

Stat of the week

Junior midfielder Maite Sturm was named field hockey Atlantic 10 Offensive Player of the Week on Oct. 7.



Senior middle blocker Jasmin Sneed, left, broke the all-time blocks record this season. Photo by Wessam Hazaymeh

Block party: Sneed, volleyball dominate the country in blocks

NOAH FLEISCHMAN
Sports Editor

When senior middle blocker Jasmin Sneed rises above the net, there's a good chance the ball won't make it over.

The San Antonio, Texas, native has a knack for blocking a volleyball at the net, but her love for blocking a ball came from a different sport: basketball. Sneed said timing a block in basketball is similar to timing jumps in volleyball.

"I just have always been a defensive player," Sneed said. "I just have always loved blocking in volleyball and basketball. Blocking is just everything for me."

Sneed has anchored volleyball's defensive presence during her four-year career, leading the Rams to the top of the NCAA's block list this season. Sneed sits on top of the total blocks list with 112 as an individual and the team does as well with 214.

Redshirt-senior middle blocker Jaelyn Jackson sits third in total blocks in the NCAA with 87.

Sneed is second in the nation in blocks per set, and she uses that as motivation to chase the No. 1 spot in both blocks per set and total blocks.

Earlier this season, Sneed broke the career blocks record set by Tori Baldwin last season at 519. Sneed currently has 617 career blocks, and she said she wants to keep extending the record "to put it out of reach" of those to come.

Blocking has been a staple of coach Jody Rogers' program. Her first recruiting class had the best average blocks per set in the country in 2017 with 3.29 and total blocks (381.5). This season, her second recruiting class is in its senior season and sits atop the nation as well.

Over the last three weeks, Jackson and Sneed were named Atlantic 10 Defensive Player of the Week after standout blocking

matches. Sneed earned the honors the past two weeks in a row.

Sneed averaged 2.25 blocks per set against La Salle and Duquesne, while Jackson averaged 1.69 per set over the Carolina Classic.

Rogers said when she finds out one of her players has won an award, she tells them right away.

"It's a great accomplishment and they need to know that," Rogers said. "You get more with honey than you do with vinegar. When they do something great, you have to embrace it."

When Sneed floats in the air and brings the ball down with force, she can count on hearing shouts of a familiar saying in the

gym. Senior libero Madalon Simpson created "#BlocksByJazzy," and she yells it when Sneed logs another block.

"That feeling just electrifies me and my team, and we get really crunk and all come together," Sneed said.

At times during the season, the Rams had multiple blocks in a rally, making it tough for the other team to earn the point, and it mostly ended with VCU earning the point on a block.

"It's like I'm playing patty-cake or ping-pong," Sneed said. "I'm just like 'nope, nope, just nope.' Those plays are so much fun. I'm going to keep blocking, let's see who wins."

During some matches this season, Sneed

said teams started to "tip" the ball over the net, instead of hitting it over.

"It's just great because after that you'll see the other team get scared and not wanting to hit through our blocks," Sneed said. "We're like 'OK, you're scared now.'"

When she jumps, Sneed's forearm, almost up to her elbow, goes over the net to try to block the ball, creating a tough barrier to get past.

Rogers said that when she sees a VCU middle blocker jump to contest an attack, she's confident it will not make it over the net. Sneed agreed.

"My team, we're a wall and I love it," she said.

Top-5 NCAA Leaders in Total Blocks

By school

VCU	UCF	Maryland	Stephen F. Austin	Houston
214	175	175	173	172

By player

Jasmin Sneed	Katie Myers	Kayla Dinkins	Jaelyn Jackson	Michelle Glover
VCU	Maryland	Tulane	VCU	UIC
112	98	96	89	87

Information compiled by Noah Fleischman
Infographic by Kamryn Gillham



THE
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FINAL CHAPTER

Redshirt-senior guard Marcus Evans and coach Mike Rhoades are in their last season together. Photo by Alessandro Latour

From Rice to VCU, Rhoades and Evans make no excuses

NOAH FLEISCHMAN
Sports Editor

THEY STEPPED OFF THE PLANE in Columbia, South Carolina, last March and something felt different: Coach Mike Rhoades and redshirt-senior guard Marcus Evans were in town for the NCAA tournament.

The two looked at each other. No words were said, but the message was clear: “We made it.”

Evans and Rhoades had talked about this moment since their days at Rice and had finally achieved the goal of making the big dance.

It was a long road to the tournament — especially for Evans, who overcame two Achilles tears and a postseason injury — but their goal was fulfilled.

Now, after four years on the court and about six of knowing each other, Rhoades and Evans are entering their final season together.

RICE

After being recruited by VCU when Rhoades was an assistant in Richmond, Evans followed him to Rice after Rhoades received his first Division I head coaching job.

When Evans arrived in Texas, he and Rhoades set a goal.

“I told him we were going to play in the NCAA tournament and I said that when we were at Rice,” Rhoades said. “From our first day at Rice ... that’s what we were pushing towards and we were getting closer.”

Evans had a breakout freshman season for the Owls, being named C-USA Freshman of the Year and First Team All-C-USA. He followed up his freshman season with another All-C-USA selection his sophomore year.

“We threw him in the fire as a freshman at Rice and said that we were going to build a program at Rice on him and his class,” Rhoades said.

VCU

When Rhoades accepted the job to coach the Rams, Evans said the team at Rice knew he was leaving for his dream job.

For Evans, who followed Rhoades to Richmond, it was a chance to play closer to home and for a coach who had been by his side since the beginning.

“I was up in the air about where I was going, but I knew I kind of wanted to be closer to home and I wanted to play in a program that was making the tournament,” Evans said. “As I went throughout the process, it kind of made sense that VCU checked all those boxes.”

Playing in the Siegel Center last season was not the first time Evans stepped foot on the floor on the Rams’ home court. The two met on the floor of the Siegel Center during Evans’ sophomore year of high school at a team camp.

“He had a lot of energy,” Evans said. “It was early in the morning and he was hyped up so I knew he was a crazy guy in a good way. I just knew he was a guy that a lot of players connected with.”

ONE AFTER ANOTHER

The Chesapeake native transferred to VCU after his sophomore season and had to sit a year per NCAA transfer rules. During his redshirt season, Evans tore his left Achilles, but he used the year to recover and didn’t miss a game.

In June 2018, Evans tore his right Achilles playing pickup basketball, putting in jeopardy the beginning of his junior season.

“It was now he was going to miss games,” Rhoades said. “All he wanted to do was play and put on a VCU uniform, he was so excited to do that. That really took everybody for a loop, but man he came back so quick and he didn’t miss a game.”

To everyone’s surprise, Evans returned for the Rams’ season opener last year against Gardner-Webb, a mere five months after his injury. He played nine minutes and logged 9 points in the contest.

Evans said the support from Rhoades took off the pressure to return to the floor.

“The biggest thing he did was giving me reassurance,” Evans said. “I was fighting so hard to get back for the first game, and he just kind of helped take the pressure off of me basically, saying ‘take your time, we’re going to be fine.’”

Rhoades said Evans leaned on his faith, his family and the team to return so quick last season.

See **EVANS** on page 6

“To beat Marcus Evans, you’ve got to kill him.”

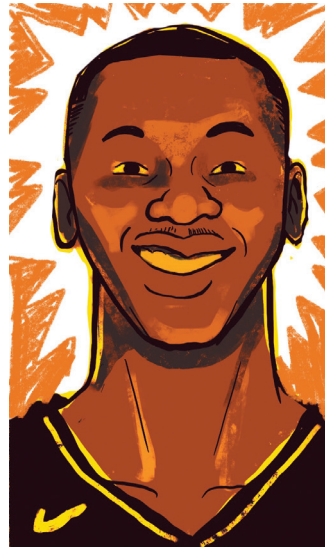
MEET THE PLAYERS

This season's men's basketball squad brings experience and youth to the Siegel Center

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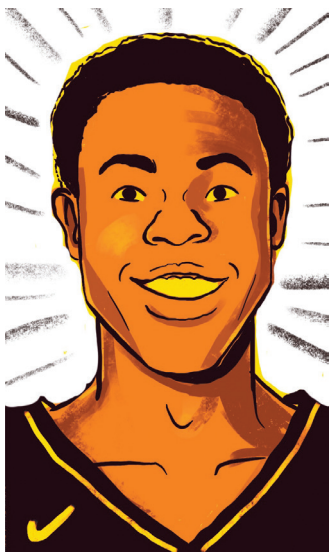
DE'RIANTE JENKINS
0 - SENIOR G

Jenkins heads a returning class of nine players, with the senior guard coming off a season in which he started all 33 games. The 6-foot-5 Jenkins racked up 20 double-digit scoring games and led all black and gold players with 63 buckets from beyond the arc. His average of 11.3 points makes him a solid player to have on the floor at any time — he's started all of the Rams' 66 games since he was a sophomore.



MIKE'L SIMMS
1 - SENIOR G

The Richmond native returns for his third season of play with the Rams. The 6-foot-5 guard has appeared in all 66 games since he arrived at VCU. He scored double-digit points four times last season, including 15 in 18 minutes during the Rams' Dec. 30 win over Rider.



KESHAWN CURRY
11 - SOPHOMORE G

After the Jacksonville, Florida, native made 15 appearances off the bench for the Rams in their 2018-19 campaign, he's solidified his place on the roster as a solid shooter and a quality guard. Curry's season-high 8 points in December came off a 3-for-3 shooting day from the paint, and he racked up a shooting average well over .500 in almost 30 attempts. Look for Kyrie Irving-esque antics from the guard who wears the same number as the NBA star.



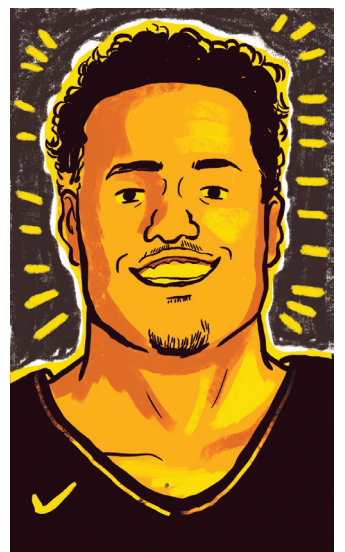
TRE CLARK
12 - FRESHMAN G

One of four freshmen on this year's team, a combo guard, Clark brings dynamic scoring ability and adds depth to VCU's roster. Following his breakout summer of 2018 playing AAU, recruiters began to notice Clark's skill. During his senior year in Covington, Georgia, playing at Newton High School, he averaged 20 points, six rebounds, and three steals. He led his team to a 22-8 record and a run in the State Tournament.



MALIK CROWFIELD
13 - SENIOR G

Last year, Crowfield averaged 3.7 points and 1.6 rebounds and shot a team-best 37.6% from 3-point range. He posted double figures on four occasions, including his best game against cross-town rival Richmond, where he finished with 14 points. His development over the past three seasons has seen an already gifted shooter expand his skillset. His biggest asset is the sneaky athleticism he poses at 6-foot-4 and his ability to drive to the basket at any time.



MARCUS SANTOS-SILVA
14 - JUNIOR F

In 2018 Santos-Silva proved to be the Rams' most improved player. Starting all 33 games, he also posted double-double numbers a team-high six times. One of the most skilled left-handed players in the nation, Silva's rebounding ability and his excellent passing make him one of VCU's key players.

EVANS

After adversities, the Rhoades-Evans duo begins their final chapter

Continued from front page

"When you have adversities like that, you have to lean on something," Rhoades said. "For him to be ready and be even stronger this year it's just an acknowledgement for him to know that hey, 'I got through a lot of stuff, we can do this and now we can do it together.'"

Evans played in all 33 games last season despite being in recovery from the Achilles injury for most of it. Just when he was almost 100%, he got injured again, and this time it was his knee.

In the Atlantic 10 tournament against Rhode Island, Evans rose up to attempt a layup and came crashing down to the court. His screams silenced the Barclays Center in Brooklyn as training staff tended to him.

The injury was diagnosed as a deep bone bruise and hyperextension, but it was painful for Evans to put weight on his knee.

Less than a week after he sustained the injury, Evans suited up and played in the NCAA tournament against UCF.

"In the A-10 tournament when he went down, I really thought it was a major knee issue," Rhoades said. "He wasn't 100% in the tournament, but just to see him fight back and say 'We're going to play in the tournament together, coach' was a tribute to him."

Evans wore a padded knee brace in the game he worked toward his entire collegiate career, playing 26 minutes and recording 6 points.

"It was hurting from the jump, damn near every step I was taking," Evans told The Commonwealth Times in March. "But we worked so hard to get to this point, I wanted to try to give whatever I had to help this team win."

**'TO BEAT MARCUS EVANS,
YOU'VE GOT TO KILL HIM'**

If nothing else, Evans and Rhoades have one thing in common: competitiveness, as individuals and with one another.

For Evans, it's winning every play at practice like it's a game, Rhoades said. For Rhoades, it's his persistence and dedication with everything he does, Evans said.

"Everything he does, he wants to win — he wants to beat you," Rhoades said. "I always say to beat Marcus Evans, you've got to kill him because he's going to keep coming at you."

Rhoades' dedication is just like the players' on the court, Evans said. It's easy for them to connect with Rhoades because he has the "fight in him" like the players do.

"He's a guy you kind of have to give some respect for because in his way, he's not going to be told no, he can't do it or his way doesn't work," Evans said. "In his mind, if he believes in his team and the system he has, it doesn't matter what the media says."

Rhoades has not kept Evans on a leash

at all during their time together. Instead, he allows him freedom on the court, which Evans said helped him grow as a player.

"I think after that it was kind of understanding," Evans said. "I knew the level of trust he had for me, and I knew what he expected from me."

The trust and freedom that Rhoades bestowed to Evans in their first two years together resulted in Evans scoring 1,000 points before coming to Richmond.

Although Evans suffered multiple injuries last season, he fought through both and accomplished the goal of making the NCAA tournament that he and Rhoades set for themselves years ago. For Rhoades, it demonstrated his attitude and coaching philosophy of not making excuses for anything.

"You go through a lot of tough ups and downs, and we did it at Rice and we did it at VCU," Rhoades said. "But we're going to make no excuses, don't complain about it, just keep finding a way — and we made it."

Stat of the week

Sophomore Ian Peng finished tied for third with a score of 10-under at the VCU Invitational Monday and Tuesday at the Country Club of Virginia.



Redshirt-senior middle blocker Jaelyn Jackson slams the ball over the net during the VCU Invitational against NC State on Sept. 5. Photo by Jon Mirador

Jackson overcame injury, depression to become key player in rotation

NOAH FLEISCHMAN
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First it was a broken shin in 2012. Then the rod needed to be replaced in 2014 in her right leg. A couple years later, it was a torn ACL and meniscus in her left knee.

That was the latest in a series of injuries senior middle blocker Jaelyn Jackson overcame as she battled depression throughout her volleyball career.

Jackson, a South Chesterfield, Virginia, native, wanted to be far away from home when she left for college in 2014, so she decided to attend Baylor. While playing in Waco, Texas, Jackson had to redshirt her freshman year because of a new rod in her leg.

Missing her freshman year on the floor made it hard for Jackson while at Baylor. But she says not feeling appreciated on the team worsened her depression.

"I was super depressed at Baylor, and it made it really hard to want to play volleyball or come back [from injury]," Jackson said.

Jackson knew after recovering from her injury she would return to the same thing, not feeling appreciated or wanted at Baylor. She says it made her tougher mentally.

"If I got injured today I'd bounce back quick because they [VCU] need me," Jackson said. "I have a reason to want to come back now and I think that was just a lesson I had to learn."

Jackson has a competitive spirit, but battling through her injuries was not a competition for her. She said she didn't feel like a competition back then; it felt like she was getting beaten down "unmercifully" and couldn't come back from it.

"And that's where it got difficult," Jackson said. "Not only did I not believe in myself, no one else did either."



Redshirt-senior middle blocker Jaelyn Jackson. Photo by Jon Mirador

Two people did believe in Jackson: her parents, and they were constantly motivating her to return to volleyball. She told them every time she wanted to quit, but they remained supportive of her and wanted her to play again.

Jackson said she has a "competitive itch" that she has to scratch. During her final season at Baylor, she was able to scratch that itch after a couple players went down with injuries.

"That re-jogged my memory of what competing felt like, because I wasn't going to play my fifth year," Jackson said. "I was just like 'forget it.' But I don't know, I just didn't want to let it go."

Jackson finished her career at Baylor appearing in 32 matches and recording 130 kills and 115 blocks. In 2017, she only appeared in one match, playing in one set.

After her senior season at Baylor, Jackson decided to leave.

"I wanted to be close to home," Jackson said of her decision to transfer to VCU. "I wanted an experience that was opposite of Baylor, not that I had an awful, terrible time there, but I didn't feel wanted there."

Jackson said her parents missed her more than she thought they would when she left for Baylor, and by attending VCU, she would be closer to them, just like they wanted.

Fellow graduate transfer, redshirt-senior middle blocker Kat Young, plays alongside Jackson on the front row.

"Jaelyn's a very fiery player," Young said. "I love playing next to her and I think we feed well off each other. She's also a very supportive teammate, very empathetic, here-for-you kind of person."

On the court this season, Jackson had to fill the shoes of Tori Baldwin, who graduated last year as the all-time leading blocker in program history. Coach Jody Rogers said Jackson stepped right into the role, playing well in a challenging position.

"Her leadership has been great," Rogers said. "On teams you need leadership to be successful, and she's brought both of those tangibles to our program."

This season, Jackson has logged 58 kills and 57 blocks, appearing in every match.

Rogers said that the strength and performance staff at VCU has helped Jackson and other athletes with injury prevention and recovery.

"Her work ethic is incredible, but she also takes care of her body," Rogers said. "I really think it's a combination of the strength performance team that we have at VCU that works so great with our student athletes."

Rogers said it's beneficial for Jackson to be at a university where the strength performance team is "paramount." And Jackson says the kindness of the coaching staff was a big reason she chose VCU.

"I just felt like I was supposed to be here," Jackson said.