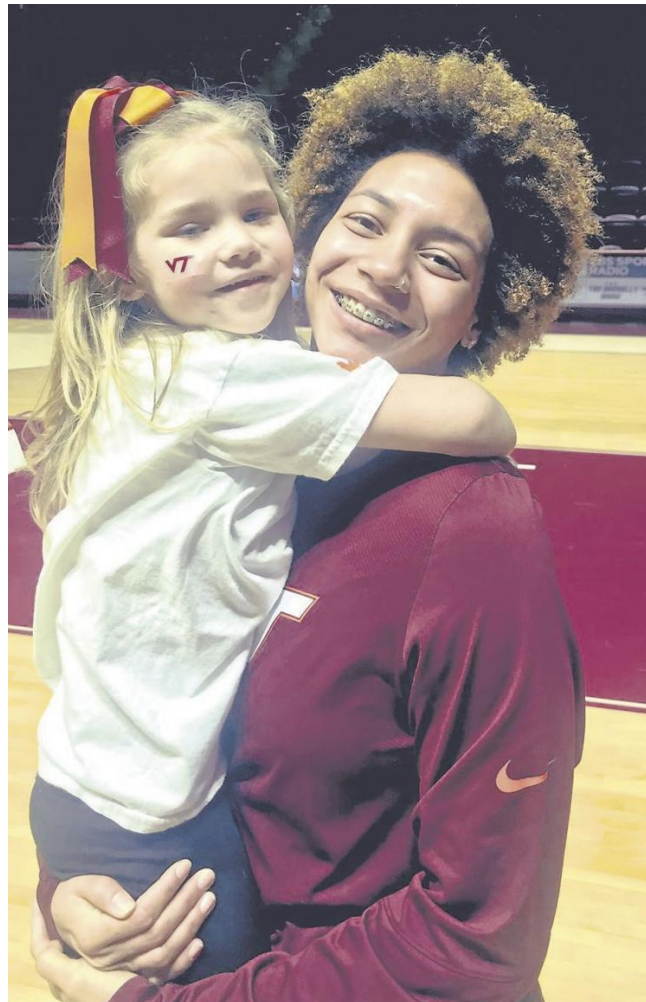


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EDITOR'S PICK SPOTLIGHT

The Name Game: Martinsville's Emery Taylor finds a hoops hero and friend in Virginia Tech's Taylor Emery

By Cara Cooper
Mar 14, 2019



Martinsville's Emery Taylor (left) found a hoops hero in Virginia Tech women's basketball player Taylor Emery (right), but a simple meet-and-greet between the similarly named players turned into a close friendship beyond the basketball court.

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It was towards the end of the basketball season last year when Martinsville's Brooks Taylor noticed a familiar name on the Virginia Tech women's basketball roster.

Taylor had never met Hokies' guard Taylor Emery, but the name stood out because his 4-year-old daughter's name is... Emery Taylor.

At the beginning of this season, Brooks Taylor, who works as the Director of Public Relations at Martinsville Speedway, messaged the sports information director of the team asking if it would be possible for Taylor Emery to meet his daughter after a game and possibly take a photo. But that one photo opportunity turned into more games and eventually season tickets, with the similarly named duo meeting up at the end of every game to chat, talk basketball, and build a friendship that both know will last beyond Taylor Emery's time in Blacksburg.

Since that first meeting between Emery Taylor and Taylor Emery, Brooks Taylor said just about every Thursday he'll pick his daughter up from school and they'll make the trip up to Blacksburg for the game. They've only missed one this season.

At the end of the contest, little Emery Taylor will wait on the sideline for her cue, and then heads onto the court or the back hall to wait for Taylor Emery and Hokies' freshman Dara Mabrey to come out of the locker room.

"They talk for a while, and then we come back here and get ready for the next one," Brooks Taylor said. "It's been really fun for both of us really."

Emery Taylor even has her own specially made jersey.

“The ‘Taylor-Emery-Taylor’ jersey we call it,” he said.

Taylor Emery, the Hokies senior who average 18.7 points per game this season on the way to a Second Team All-ACC selection, has been the perfect role model for Emery Taylor. And not just because of her play on the court.

“Taylor is awesome. Not just as a basketball player, obviously, but as a person,” Brooks Taylor said. “She’s a great role model. There’s probably nobody that I can think of that I would rather have as her (Emery’s) hero and role model. So that’s pretty cool too.”

She’s even passed on some of her hoops knowledge to her young protégé.

“She’s good. She passes a lot,” Emery Taylor said. “(She’s teaching) dribbling with my left hand and dribbling with my right hand... How to shoot goals.”

Being a role model to young players like Emery Taylor is important to Taylor Emery. She said she’ll often get requests from parents on social media to meet their kids after games, and even has little girls who recognize her in the mall.

Growing up herself idolizing WNBA star Maya Moore, Taylor Emery knows what it means to be a young athlete with hoops heroes.

“Knowing that there are kids out there who love you, not only for basketball but for some reason they have some type of connection towards you, it means a lot for me,” she said. “It means a lot that I am being a positive role model for kids all over the country.”

Getting to meet a hero has been special to Emery Taylor, but at the same time it’s also helped make the college experience better for Taylor Emery, who has eight nieces and nephews, all under the age of 12. Being in college away from her home in Tampa, Florida means being away from that big family, so having Emery Taylor around has made Blacksburg feel a bit more like home.

“Honestly, being away at college, ~~the way you end up happy is having something feel like home,~~” she said. “Being around kids is what I’ve always been used to. It’s what I basically grew up on, so just having that here, she reminded me a lot of my little niece who is in Florida right now, and it feels like home.”

“Knowing there are people here who aren’t just in it for you with basketball but they’re more like family. That’s what she’s become to me, like my little niece.”

Taylor Emery’s time on the court in Blacksburg is coming to an end, but the friendship between her and Emery Taylor will definitely go beyond her time as a Hokie.

Emery Taylor had one request at the Hokies’ final home game on March 3.

“I want to go to Sweet Frog with her and the whole team,” Emery Taylor said.

She doesn’t know it yet, but Brooks Taylor is hopeful that will happen. Emery Taylor’s birthday is in May, and the plan is that Taylor Emery will be able to make an appearance at her birthday party at the frozen yogurt spot.

And while Taylor Emery won’t be on the Hokies’ squad next season, the Taylors plan to keep their season tickets. Mabrey, Emery Taylor’s other close friend on the team, is just a freshman this season.

“So that pretty much locks me in for three more years, at least. And then it’ll be somebody else after that,” Brooks Taylor said. “They’ve all been great, but especially Taylor and Dara. They both have really made it a point to see Emery and talk to her and hug her and just make her feel special. It’s been really, really cool and a lot of fun to see that too.”

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“I definitely plan to stay in touch with her parents and be able to come see her whenever I can,” Taylor Emery said. “I take pride in building relationships with people and I think that’s how you’re happy in life. Building relationships with people, that’s what means the most, that’s what I take pride in being able to do.

“She’s a great kid, she’s so cute, she’s so adorable. That’s what I love being. I love being a role model for kids, for little girls and having them learn that it’s not all about basketball, it’s not all about academics, it’s about being a good person.”

And who knows, maybe one day Emery Taylor will get to be the role model Taylor Emery was for her. Right now, that’s her dream. When asked if she’d like to play college basketball one day, Emery Taylor’s answer was simple.

“Yes,” she said. “At Virginia Tech.”

Cara Cooper is a sports writer for the Martinsville Bulletin. She can be reached at cara.cooper@martinsvillebulletin.com

Cara Cooper

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EDITOR'S PICK SPOTLIGHT

Bassett's Ashley Crouch completes 'ultimate endurance test' at Western States 100-miler

This race starts at an elevation of 6,200 feet and climbs another 17,000 before reaching its peak. Descending is nearly 23,000 feet.

By Cara Cooper cara.cooper@martinsvillebulletin.com

Jul 19, 2019



Bassett's Ashley Crouch (center) crosses the finish line of the Western States 100-mile Endurance Run last month in Auburn, California, with her crew (left) Anna Walker, Brandy Arnold, and (back) Travis Crouch

Contributed photo

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The Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run has never been for the faint of heart. In its 45 years of existence it was never meant to be easy. Runs of that distance never are. Starting in Squaw Valley, Calif., just northwest of Lake Tahoe, and following the Western States Trail, the run is roughly the distance from Bassett to Danville and back.

It starts at an elevation of 6,200 feet and climbs another 17,000 before reaching its peak. If the climbing wasn't tough enough, the way down may be tougher, descending nearly 23,000 feet before the race is said and done.

Seventy-eight miles in, after running for nearly a full day, racers are expected to ford the American River. The website for the race states, in no uncertain terms, "much of this territory is accessible only by foot, horse, or helicopter."

More than half of the race is run after dark. Temperatures throughout the distance can vary from as low as 20 degrees – even in June, the website says snow conditions could force a route change – to well over 100.

This year's race has a finish rate of 86 percent, the highest since 1977, when only one runner competed. Beginning at 5 a.m. on June 29, runners must have completed all 100 miles by no later than 11 a.m. on June 30.

Bassett's Ashley Crouch finished it with just enough time to spare.

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Crouch was one of 319 finishers of this year's Western States Endurance Run, running the 100 miles in 29 hours, 31 minutes. The race that calls itself one of the "ultimate endurance tests in the world" was a true test for Crouch. Training mostly around Henry

County and Roanoke, she was unable to train for the high altitudes of the race – such elevations are not seen anywhere on the east coast — and she had severe altitude sickness for the first 50 miles.

“During this particular race, the biggest race of my entire life,” she said, “the first 50 miles of this race I spent with a massive headache and throwing up the whole time. It was pretty rough.”

Making the 30-hour cutoff was a risk for Crouch early as she battled sickness and tried to make her way to the lower terrains. Aid stations along the way offered some respite and help from paramedics, who offered her food and advice on how to control her stomach.

“That’s not something you can train for here. We just don’t have something like that here,” she said.

Crouch had completed one other 100-mile race, in Abingdon in 2018. Running that race got her a ticket into the lottery for Western States, but one ticket was a long shot to get chosen to go to California.

“Some people have 15, 27, 50 tickets in there, and I had one ticket in there,” she said. “I think there was about 50,000 tickets in the bucket, and I think there was a 1.27 percent chance of having your name drawn off of one ticket, and mine just happened to be drawn.

“There are people that have been entered in this lottery for five, six, seven years and don’t get in, and for some reason my name was drawn.”

The scary 1-miler

Training wasn’t much more than Crouch was already used to. An ultra-marathon enthusiast, she has done a number of 50K races, and she estimates about 20 ultra marathons, as well as the Blue Ridge Double Marathon.

Crouch's longest training run for Western States was on the Appalachian Trail in Roanoke, running what hikers have dubbed the "Triple Crown Loop" of three mountain hikes – McAfee Knob, Tinker Cliffs, and Dragon's Tooth – that in all add up to about 40 miles for a single day, with 8,000 feet of elevation change.

The longer runs are actually far less daunting to Crouch than a regular 5K, races that put pressure on the runner to go as fast as possible. She said the only time she ever has been nervous for a race was before a 1-mile run at Martinsville Speedway last year.

"I only had to run one mile, and I thought I was going to die," she said. "Like, who does this? Runs really fast all the time for just one mile? That's crazy to me."

Even marathons, the 26.2-miler that has become the staple race of distance running, is too short for her liking.

"The older I get the harder it gets to run really fast," she said. "So one day I realized that in ultra running you don't even have to run really fast, you've just got to run really far. And it was easier for me to run really far than it was go really fast, so it just kind of works out for me.

"I think it's a little bit crazy."

Late to running

Crouch, 38, wasn't always crazy about running. She actually just started about six years ago. After she quit smoking, she gained about 30 pounds and admitted she was "miserable" for a time. After being gifted an old treadmill, she realized running wasn't as terrible as she may have thought. so she moved from the treadmill to the trails. But she couldn't get anyone to go with her.

It was okay, though, because running alone proved to be a blessing.

~~"We had seven kids at home at the time, and I was thinking to myself, 'No one wants to go with me,'" she said. "That was the first time I was alone in forever. So that's how running started for me. I got to be alone for the first time in 20 years. And it just~~

escalated. Now all of my kids are runners, and we get to do it together and it's really fun."

Exercise as therapy has always been the case for Crouch, and despite early struggles, the Western States run was therapeutic for her. The race wasn't really about the running. It never is. It's about getting comfortable in your own head.

Training your mind

To get ready for Western States, Crouch spent a lot of time on the treadmill to get more experience for extreme downhills that she can't find on trails around the area. She said that process meant more time to catch up on her TV. She's pretty sure she saw everything Netflix has put out in the past five months.

But it's important to let your mind wander and not think about the pain of each step and additional mile. Training your mind for races is often much more important than training your body.

"Your body is going to hurt. Your feet are going to hurt. You're going to get tired, and you have to understand that," Crouch said. "But the second that you kind of let your mind wander where it shouldn't, you're done. So you have to make sure you stay very comfortable in your brain within yourself. And it's fine. I think that's the biggest challenge is the mental challenge. It's not even the physical challenge, it's just staying happy mentally.

"I kind of just zone out a little bit. Running is like the one time in my life I don't have to concern myself with what's going on around me so I just zone it all out and just go out for a run."

Taking off the shoes

Twenty nine hours is a long time. ~~Quite long, especially when running the entire time, as~~ Crouch knows. There's no sleeping during a 100-mile race, and no sitting down for a meal. Even at the aid stations where they have food and water, it's dangerous to sit for too long or your body becomes too comfortable. Discomfort is the most important thing.

Even after finishing the race, the discomfort continues. Crouch said her first thoughts after finishing weren't joyful. When asked what was going through her mind as she crossed the finish line, she said it was simply "Can I please take my shoes off?"

"That's really all I want," she said with a laugh. "I just want to take my shoes off. That's it."

And the weeks after the race aren't really joyful either. While a runner's high is definitely a real thing — "It's really funny because my kids will tell you after a long, really fun race like that I have a runners high for about four days and I really, really love them a whole lot" — once the high wears off it's time for the real world to set back in again.

Post-race depression

Athletes will often say that after training for weeks, months, and years, after completing a championship season or a long career, when the celebrations are done it can be tough to move on. What do you do next? Where do you go from there?

"It's very depressing," Crouch said. "I was so depressed for about two weeks because I had all this free time now and there was nothing filling it because I was running for hours and hours and hours a day and now nothing.

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"So it was actually quite depressing. It was a weird change. Now I'm back into a different new training cycle and it's all O.K. again, but for about two weeks I was just really sad that I wasn't running all these miles."

Crouch has neuropathy, which affects her feet and causes nerve damage, and said she didn't have any feeling for about a week following the race. Even if she wanted, needed, to run to get out of her rut, she just couldn't. She could barely move her feet at all.

That coupled with the effects of the altitude sickness really took a lot out of her body.

On the second week she was able to get back into a little bit of a routine, running about three or four miles a day.

Now, she said she's feeling good and back to her normal 10-12 miles a day.

What's next?

And even after completing one of the toughest races in the country, less than a month later she's already set her sights on the next ones. Crouch plans to do another 100-miler in September, and a half Iron Man in October.

The Iron Man race will add another element, with biking and swimming as well as a run part of the trio of events. She admits those other two aren't really her thing, but she was peer pressured by good friends into giving it a try.

And when she's not running and training herself, she's helping others learn to fall in love with the sport that has done so much good for her. Crouch does a lot of coaching through Miles in Martinsville and the YMCA, helping coach for 5Ks and half-marathons. She also works with "Girls on the Run," a nonprofit that encourages young girls to give cross country a try and be confident in their athletic abilities.

"It's definitely a male-dominated field," she said. "This year at that particular race [Western States] we had a record-breaking number of women that were running it, and when they told us 24 percent was a record-breaking number, I thought, 'Oh my gosh what a low number.' ... Girls are just, I don't know, we're just not in the field of distance running and I would love to change that."

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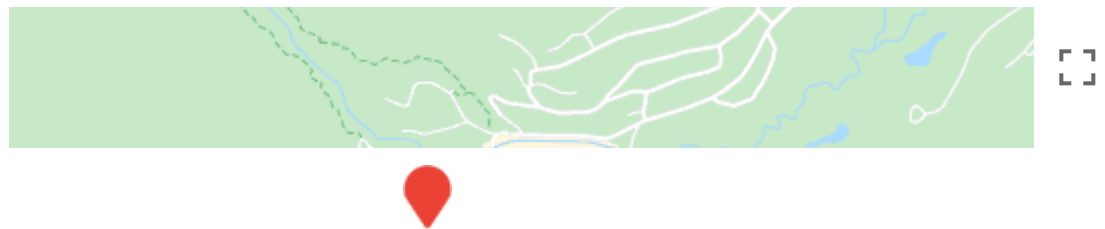
Don't let the grueling races fool you. No amount of sickness or pain would keep Crouch from putting on her running shoes and going as far as she possibly can. Because for her, the pain in her body is worth it for the joy the sport brings to her mind.

“If you had asked me 10 years ago or when I was in high school, I would just have died laughing,” she said. “That is not me. But it just became my thing. I don’t know, it just happened and it worked out.

“They tell me I’m crazy all the time. My kids are like, ‘This is crazy, why are we doing this?’ but, I don’t know. It’s fun. I really love it... It definitely is my therapy for sure. You have to be a certain kind of stressed to even want to run three hours a day, much less run a hundred miles. You really have to be something. I don’t even really know the word for that. You just got to be something. I don’t think it’s everybody’s cup of tea.”

Cara Cooper is the sports editor of the Martinsville Bulletin. You can reach her at (276)638-8801 ext. 241.

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EDITOR'S PICK SPOTLIGHT

Long range shooting up around high school hoops - Is Steph Curry or Tony Bennett behind the trend?

By Cara Cooper
Feb 16, 2019



Magna Vista freshman Spencer Hairston hit 60 3-pointers during the regular season. Three-pointers have gone up around high school basketball this season.

Bulletin photo by Cara Cooper

On Jan. 22, Magna Vista's boys basketball team defeated Patrick County, 95-77. That game was far-and-away the highest scoring contest in the Piedmont District this season, but one aspect of the numbers is becoming increasingly more common: In 32 minutes that night the Warriors hit 13 3-pointers, and the Cougars knocked down seven.

About two weeks later, Magna Vista faced off against Martinsville and hit 10 3-pointers, with the Bulldogs making seven.

Magna Vista has two players who have each attempted more than 100 3-point shots this season. Martinsville, as a team, has put up nearly 400 attempts. A trend for 3-point shooting that has been growing across the NBA seems to be trickling down to the high school level.

But is the trend solely a result of young athletes trying to emulate their professional heroes on the court, or has outside shooting become a necessity in today's game?

BLAME STEPH

"God yes, it's Steph Curry," Chris Draper said during a recent workout at the Martinsville YMCA. Draper coaches players as young as elementary school through high school as a personal trainer with I Won't Stop Family, LLC. "Certain players like Michael Jordan to a certain extent, or even Allen Iverson have changed the game and the culture, but any little kid I work with immediately wants to come in and shoot the ball... from deep."

Players young and old are turning away from trying to turn heads with a flashy dunk or slick ball-handling skills and are instead imitating the NBA's most prolific shooter. Curry, the former NBA MVP and three-time champion with the Golden State Warriors, is largely credited with popularizing the current 3-point trend that saw pro teams averaging 22.5 makes per game last season,

Curry's comparatively small stature (he's listed as 6 feet 3, 190 pounds) has helped smaller players feel like they can be effective from long-range in a game previously thought only to benefit the taller players.

"I think the three has kind of become the new dunk," Magna Vista Boys Basketball Coach Patrick Mills said. "If you look at my team, I don't have anybody who is consistently making a dunk, not making one in a game. But the 3-point shot is a big momentum swing."

The Roanoke Times tracks high school basketball statistics for more than 60 schools across the western side of Virginia. As of the first week of February, 15 of the top 40 3-point shooters in the area have attempted more than 100 3s this season. In the same week last year, only 15 of the top 50 had shot that many.

Two of those with more than 100 attempts are Spencer Hairston and Japhet LeGrant from Magna Vista. Hairston has made 60 (46 percent) and LeGrant has 43 (36 percent).

As a team, Martinsville is attempting 21.6 3s per game, which is nearly equal to their 24.5 2-point attempts. They average nearly seven made 3s and 12 made 2s.

Coaches around the NBA have bemoaned the elongating of the game and the loss of a true center position. Legendary San Antonio Spurs coach Greg Popovich said last year, "There's no beauty in it. It's pretty boring."

But coaches in high school have embraced 3s, even if it does mean teams aren't playing with a true big man anymore.

"You don't have post players anymore, you just don't," Patrick County Head Coach Andrew Terry said. "From our perspective, we just don't grow them like we used to. We play five guards out.

“When you look at it that way, the development of the 3-point shot makes sense because you don’t have the good post presence. The guys are playing on the outside so you work more on dribble drive and shooting the ball, and I’ve got guys that can do that. Occasionally you’ll get one that will come along, and you can switch things up a little bit and pound the post and stuff like that.”

BLAME TONY

While players in high school are better at shooting because they practice it more, they also need to be better given the changes in defensive configurations.

University of Virginia Basketball Coach Tony Bennett has popularized the “packline” defense, which is designed to have all five defenders inside the 3-point arc to avoid giving up layups and points close to the basket. Given UVA’s recent success and the university’s proximity to this area, it’s easy to see why coaches would watch them and try to emulate that.

“Every high school coach here, that’s all we see is the packline,” said Martinsville Head Coach Jeff Adkins, whose team runs a similar zone defense. “So the way to beat the packline defense is with 3-point shooting, because they want you to drive into the paint. That’s why you’re seeing more 3s.

“In fact, we’re better off shooting more threes than to force a drive in and turning it over into the pack. They want you to drive in and they’re waiting on you.”

Defense is also likely the biggest reason scoring isn’t up around high school basketball the way it is in the NBA. While the professional league has seen scoring go up incrementally for about seven years, in the Piedmont District this regular season, teams only have scored in the 70s 16 times, the 80s five times and the 90s three times – 11 of those games have come from G.W.-Danville, the No. 1-ranked team and highest scorers in the district.

During the past three seasons, Martinsville’s scoring average dropped from 56.8 to 51 points per game last year to 53 this season. Magna Vista’s rose from 54.8 to 56.8 this season, including the 95-point game and an increase of four victories.

The further teams step away from the basket, the lower the percentage for makes is going to be. Plus, with teams not driving to the basket or attempting shots in the paint comes fewer free throw attempts.

Part of the reason scoring is up in the NBA is teams are playing with a faster pace, trying to get 3-pointers off early in the shot clock, whereas in high school, when facing the packline defense, it forces teams to have much longer possessions, passing around the outside until the open shot comes.

“We’re basically getting 10 possessions a quarter, each possession lasts 20 or 30 seconds,” Adkins said. “Because if you shoot quick, that’s what the pack wants is you to shoot quick.

“There’s more 3-point shooting, not because it’s worth three points. I’d rather have a layup every day, but I’d rather have an open 3 than a layup with three people trying to block it and take a charge, so that’s the way I look at it. I want the open shot, so that’s why sometimes the open look is the 3, and to beat the packline you have to hit 3s. You’ve got to swing the ball and hit 3s. That’s one of the things you can beat the packline with.”

Year-to-year scoring last three seasons in the Piedmont District (all stats provided by MaxPreps.com)

Bassett:

2018-2019 (3-19) - 47 ppg/1036 points
2017-2018 (13-11) - 57.3 ppg/1376 points
2016-2017 (7-18) - 54.48 ppg/1362 points

Franklin County:

2018-2019 (7-15) - 48.4 ppg/1065 points
2017-2018 (17-11) - 57.8 ppg/1619 points
2016-2017 (17-11) - 63.4 ppg/1776 points

Hallifax County:

2018-2019 (18-5) - 61.2 ppg/1408 points
2017-2018 (10-13) - 55.8 ppg/1284 points
2016-2017 (16-9) - 59 ppg/1475 points

Magna Vista:

2018-2019 (9-12) - 56.8 ppg/ 1194 points
2017-2018 (6-15) - 54.8 ppg/1151 points
2016-2017 (4-17) - 41.9 ppg/ 880 points

Martinsville:

2018-2019 (19-5) - 53 ppg/1274 points
2017-2018 (19-8) - 51 ppg/1379 points
2016-2017 (20-5) - 56.8 ppg/1420 points

Patrick County:

2018-2019 (6-16) - 54.1 ppg/1192 points
2017-2018 (6-16) - 48.3 ppg/1063 points
2016-2017 (11-14) - 49.3 ppg/1184 points

Tunstall:

2018-2019 (4-17) - 47.1 ppg/990 points
2017-2018 (3-20) - 48.5 ppg/1117 points
2016-2017 (5-16) - 48.5 ppg/1019 points

G.W.-Danville

2018-2019 (22-1) - 70 ppg/1548 points
2017-2018 (21-5) - 62.3 ppg/ 1621 points
2016-2017 (22-5) - 69.6 ppg/1810 points

Unlike in the NBA where scoring has risen alongside the 3-point trend, in high school, where 3-point shooting has also risen, scores have stayed largely the same.

By Cara Cooper

'IT'S LIKE A CURVEBALL'

The 3-point shot has allowed players who aren't natural in the post or physically imposing to find more success on the court, which in turn makes basketball seem more accessible to young players.

But coaches are quick to point out that it takes more than the ability to hit every once in a while to reach Curry's level.

"They're not even strong enough to shoot it. That's like throwing a curveball in baseball," Draper said. "You're not strong enough to make this pitch, but they see it, and they want to do it."

"Me personally, when I was a coach, we didn't let certain kids shoot 3s because guess what, they weren't making 250 to 300 shots a day in the gym, so you're not really going to translate to the court unless you get streaky and you get hot."

Draper said, except for special circumstances, he doesn't typically like for players to even start shooting 3s until they reach junior varsity level or prove they can knock it down consistently. Until then, it's about learning to shoot with your legs and squaring up to the rim with the right form every time.

"Really, if you look at any high school game, the midrange is the most open shot you've got," he said. "Because you always have them packed on the inside ready to take away the inside and if you're a really good 3-point shooter they're going to run you off the 3-point line. So you can develop pump fakes, if you can develop jabs, if you can develop good footwork to where they're always chasing you."

Mills said his team adapted to shooting more 3s out of necessity because they didn't have much size on the inside, but they didn't go into the season with the mindset of shooting more from the outside, it just came naturally.

And, for the foreseeable future, they likely will keep shooting.

“With my group for the next few years I think it’s here to stay because I don’t necessarily have a big man,” Mills said. “I think if we had an opportunity where we could to play inside out I would like to do that more, but just basing my philosophy with the group I have... I think for right now in the short term with some groups it may be fad, but I think you’ll see it staying more than not.”

But coaches also want young players to realize that Curry didn’t step in the gym and become one of the most prolific shooters of all time overnight. Mills said both Hairston and LeGrant regularly put up hundreds of shots a practice.

And the rest of the game will always be important too, no matter what level you’re playing on.

“Roy Williams at Carolina, he says this, ‘The game looks a lot better when the ball is going in the basket,’” Terry said. “When you’re hitting shots like that the game is easy. You feel good, everything is easy, the flow of the game is easy. But when you’re not making those shots, that’s when the hard stuff comes in... What are you going to do now? You have to defend like nobody’s business and you’ve got to get to the rack and hit free throws. That’s something you have to be able to do.”

Cara Cooper is a sports writer for the Martinsville Bulletin. She can be reached at cara.cooper@martinsvillebulletin.com

Cara Cooper