopeful. Much of the nation will watch with wide eyes, giddy to see Virginia choke again, to see Guy fail.

The Indianapolis, Indiana, native knows this. As he's continued to work on his mental health, he's heard the "UMBC" chants in opposing arenas, and, in an era when the door to college athletes has been opened through social media, seen the trolls in his Twitter mentions entertaining the fantasy of punching him in the face.

He has little interest in proving them wrong, though. He's more interested in taking his story back.

"We're ready to put on a show this year, so we can talk about something else," Guy said.

On a weekend back home last spring, he handed his father a note. A former Marine, Joe Guy is not one to speak openly about his feelings. He once confused a panic attack for a heart attack. Then he read the letter, which detailed his son's inner narrative.

"Not everyone knows, but you've been taking medication for your anxiety attacks all season. You've kept it a secret because you didn't want to be viewed as weak. You were worried people might think you aren't built for this," Guy wrote in the letter he later shared on Facebook. "They don't understand you couldn't smile through the latter half of the season because the anxiety and pressure was eating at you, but you still kept pushing."

Positive comments flooded in. As a new season approached last fall, Guy continued to speak openly about his anxiety, following in the footsteps of former teammate Isaiah Wilkins. He shared with reporters that he was still journaling his feelings, and he hosted a mental health panel for Virginia athletes on Grounds.

A third team All-American last season, the junior led the team in scoring through much of the 2018-19 regular season. But his anxiety still weighed on him. He had a panic attack before one of the first games of the season, his mother, Katy Fitzgerald said, and she spent much of the team's nonconference slate in Charlottesville hotels, the eight-hour drive from Indianapolis becoming routine.

"Sometimes I left on Tuesday, came back Wednesday then went back on the weekend," she said.

Guy's fiancée, Alexa Jenkins, spent several weeks in Charlottesville with him, too, Fitzgerald said. On Jan 2, Jenkins uploaded a video to YouTube of herself and Guy reading some of the mean tweets he'd been tagged in.

"Virginia's Kyle Guy might as well be Grayson Allen, in other words, someone everyone should hate," one read.

"Not actively suggesting, but if somebody wants to casually take Kyle Guy out during halftime, I would not be mad," read another.

"Those are the ones that make me mad," Jenkins said in the video. "Like, how would you like it if you had 20 people saying, 'I hope you get hit by a car?' Because people say that to you. Like, 'I hope you get punched in the face.' 'I hope you die.'"

Lost in the hoopla of March Madness, with the office pools and bracket busting and with an ongoing federal corruption investigation shadowing the sport, is that the players are amateur athletes, just kids on the court playing a game they love.

Virginia players were the object of jokes in the wake of their tournament defeat, but they also received death threats. They were national punching bags, and Guy seemed to get the worst of it.

"If you're a fan, you're supposed to ride with the team through wins and losses. Maybe we lost some fans, but if we lost some fans, they weren't real fans," said De'Andre Hunter, who wrapped his arm around Guy as the guard cried into his jersey after the UMBC loss.

After Virginia's 83-45 win over Morgan State on Dec. 3, Guy addressed the media wearing a blue hoodie that read: "Just a kid from Indianapolis" in gray lettering. He flashed the smile that struck a chord with the family and friends in attendance that follow him to every game.

"They mean the world to me, and that's why I put on this jersey every night," Guy said. "For people like them."

He was in less-friendly territory Nov. 28. When he stepped onto the court in College Park, Maryland, for pregame warmups, the Terrapins' faithful reminded Guy of what happened last March. They chanted "UMBC" and flashed signs bearing that photo.

What they didn't know was Guy, who scored 18 points in Virginia's 76-71 win, had become friendly with the image, sleeping under it every night. In the months that followed, as the Cavaliers rolled to their second consecutive ACC regular season championship, Guy made the image his Twitter avatar. He retweeted references to UMBC's historic win. He encouraged former Retrievers guard K.J. Maura to attend the Cavaliers' game at Duke on Jan. 19 and stand among the Cameron Crazies, as some gleeful Blue Devils fans had called for.

After the Maryland game, he confirmed a reporter's suspicion that the team was playing with more determination this season. He was asked to elaborate.

"I think everybody here knows why," Guy said.

His mother has noticed a difference in recent weeks. His voice no longer sounds flat and empty. He calls home less frequently. In an early-March sitdown with his uncle, Bryan Patterson, who also is a former Marine, Guy learned the phrase, "Calm is contagious," and wove the sentiment into his life.

But there are still challenges.

On March 14, Guy scored 29 points in Virginia's win over N.C. State in the ACC Tournament quarterfinal, but he couldn't shoot them to victory in the following night's semifinal loss to Florida State.

Afterwards, he sat at his locker in the Spectrum Center, the same Charlotte, North Carolina, arena his family had slogged out of a year earlier, tears dripping from their eyes.

"I would say you can throw this on there, too, because we had expectations and goals and aspirations," Guy said. "There's only one way to go when you fall down, is back up."

And then he packed up his uniform, plopped in his earbuds and boarded the flight back to Charlottesville, leaving behind the sight of the defeat that no longer defines him.

FEATURED

Higher calling: Jay Huff's faith has been tested — and validated — at Virginia

- BY JOSH NEEDELMAN Feb 7, 2019
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Virginia's forward Jay Huff dunks the ball against Virginia Tech earlier this season.
ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS

Jay Huff was not ready to sleep. He was lying under the covers, his head resting on his pillow, but he couldn't shake the memory of earlier that night. The referee in his high school game had gotten it wrong. Blown the call. *How could that happen?*

His father, Mike, took a seat on the edge of his bed in their Durham, North Carolina home and lent him an ear. Then he drew on his faith and found a familiar story. Jesus Christ got the ultimate bad call, he said. He was sinless but sentenced to death anyway, and accepted his fate.

Huff quieted his mind and listened.

"If we're going to model Christlikeness," Mike said, "this is one way we can do it."

It hasn't always been easy for Huff to accept his circumstances since joining the Virginia men's basketball team in 2016. The 7-foot-1 "unicorn" has the hops to dunk from the free-throw line and the shooting stroke to swish jumpers from anywhere on the court, but he redshirted his first year and rode the bench for much of his second.

He could've transferred. Marshall coach Dan D'Antoni openly campaigned for his services. "Send him down to us," he declared, only partly in jest. But Huff chose Virginia over Duke and others for a reason. In the 'one-and-done' era of Zion Williamson and R.J. Barrett, social media shade and personal brands, Huff connected with Virginia coach Tony Bennett, a devout Christian who runs a program that rewards blue-collar hard work.

So he bided his time. He steeled himself a practice warrior, and if he was going to sit on the bench with the reserves, he made sure to be the loudest one. He explored Grounds and got to know his classmates. He joined UVa's Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship, finding balance and friendship in weekly bible study sessions with his core group.

It is during those meetups, in the college room in the college house, with the worn couch that Huff folds his 7-foot-1 frame into, his knees several inches above the rest, where he finds clarity. Away from the crowds, cameras and fans clamoring for him to receive more playing time, he remembers his purpose.

"He wants to honor God," said Justin Mooney, a member of Huff's core group.

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To say Huff was built to be a basketball player wouldn't be completely accurate. Yes, his father, Mike, spent years as director of the Michael W. Krzyzewski Human Performance Lab at Duke. And when Huff was ready, Mike put his son through some of the rigorous training he fine-tuned on Blue Devils athletes.

But for Huff, basketball was a window into something greater. Mike challenged him to ponder how he could honor God through the game.

"The Bible says, 'Whatever you do, work it with all your heart, as if you're working for the Lord,'" Mike said.

Huff embraced that sentiment. When his father challenged him to make 500 shots in a row, Huff parked himself in front of the hoop, sans a rebounder, throwing up shot after shot.

"You're not going to believe it," Huff told his dad. "I made 499 in a row, and missed No. 500."

His stroke grew in sync with his body, and soon Krzyzewski came calling. Playing in front of the Cameron Crazies was a longtime dream of Huff, who attended the 2010 Final Four, when Duke won its fourth national championship.

He probably would've gone to Duke, his parents said, had it not been for the connection he developed with Bennett.

Huff and Bennett, who declined to comment for this story through a team spokesperson, bonded over their shared faith, among other things. By the time Huff and his parents visited John Paul Jones Arena and saw the program's biblically derived five pillars — Humility, Passion, Unity, Servanthood and Thankfulness — mounted on the wall in Virginia's locker room, his mind was made up.

He had grown up a Blue Devil, and it would be easier to claim minutes at Duke, where flash is placed at a higher premium than at Virginia. But Huff's journey is about more than basketball.

The Durham kid was a natural Cavalier.

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Huff met many of his closest friends at Voyager Academy High School through the school's Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter, even though most were not athletes.

He found a similar environment with his Chi Alpha core group at UVa. That he was a 4-star recruit with NBA dreams was of little consequence.

Sure, his new friends needed to crane their necks to meet his eyes. But once there, they analyzed the intricacies of the New Testament, not the Pack Line defense.

Basketball only came up when Huff revealed one week that he'd have to miss an upcoming Chi Alpha event because of practice.

Kiran Menon, a member of Huff's core group, looked up at Huff:

"What practice?"

An unplanned run in with Bennett at Chipotle elicited curiosity from another Chi Alpha kid: "Who was that?" On a later occasion, the same friend confused the 6-foot-10, 250-pound Jack Salt for a team manager.

"That's big for me," Huff said. "A lot of my friends back home couldn't care less that I play basketball."

The redshirt sophomore recalled those memories from the stage of Charlottesville's University Baptist Church on Jan. 14, microphone in hand. It was Chi Alpha's weekly 'Monday Night Live' meeting, and it was Huff's turn to give his personal testimony.

He was bestowed the introduction of a basketball star:

"And now, No. 30, Jay Hufffffff!" The church erupted. Orange and blue streamers flew in the air, and friends brandished signs.

It was the kind of spotlight he was craving the evening of Nov. 10, 2017, with UNC Greensboro at John Paul Jones Arena for Virginia's season opener and Huff's first game as an active college player.

He waited on the edge of the bench, anticipating Bennett's signal, but it never came.

* * *

Huff grew up in a church, but his faith was solidified in a Durham Dick's Sporting Goods. Scanning the shelves for a size 15 shoe that was not there, he let out a sigh.

"This world was not made for me," he said, exasperated. His father offered a rebuttal.

"You weren't made for this world," Mike said.

That sentiment has stuck with him.

"I believe that I was created for God's kingdom," Huff said. "I'm obviously supposed to live [on Earth]. But it's not home."

So Huff didn't sink after the season opener. And he didn't soar when, three days later, he converted the first six field goals of his career, scoring 16 points and blocking five shots in his college debut against Austin Peay.

But his faith was tested as the season wore on.

After UNC Greensboro, the next DNP was against Rhode Island. He got another for the Wisconsin game, and yet another against West Virginia. Huff was an afterthought during ACC play, his court time mostly relegated to practice and garbage time. Huff was an observer as the Cavaliers won ACC regular season and conference titles, his warm-up shirt guarding his jersey.

“It was weighing him down,” Mooney said.

Few have questioned Huff’s ability to score against ACC opponents; it’s his defense that has cut into playing time for a coach with higher expectations than most. In high school, it wasn’t necessary to master the finer points of that side of the game. Bigger and stronger than the rest, he needed only to sit back and block shots when they came. At 232 pounds, his gangly frame has proved easy for some ACC opponents to exploit.

In lieu of court time, Huff contributed in other ways. In meetups with Bennett, the two prayed for the team. And when program chaplain George Morris missed some of the Cavaliers’ earlier games this season, Huff recited prayers for his teammates, inspiring their play while his continued defensive struggles limited his.

“God puts people in a unique position to make an impact,” Mike said. “That’s why I believe he’s at Virginia; to make an impact on that campus.”

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Something clicked at the start of ACC play this season. Huff scored 11 points in 10 minutes at Clemson, and seven points in 11 minutes against Virginia Tech. Finally on the court, Huff launched 3-pointers over outstretched arms, leapt for dunks that made defenders look like high schoolers.

Bennett commended Huff’s play in the team’s 66-65 overtime win at N.C. State on Jan. 29. The redshirt sophomore converted a key three-point play in overtime, but not before a sequence on defense that brought the Cavaliers’ bench to its feet.

Showing on a screen, Huff forced a loose ball and dove to the ground. He couldn’t scoop it, but picked himself up and sprinted from halfcourt to the low block, swatting away an N.C. State alley-oop. PNC Arena groaned.

“That’s a winning player. Those are winning plays,” Bennett said.

Five days before the win over the Wolfpack, the redshirt sophomore met up with his core group. They went around the room, each sharing their ‘high’, ‘low’ and ‘grow’ from the preceding week. Huff hesitated.

“I don’t know that I have a high this week,” he said.

“Well, you’re getting more playing time. That’s a high,” one guy said.

“Yes, yes, you’re right,” Huff said, nodding his head. More minutes, after all, means a greater platform to share his beliefs.

The circle moved on. One guy lamented his girl problems. Another spoke of his desire for more work-life balance. Then it was time to pray.

The guys stowed away their cell phones and settled into the chairs and couches, the chatter giving way to silence. Huff leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees, like all the rest. He closed his eyes and listened.

