

Reed Sheppard’s NBA success no surprise



Vaught's Views
Larry Vaught

Reece Davidson knew his cousin, Reed Sheppard, was a “special player” when he played at North Laurel High School and then the University of Kentucky. However, even Davidson has been a bit surprised by Sheppard’s overall play the last two years with the Houston Rockets. “I can’t say I knew he would be where he is right now, especially this early. I thought it would take him, if he got to the NBA, probably a couple years to do what he’s done right now,” said Davidson, who signed to play college basketball at Liberty after a superb career at North Laurel. “I played with him in high school and from when I played with him there to going to Kentucky his freshman year and then now, every step of the way he’s gotten better every year. Sheppard was the only Houston player to play in all 82 regular-season games — and one of only 18 in the NBA to do so — last season when he averaged 26.2 minutes and 13.5 points per game after averaging 12.5 minutes and 4.4 points as a rookie. He shot 43 percent from the field and 39.4 percent from 3 during the regular season. His 122 regular-season steals were sixth best in the league. Although he began the season coming off the bench, Sheppard started 11 of Houston’s final 14 regular-season

games and during that stretch averaged 14.3 points and 4.3 made 3-pointers per game. He started five of the team’s six playoff games and averaged 12.2 points, 4.7 assists and 2.2 steals per game. North Laurel coach Nate Valentine told anyone who would listen that Sheppard was elite in high school and that would translate to the collegiate level. Sheppard finished his high school career with 3,727 points along with 1,214 assists and 1,050 rebounds. He was Kentucky’s Mr. Basketball and went on to become national freshman of the year at UK and was the third overall pick by Houston in the 2024 NBA Draft. “A lot of people ask me, did you ever think you would be in the NBA? And I was like, ‘Yeah, I really did because every stage that we put him on, he excelled,’” Valentine said. “Early on the Division I one guys start calling and I am like, ‘I think he can play at that level.’” Valentine knew college coaches would expect him to say good things about his player but he knew Sheppard had the talent and statistics to justify the confidence he had in him. “At every level, people were wondering if he could do it against this guy? And then he goes to Kentucky, and he does the same thing. He’s back tipping guys. He’s blocking 3-point shots. He’s scoring 28 points. He’s hitting game-winners against Mississippi State,” Valentine said. “So then the NBA guys start calling, and it’s the same thing. How do you think it’s going to translate? Because defensively, they say his

metrics and his analytics are unlike anything we’ve ever seen. I said, the only thing I can tell you is he’s done it at every level. When people keep saying, ‘Can you do it? Can you do it?’ Well, he’s still doing it. So nothing he does surprises me.” Valentine was confident Sheppard could make shots in the NBA — he shot 53 percent from 3 at Kentucky. “He’s a tremendous passer. He has great vision and just such a great feel for the game. But the defensive stuff ... you’re watching him play LeBron (James), and he back tips LeBron,” Valentine said. “He’s still blocking shots. They measure a ton of those analytics, and to see him the numbers that those guys put out, it’s just off the charts for him. Those (NBA) guys didn’t know how he would translate because they’ve never seen a guy like him. “So I think it was just a little bit just figuring out with Reed that you’ve got to give him some freedom. He’s going to get beat off the dribble some. But he’s going to make a 3, he’s going to back tip somebody, they’re going to throw it to the other end, and you’re going to have a five-point swing. I think he’s only going to become more and more a big part of that team.” Davidson, a 6-foot-8 forward, grew up playing against his older cousin because they lived within minutes of each other in London. “He’d always be at our house. We’d be playing. We worked out together,” Davidson said. “He’s pretty competitive. I wouldn’t say he would let me win at all when we played. That was good for me, though,

honestly rather than him letting me win.” Davidson said he learned valuable lessons from Sheppard on and off the court. “Staying true to who you are is probably the biggest thing I learned from him,” Davidson said. “He’s obviously gone to the highest level, and he hasn’t changed a bit in what he believes in and who he is as a person.” Valentine admits it is still a bit “surreal” watching Sheppard play. “I grew up watching the Knicks and rooting for the Knicks and watching him play in Madison Square Garden and guarding Jalen Brunson was something,” Valentine said. “There’s still those surreal moments watching games. You are think-

ing three years ago this kid’s playing in North Laurel High School and now he is starting for the Rockets. It’s certainly been a fun ride.” It is still a fun ride when Sheppard gets a chance to return home to see his parents, former UK players Stacey and Jeff Sheppard, and other family members and friends. “Everybody still wants a picture... I went to a game in Indianapolis, and he had an entire section of people that waited for him after the game. It was unbelievable. One hundred people probably waited for him, and he stood and took a picture with every single one of them. That’s just the way he is,” Valentine said. “He’s accessible

when he’s here. I think that’s something that Jeff and Stacy instilled in him. You’re never going to see Reed turn away a kid for a picture or autograph. Kids probably have hundreds of pictures with Reed and still if he came back tomorrow, they would be back in line to get another one. He’s still a hot commodity.” Even if that happens, Valentine knows Sheppard will remember his upbringing. “When I talk to him, he’s still a kid to me and does the same things. He’s been very responsible with the money that he’s made, and it hasn’t changed him at all,” the North Laurel coach said. “I wouldn’t expect anything less, but he sure is fun to watch play.”

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