

***2017-18 TENNESSEE STATE  
MEN'S BASKETBALL***



***PRESS CLIPPINGS***

## ***TSU's 2017-18 opener will be a tough one***

*David Bocclair - Nashville Post - August 11, 2017*

Tennessee State men's basketball coach Dana Ford won't have his team dip its collective toe into the 2017-18 season.

In fact, he is going to have the Tigers dive in headfirst with a season-opener at Kansas (Nov. 10).

TSU released its schedule Thursday. It includes 14 home games and 15 road contests, including visits to Texas (Dec. 18) and Purdue (Dec. 21).

The Tigers also will get to see how they match up with the other area teams. They will play home games against Middle Tennessee (Nov. 18), Fisk (Nov. 28) and Lipscomb (Dec. 2).

The expanded Ohio Valley Conference slate will pit TSU with Belmont and Austin Peay twice each. Conference play begins Dec. 28 at UT Martin.

"We are excited about this year's list of games and opponents, which includes opening the season at historic Allen Fieldhouse," Ford said in a release. "We believe that our non-conference slate of games will prepare us for a challenging Ohio Valley Conference season."

This is Ford's fourth season as TSU's head coach. He is 42-50 overall, but 37-24 the last two seasons.

## ***ESPN2 to air TSU men's basketball game***

*David Bocclair - Nashville Post - August 29, 2017*

A big-name opponent once again will provide Tennessee State men's basketball team a bit of national exposure.

ESPN2 will broadcast the Tigers' game at the University of Texas (Dec. 18), the network announced Monday. It will be the second meeting between the programs. The first was in 1987-88, when Anthony Mason was TSU's star player.

Tennessee State was on the network last season when it traveled to Duke, ranked in the top five at the time. Coach Dana Ford's team made a good showing in that one. It trailed by just four at halftime and ultimately lost 65-55.

"Hopefully we realize that if we play as a team, we currently feel like we can play with anybody in the country," Ford said that night. "But we're trying to get to the point where we can consistently compete against high-level teams."

Texas is not the only high-profile program on the Tigers' 2017-18 schedule. TSU opens at Kansas (Nov. 10) and will play at Purdue (Dec. 21).

## ***Hurricane Harvey clothing, shoe challenge from Houston met by coaches in Tennessee***

*Mike Organ - The Tennessean - August 30, 2017*

During the Nashville flood of 2010, Drew Maddux helped with cleanup efforts in the Bellvue area.

So when basketball coaches were challenged on social media to send clothing to Houston for flood victims from Hurricane Harvey, he didn't hesitate.

"(The Nashville flood) actually made it very personable to me," said Maddux, a former Vanderbilt player who is the coach at Christ Presbyterian Academy.

"When we saw the images and knowing several people in the Houston area it became very personable."

Maddux sent T-shirts, shorts and socks left over from different Nike camps to Houston on Wednesday. The school is now discussing what more they can do, he said.

"I put all I could fit in it," Maddux said.

TSU's men's basketball team sent 30 shirts and 12 pairs of sneakers. The women's program is also gathering items to send.

"Our thoughts and prayers are with the entire state of Texas," TSU men's basketball coach Dana Ford said. "The city of Nashville knows first-hand how devastating of an event this is.

"Our hope is that we can lend a helping hand in the rebuild process of everyone affected."

Tennessee's men's basketball program already sent a package to Houston.

Tennessee Tech women's basketball coach Kim Rosamond is compiling items from the various athletic programs to send.

Middle Tennessee State men's basketball coach Kermit Davis and baseball coach Jim McGuire

both have boxes of T-shirts and shoes headed to Houston.

Memphis' men's basketball program tweeted it has sent boxes of clothing to Houston.

Austin Peay men's basketball coach Matt Figger put out a department-wide call Tuesday and have received 25 boxes of shoes, shirts and other gear that are being sent out.

Lipscomb's baseball and softball teams are collecting new clothing and shoes to send out Friday.

Trevecca baseball coach Ryan Schmalz is collecting donations from the athletic department to be sent later this week.

Vanderbilt is still determining how it can help flood victims, according to school officials.

Other area high schools that have sent clothing or are in the process include Battle Ground Academy, Blackman, Middle Tennessee Christian, Moore County, Northeast and Rossvie. And the Tennessee Baseball Coaches Association is sending T-shirts and golf polos.

"It's just the right thing to do," said Rossvie girls basketball coach Justin Woods, who said softball coach Courtney Elrod sent a note to all coaches asking for donations.

"My mom's house got hit by a tornado a while back in West Tennessee," Woods said. "She lost everything she had. When something like that hits close to home, you don't forget."

## ***Tennessee State basketball season opener will be on national TV***

*Mike Organ - The Tennessean - September 4, 2017*

For the second time in eight days Tennessee State's men's basketball team announced it will play a nationally-televised game this season.

Coach Dana Ford announced on Monday the Tigers' season-opener on Nov. 10 at Kansas will be broadcast on ESPNU.

Last week Ford said the Tigers game at Texas on Dec. 18 would be on ESPN2.

The game against Kansas at historic Allen Fieldhouse will tip off at 8 p.m.

The Jayhawks went 31-5 and ended the season last year in the elite eight of the NCAA Tournament with a 74-60 loss to Oregon.

TSU went 17-13 in Ford's third season.

Kansas is predicted to be a top-5 team in most pre-season publications.

The Jayhawks, who have claimed 13 consecutive Big 12 Conference championships, return two regular starters — guards Devonte' Graham and Sviatoslav Mykhailiuk — and three players — guard Lagerald Vick, center Udoka Azubuike and forward Mitch Lighfoot — who were part-time starters or saw a lot of action.

Sophomore guard Malik Newman, who sat out last season after transferring from Mississippi State, is expected to step into a significant role.

## **Belmont, Lipscomb, Tennessee State basketball teams all trending upward**

*Mike Organ - The Tennessean - November 8, 2017*

A common thread for local men's college basketball teams Belmont, Lipscomb and Tennessee State is that all three are trending upward.

Belmont, of course, always seems to be on the rise. What makes this season special is that the Bruins might be just as good, if not better, than last season even after losing all-time leading scorer Evan Bradds.

Coach Casey Alexander has established some consistency in the Lipscomb program that has been missing for several years.

And TSU has the chance to post a winning record for the third consecutive season for the first time since coach Frankie Allen led the Tigers to four straight winning seasons from 1992-93 through 1995-96.

Here are three reasons each program is on the uptick:

### **Belmont**

1. Three for one: Replacing Bradds, the two-time Ohio Valley Conference Player of the Year, will be a monumental task for coach Rick Byrd, who is headed into his 32nd year at Belmont. Byrd will rely on a solid nucleus including returning starters Amanze Egekeze (11.3 ppg/5.5 rbs), Austin Luke (8.0 ppg/7.1 apg) and Dylan Windler (9.2 ppg/6.3 rbs) to step up and replace the void left by Bradds.

2. Returning to the NCAAs: Belmont has been to the NCAA Tournament seven times but only once in the past four seasons. The Bruins earned NIT berths in the other three seasons. But the benchmark for the program is the NCAA tournament, and the veteran returning group will push hard to get this team back there.

3. McClain braced for breakout: Junior Kevin McClain, a speedy and skilled guard from Jennings, Fla., is ready to step into a brighter spot-

light. He'll crack the starting lineup after appearing as a backup in every game last season.

Season opener: Friday (9 p.m.) at Washington

### **Lipscomb**

1. Balance: After finishing last season ranked ninth nationally in scoring (85.0 ppg.), much has been made about the offensive improvement the Bisons have made. But Alexander is just as proud of the strides his team has made defensively. The Bisons went from allowing opponents an average of 81.5 points per game in 2015-16 to 77.6 in 2016-17.

2. Nine of 10 are back: Nine of the top 10 scorers from last year's team are back. And that was a team that went 20-13 and finished second in the Atlantic Sun. It includes returning starters Garrison Mathews (20.4 ppg.), Rob Marberry (12.7 ppg.), Nathan Moran (11. ppg.) and Eli Pepper (5.4 ppg.).

3. Mathews is a rising star: Mathews, a junior guard from Franklin, is the fastest player to reach 1,000 career points in Lipscomb's NCAA Division I history. He hit the storied mark in 65 games. Mathews also set the program's single-game scoring record with 39 points at Jacksonville last January.

Season opener: Friday (6:30 p.m.) vs. Emory

### **Tennessee State**

1. Defense dominates: When coach Dana Ford became the Tigers coach three years ago, he promised to build a smothering defense. In his first season, TSU was seventh in the OVC in defense. In his second, it was second. And last year, it was first (67.7 ppg.). The Tigers also have led the OVC in field-goal percentage defense each of the past two seasons.

2. Reddick ready for big year: Senior guard

Darreon Reddick was Ford's first signee and will be the Tigers' best player this season. With 674 career points, he is on par to become the program's first player to score 1,000 points since Pat Miller (2010-14).

3. Building fan support: Interest in the program had nearly bottomed out before Ford's arrival. In his first season, TSU was last in the OVC in average attendance per home game (1,337). Last year, TSU climbed all the way to third (2,627).

Season opener: Friday (8 p.m., ESPN2) at Kansas

## ***Vick leads No. 4 Kansas to 92-56 win over Tennessee State***

*Associated Press - November 10, 2017*

LAWRENCE, Kan. (AP) — Tennessee State coach Dana Ford forked over the cash to watch the online feed of Kansas playing in Italy last summer, and \$40 for the pay-per-view of the Jayhawks' exhibition game against Missouri.

It was an investment made in scouting the Tigers' first opponent of the season.

"Wasted a lot of money," Ford said with a wry smile.

Lagerald Vick scored 23 points, Svi Mykhailiuk added 15 and the No. 4 Jayhawks ran roughshod over their Ohio Valley counterpart, beating Tennessee State 92-56 on Friday night in their only tuneup before heading to Chicago to face No. 5 Kentucky in the Champions Classic.

"They really shot it well," Ford said. "We obviously didn't do anything to help with that. But you have to give credit where credit is due. They were really, really good tonight."

Devonte Graham added 10 points, 12 assists and seven rebounds for the short-handed Jayhawks, who played without five-star prospect Billy Preston. The touted freshman forward was suspended for the opener after he missed curfew Thursday night and failed to show up for class Friday.

That wasn't the only message coach Bill Self sent, either. Mississippi State transfer Malik Newman lost his starting job to freshman Marcus Garrett after a lousy practice this week.

"Just take care of your business," Self said. "Everybody needs to be responsible."

Newman still finished with 12 points off the bench as the hot-shooting Jayhawks won their 43rd straight home opener. Garrett added 10 points while 7-footer Udoka Azubuike, who missed most of last year with a wrist injury, contributed 13 points and six boards in his

return.

Darreon Reddick had 20 points and Delano Spencer had 14 for the Tigers, who watched the longer, stronger Jayhawks use a 14-0 run in the opening minutes to build a 56-27 lead by halftime.

Kansas made its first nine shots and wound up shooting 60 percent for the game.

"Exactly what we were looking for," Graham said. "We just have to try to start every game like that because it really got us going and sent a message to the other team."

The Jayhawks got sloppy early in the second half, turning the ball over five times in a 5-minute span, and their seven-man rotation appeared to wear down. But the Tigers were never able to string more than a couple baskets together, allowing the Jayhawks to empty their bench early.

That probably won't be the case against the Wildcats on Tuesday night.

Kansas and Kentucky are playing the nightcap of the annual doubleheader in Chicago, a matchup of two of college basketball's bluebloods. It should be an early barometer for teams with national championship aspirations, and an intimidating venue for Preston to make his collegiate debut.

The Wildcats overcame a sluggish start to beat Utah Valley in their opener Friday night.

"It'll be nice to see how much poise we have in a pressure situation," Self said, "but I certainly anticipate it not being pretty. But I do anticipate both teams playing very hard."

### **WELCOME TO THE SHOW**

Garrett found out Thursday that he would start his college debut, but he was hardly intimidated by the stage. He also had 10 rebounds and a couple assists in 23 minutes. Asked whether he was surprised to start, the 6-foot-5 guard from Dallas replied: "Very."

### **BEHIND THE NUMBERS**

The Jayhawks showed their inside-outside chops by knocking down 12 3-pointers and outscoring the Tigers 46-18 in the paint. They also had a 45-23 advantage on the glass and blocked seven shots, but an uncharacteristic 20 turnovers was a significant blemish on the final box score.

### **BIG PICTURE**

Tennessee State was overmatched in just about every facet, though the Tigers never gave up. That should serve them well not only against Texas and Purdue later in the non-conference season but when they open conference play in late December.

Kansas had a depth issue Friday night that should be somewhat assuaged later this season. Preston is due back next week, and Arizona State transfer Sam Cunliffe becomes eligible in December. But if injuries hit this season, the Jayhawks could require massive big minutes from a short bench.

### **UP NEXT**

Tennessee State gets a substantially easier test next in NAIA member Reinhardt on Monday night.

Kansas heads to Chicago to face the No. 5 Wildcats, who won both previous meetings in the Champions Classic. They'll take the floor after top-ranked Duke plays No. 2 Michigan State on Tuesday night.



## ***Tracing Robert Covington's journey from unheralded recruit to \$62 million man***

*Rich Hofmann - The Athletic - November 17, 2017*

When Dana Ford walked into an unsigned senior showcase in Waukegan, Illinois in the spring of 2009, he wasn't there with any specific targets in mind. He hadn't even officially gotten an assistant coaching position at Tennessee State yet, but Ford knew that if he landed the job, the Tigers would need quite a few players.

One of the high school seniors in the gym that day was a long 6-foot-7ish swingman with the type of shooting ability that immediately stood out.

"This kid is better than me at that age and I played in the Missouri Valley," Ford thought to himself. "So he can definitely play in the Ohio Valley."

After receiving a position on John Cooper's staff, Ford told the TSU head coach about the lanky kid with the sweet shooting stroke. Entering his first season running a Division 1 program, Cooper shortly thereafter made the trek with Ford to Proviso West High School in Chicago's western suburbs. A few of the other players Cooper had been expecting didn't show up, so his personal evaluation had to be made based on little else than a halfcourt 4-on-4 setting.

With six scholarships in his pocket, Cooper decided to bring Ford's find in for a visit to the school's Nashville campus. After meeting with the player's coaches and family, Cooper ultimately decided that his combination of length and shooting made it worthwhile to offer a scholarship.

Robert Covington committed to Tennessee State, and it only took one individual workout for the coaches to realize that they had made the right move.

"Me and Coop looked at each other and said, 'Man, we've got a pro,'" Ford said.

Some Sixers fans will make the argument that Covington, not Joel Embiid, is the player that best represents The Process. By plucking Covington out of the D-League in November 2014 and giving him the opportunity to develop in the NBA, former general manager Sam Hinkie found a long-term starter off the scrap heap because his strategy allowed the Sixers to take swings on players that most other teams simply couldn't.

There is logic to that argument, but to get the full story, Covington's process started long before then.

There isn't a consensus on why a high school senior with Covington's credentials — playing on a talented team, he won the West Suburban Conference Player of the Year — had only two Division 1 scholarship offers. It's not like he was playing in the middle of nowhere.

The most accepted explanation is that Covington's skinny frame scared off recruiters. Kevin Dockery, Covington's mentor as well as his former AAU coach with the Illinois Bobcats, was told by Division 1 schools in Illinois and Indiana that they would look at Covington only if he went the junior college route and put on additional weight.

Covington weighed only 174 pounds when he stepped onto TSU's campus, which had led to some questions in coaching circles about his toughness. Dennis Bryant also heard critiques of his son's effort level, which he felt was a misinterpretation of Covington's ability to make some areas of the game look easy. Bryant believed that looking at Covington's well-rounded contributions in the stat sheet was all the proof necessary that he was playing hard.

Cooper said it took only two workouts for him to realize that any questions some of his peers had about Covington's toughness were misguided.

"He just needed to get stronger," Cooper said. "It wasn't about him being afraid to engage and compete or any of those things. It was just a matter of, 'Hey, if we can get some weight on him and go from there.'"

Covington's scoring totals might have also kept him under the radar, as college coaches don't quite have SportVU data or on-off splits available for high school recruits. Covington, who didn't break out until later in his career at Proviso West, averaged double figures as a senior but his scoring totals weren't necessarily huge for a top offensive option.

Tommie Miller, his high school coach, figures Covington could've averaged close to 30 points per game with a more aggressive mindset. Looking

back on Covington's career at Proviso West, Miller's only quibble both on and off the floor with his go-to scorer was that he was too unselfish at times. And watching the Sixers on television now, he finds himself saying the same thing he said during Covington's days playing for him: Rob, shoot the ball.

An unselfish mindset might have paid off as Covington moved up the ladder. After all, there are plenty of big-time high school scorers who fizzle out at higher levels when more is required of them than getting buckets. And when you talk to Covington's coaches, almost all of them link the on-court approach to his character off the floor.

"When you're high-character, humble, and coachable, then you listen and learn how to do things at each stop," Ford said.

"The shooting and the length have always kept him on the floor. And once he gets on the floor, his character is what has allowed for him to stay on the floor and be successful."

With the coaching change and plenty of roster turnover at Tennessee State, Covington averaged over 27 minutes per game as a freshman. Rapidly, he went from an unheralded high school recruit to averaging 11.5 points and 6.5 rebounds per game as a college freshman.

Not only did Covington get to play, but he also wasn't the standstill shooter that Cooper believes he may have been if a high-major program landed him. Covington posted up and could try to make plays off the dribble at TSU, which allowed him to work on his weaknesses. And even though the Tigers stumbled to a 9-23 record, the coaches that passed him over took notice.

"After his freshman year, everybody called me and asked if he wanted to transfer," Dockery said. "I was like, 'Hell no, he good.'"

A bad, rebuilding team. Plenty of playing time. A coach who offered a ton of offensive freedom. Sound familiar?

And as TSU was undergoing its own sort of process, Covington could measure his own improvement when he went back to Chicago.



## **Tracing Robert Covington's journey from unheralded recruit to \$62 million man (CONT.)**

*Rich Hofmann - The Athletic - November 17, 2017*

"I think what Rob started seeing is that, him playing everyday and growing and getting better, 'I maybe start getting better than these guys,'" Cooper said. "'And maybe I was better than those guys.'"

The story probably won't have the same longevity as Michael Jordan not making his high school team as a sophomore, but Covington was cut from the basketball team at MacArthur Middle School in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades.

He still played travel basketball, except for a time in seventh grade when there were a couple of Fs on his report card. Covington's Pop Warner football team was in the playoffs at the time, but when Teresa Bryant saw her son's grades, he wasn't allowed to finish up the football season or try out for AAU basketball. In the following years, the message had apparently gotten through.

"He was on the honor roll after that," she said. According to Cooper, Bryant (who the coach affectionately calls "Mama B") never once complained about her son's playing time or any other aspect of his coaching style. In fact, he tells stories about how she implored him to push Covington harder.

Bryant is a believer in tough love, and even as her son started to creep onto the NBA's radar at Tennessee State, she never wanted to be what she refers to as "that parent."

"What they didn't do with Rob is what a lot of parents do," Ford said. "They create this illusion that kids are supposed to challenge authority. And they never created that in their house, so he's always been coachable. And that's only helped him as a player, and it's helped him grow. The coach is never wrong in their household."

Under Cooper's guidance, Covington developed into a first-team all-conference player in his junior season as he led Tennessee State to the Ohio Valley Conference championship game. But after Cooper left to accept the head coaching job at Miami (Ohio), a torn meniscus affected a senior year that his mother admitted was a downer for Covington. He still managed to average 17 points and 8 rebounds in 21 games during the 2012-13 season, but the Tigers had taken a step back as a team.

Covington didn't hear his name called in the 2013 NBA Draft, but before the night was over, the Houston Rockets were on the phone offering him a partially guaranteed contract. For Bryant, her son was in a familiar spot entering the NBA.

"The way we always look at it is he had to go a different route than other highly recruited people," she said. "He had to prove himself even more than anybody else."

Sitting in the cramped visitors locker room at Nasau Veterans Memorial Coliseum, Jacob Pullen is getting ready for a preseason game against the Brooklyn Nets. Pullen, who is signed to a two-way contract with the Sixers, was two grades ahead of Covington when he entered Proviso West. After his freshman year, the future Kansas State point guard transferred to neighboring Proviso East.

That's not a small thing. Proviso East and Proviso West is such an intense rivalry that the football and basketball games between the schools take place during the day just to control the crowd size. East has a richer basketball history, counting Doc Rivers and Michael Finley (who Brett Brown coincidentally compared Covington's shot to) as two of its most famous alumni.

Despite being on opposite sides of the rivalry, Pullen and Covington are much more than basketball acquaintances. When the former was in Philly, they hung out close to every day. And Pullen is happy for Covington's success.

"He grew into his own," Pullen said. "He worked for everything that he got. Like a lot of other Chicago guys, he's a blue-collar hard worker." Pullen knows Covington well, and the tidbit that stuck out from our conversation is that Covington once had around 30 blocks in a high school game as a sophomore.

30 blocks!?

"It wasn't 30," Dennis Bryant said. "I think it was either 26 or 27 blocks in one game. ... They kept trying [him]."

Since Hinkie corrected his "draft-night mistake" and

signed Covington three years ago this past Wednesday, his defense has seemed to make huge strides in a relatively short period of time. And whether or not Covington actually had 30 blocks, the idea serves as a reminder that he has always been blessed with a couple of very useful things on the basketball court: shooting and length.

Covington played seven games in Houston as a rookie in 2013-14, so he spent most of his time with the Rio Grande Valley Vipers, earning D-League Rookie of the Year honors. Even then, the defensive tools were apparent to Nevada Smith, who coached the Vipers.

"He was an almost elite help-side defender at that point," Smith said. "He was so long, he has such a great IQ. He was always getting deflections and steals on skip passes, cross-court passes."

That level of disruptiveness has translated to the NBA, as Covington led the league in deflections a season ago. Offensively, the Vipers played the type of bombs-away style that the Rockets employ now at the NBA level. Covington, who Smith noticed mostly took above-the-break threes and wasn't bothered much when there was a hand in his face, had the green light to fire 8.5 shots from beyond the arc per game.

"I inherited this gunslinger that just jacked threes," Brown said.

For Brown, the Covington who didn't shoot enough in high school didn't exist. Hinkie used the last couple of roster spots to bring in tons of unheralded players during The Process, and while Brown wasn't particularly fond of Covington's shot selection, he at least saw the potential.

"Over time you started like looking at his body and realized if he put his mind to it — he's an athlete and good people, you could wind him up to play defense," Brown said. "Then you thought if you can do that and he can shoot, and we just sort of like watered down his version of what a good shot and bad shot is and really just let him play in a system, then maybe you could really have a chance to have a two-way player."

Most of Covington's coaches concluded that his

## ***Tracing Robert Covington's journey from unheralded recruit to \$62 million man (CONT.)***

*Rich Hofmann - The Athletic - November 17, 2017*

on-ball defense lagged behind the plays he made shooting passing lanes. Since he was a senior at Tennessee State, Covington has worked out in the summers with trainers Jamal and Spencer Richardson in Nashville. And while the cousins used different on-court techniques like working with tennis balls to improve Covington's recovery skills, the most important work they've done together has been studying film of NBA players, from point guards to power forwards.

"Really studying tendencies, looking at habits and finding ways for him to be disruptive on the defensive end," Jamal Richardson said. "Because that's the main thing. You're not really going to stop guys, they're in the NBA for a reason. The Kevin Durants and those guys, it's hard to shut them down but you want to make them less efficient as possible."

Ask around and you'll learn a few things about Covington off the court that most people might not know. For instance, multiple friends swear that he's an excellent dancer ("Rob's got a little Odell Beckham Jr. in him," Jamal Richardson says). Smith mentions that he rolled a couple of 200 games on off days in the D-League, a talent that was developed during weekly trips to the bowling alley with his family growing up. The ATF in his Instagram handle stands for "allergic to failure," a motto that he and his father came up with a while ago.

But mostly, everyone comes back to the same general point: He's a down-to-earth, humble guy who had to work hard to get where he is and an influx of \$62 million won't change that.

"He's just a kid from Chicago living out his dream, but he's still the same guy," Thomas Steele said. "He'll answer the phone if you need him to."

Steele played basketball with Covington at TSU, and they've remained very close after college along with fellow teammate Tashan Fredrick. When Steele lived in Maryland a few years ago, he made frequent trips to the Wells Fargo Center. Now that he's relocated to Nashville, he spends a lot of his summer with Covington.

"I don't think it's going to change anything from him being who he is," he said of the contract extension Covington has agreed to.

The Sixers have wrapped up a preseason practice at their spacious facility in Camden, and Covington is getting up shots after practice. After every shot he swishes, Covington is chirping. Shooting against Pullen, the neighborhood rivalry could simply have the competitive juices flowing.

But more than anything, Covington looks comfortable in his own skin. Brown has seen a change from Covington in that regard since he first came to Philadelphia from the D-League, which he figures is only natural.

"He started claiming a role, he started feeling like this could actually be home," Brown said. "And all those things led to him now feeling like, 'This is as much my program as it is anybody's.' Like him and Joel have been with me the longest. And he's got a right to think that. And he knows how we and me value him. And I just think all of us, when you know you're wanted and you know you have a home, that you can just emerge as a human being and find different ways to talk and lead."

After all this time, he has the combination of a home and no higher level of basketball to chase. No matter how the Sixers fare over the next few years, we can already say that the Robert Covington process has been a success.

## **MTSU men's basketball tops Tennessee State 75-65**

*Erik Bacharach - Daily News Journal - November 18, 2017*

There was a stretch early in Saturday's game at Gentry Center in which Tennessee State did not score for more than six minutes, a product of good defensive play by MTSU and TSU's willingness to settle for long, low-percentage shots.

During that same span, MTSU (3-1) dropped 14 points as it built a lead that would not be threatened in a 75-65 win over Tennessee State (1-2).

"We knew we had to come out and bounce back (from a loss to Belmont)," said MTSU grad transfer Nick King, who had 20 points on 8-of-13 shooting to lead the Blue Raiders in scoring for a fourth straight game.

MTSU's lead climbed to 17 points early in the second half before TSU went on a 7-0 run sparked by an alley-oop dunk from Delano Spencer to Christian Mekowulu. With 3:20 left, the Tigers cut the lead to 68-59, the smallest deficit of the second half. But Giddy Potts' 3-pointer with 1:34 left was the final dagger, extending MTSU's lead to 75-61.

Brandon Walters had 14 points and seven rebounds for MTSU. He played a career-high 31 minutes, a result of "his maturity level getting better," MTSU coach Kermit Davis said.

Armani Chaney had a team-high 14 points for Tennessee State, which won last year's matchup against the Blue Raiders, 74-63.

### **MTSU emphasizes ball movement**

With about 12:30 left, MTSU inbounded from under the basket. All five Blue Raiders touched the ball as it started inside before getting kicked out to the perimeter and whipping around the horn. Donovan Sims had the final touch, splashing a wide-open 3-pointer from the left wing that gave

MTSU a 54-36 lead.

It was a theme for MTSU. With nearly every half-court set marked by good ball movement, the Blue Raiders had assists on 18 of its 25 baskets. Tyrik Dixon had a team-high five assists and three other Blue Raiders had three assists.

"The ball moved so much better," Davis said. "And that was a big selling point that we talked about the last two days, that we have to get back to how we play."

### **Potts struggling**

Giddy Potts, MTSU's leading returning scorer and, by every measure, the heart of its 2017-18 team, has yet to find a rhythm.

He entered averaging 11.3 points on just 35.7 percent shooting, and Saturday was more of the same. The senior guard had just six points on 2-of-6 shooting from the field.

"He's got to be able to score off the dribble," Davis said. "I'd love for Giddy to get 12 or 15 shots but now with a lot of the set plays, you can't just get him open 3s. Our perimeter's got to better off the dribble and find him, but they're on top of him."

### **Tennessee State still meshing**

TSU graduated three starters from last year's team in Tahjere McCall (14.3 points, 5.1 assists), Wayne Martin (14.4 points, 9.2 rebounds) and Jordan Reed (8.1 points, 6.5 rebounds).

The Tigers still are working to build a chemistry without them.

"With this team, there's just so much newness," TSU coach Dana Ford said. "We're still searching. We're three games in, we've played two teams (MTSU and Kansas) who are coming off the NCAA Tournament that

have beaten us. It's disappointing that we've lost at home but we're going to continue to try to find ourselves before conference season."

## ***Coleman's basket helps Texas to beat Tennessee State***

*Associated Press - December 18, 2017*

AUSTIN, Texas -- When his chance came to make a critical play, Matt Coleman did not have time to think about all of his missed shots and turnovers.

He just drove toward the basket and hit a shot in the lane with nine seconds remaining, enabling Texas to escape an upset attempt by Tennessee State 47-46 on Monday night.

Coleman, a freshman point guard, had missed seven of his previous eight shots and committed six turnovers. He finished with four points and seven assists.

But when the big moment came?

"Just reacting," Coleman said.

After Coleman's basket, Tennessee State's Delano Spencer rushed a long shot, missing the rim, with time left to maneuver for a closer attempt.

Dylan Osetkowski led Texas with 16 points, including back-to-back baskets late in the game, and Kerwin Roach II scored 12 for Texas (8-3).

Christian Mekowulu led Tennessee State (5-5) with 15 points and 11 rebounds. Spencer scored all 11 of his points in the second half after attempting just three shots before the break, largely while hounded defensively by Roach. Spencer's 3-pointer gave the Tigers a 46-45 lead with 1:26 left.

Tennessee State hurt itself with 25 turnovers, several against Smart's trademark full-court pressure defense.

Texas converted only 3 of 21 3-point shots (14.3 percent) and committed 17 turnovers against a zone defense in which Tennessee State left some Longhorns wide open.

"They literally weren't guarding some of those

guys on the perimeter," Texas coach Shaka Smart said.

Said Tennessee coach Dana Ford, "We really packed it in."

Texas played its third straight game without injured guard Andrew Jones, its leading scorer with 15.3 a game and best 3-point shooter.

"It has been a big adjustment," Roach said.

Even with Jones, the Longhorns have to rely on one of the better defenses in the country to create scoring opportunities.

"We need to get a stop and get out in transition," Coleman said. "Some easy offense."

### **BIG PICTURE**

Tennessee State: This team that nearly beat Texas lost its season opener at Kansas 92-56.

The game at Texas was the third of six consecutive the Tigers play on the road between Dec. 2 and Dec. 31. Texas was the first against a school from a Power 5 conference during this stretch, and next the Tigers are at No. 16 Purdue on Thursday. Ford was pleased with the effort against Texas.

"I thought our guys competed hard," Ford said. "I'm really proud of our players."

Texas: Eleven games into the season, the Longhorns are still a miserable shooting team. They rank last in the 10-team Big 12 in 3-point and free throw shooting accuracy, at 27.9 and 61.4 percent, respectively. They rank near the bottom nationally as well. ...Texas missed its first 11 3-point attempts before Roach made two in row late in the first half. Coleman committed just seven turnovers in the first nine games. He has 10 in the last two games.

"A lack of poise from Matt," Smart said. "He'd been really good early in the year. Right now he's not in the moment with the pass and the play that he's making. That's why he's got 10 turnovers in the last two games."

### **HOTTEST HAND**

Osetkowski has averaged 18.2 points in his last five games. His mark of 15.2 for season ranks second on the team.

### **UP NEXT**

Tennessee State is at No. 16 Purdue on Thursday.

Texas is faces Alabama in Birmingham on Friday.

## ***TSU falls just short in upset bid***

*David Bocclair - Nashville Post - December 19, 2017*

It would have been his biggest win yet at Tennessee State. But as losses go, Dana Ford can live with it. “We came up short.”

The fourth-year coach had few complaints after his Tigers nearly upset Texas on Monday in a game that aired live on ESPN2. TSU scored eight straight points and led by one with 1:26 remaining but ultimately lost 47-46 when Texas — which was among “others receiving votes” teams in the latest AP top 25 poll — scored the decisive basket with nine seconds remaining.

“You know, we came up on the short end of the stick, but not a whole lot to complain about,” Ford said. “We fought on the glass. I think we outrebounded them, which is something that we try to do. We turned the ball over, but I think a lot of people will turn it over against that type of pressure. Some of our guys that hadn’t played a lot came up and made some big plays and earned some more playing time.”

“So I’m just really proud of our players and what they were able to come in here and do.”

TSU is now halfway through a six-game road trip and things don’t get any easier. They will be at No. 16 Purdue on Thursday before they begin Ohio Valley Conference play with contests at UT-Martin (Dec. 28) and Southeast Missouri (Dec. 31).

The Tigers are now 5-5 overall, 1-2 on the extended road trip. Christian Mekowulu led the effort at Texas with 15 points and 11 rebounds (both team highs). Delano Spencer added 11 points, capped by a 3-pointer that gave the Tigers the late lead.

“I was just playing, just competing out there,” Mekowulu said. “I was just focused and trying to get a win. Eventually we came

## ***Tennessee State basketball eager to get over worst loss, start the OVC season***

*Mike Organ - The Tennessean - December 26, 2017*

The Ohio Valley Conference basketball season tips off this week and it comes just in time for Tennessee State.

The Tigers (5-6) want to wash out the bitter taste left from their worst loss since Dana Ford became their coach in 2014-15.

That was a 97-48 beat-down at No. 14 Purdue on Dec. 21.

It was over early as the Boilermakers held the Tigers to just six field goals and 16 points in the first half.

Even with the lopsided loss, Ford believes the pre-conference schedule helped prepare the Tigers for the challenges they will face in league play, which begins Thursday (6 p.m.) at UT Martin (5-8).

"We've been able to play every type of team that we'll see in our league," Ford said. "And I think we'll have a lot of things to draw back from over the next eight weeks. We just need to take the good things and try to continue to build on them. And then some of the negative things, try to get them turned around."

Among the positives has been Christian Mekowlulu's rebounding, Armani Chaney's defensive play and Delano Spencer's free throw shooting.

Mekowlulu, a 6-foot-9 junior, is the second-leading rebounder in the OVC averaging 9.2 per game. The Nigerian native is also TSU's second-leading scorer (11.1 points).

Chaney, a junior guard, is second in the SEC in steals (2.0) and Spencer, a senior guard, leads the OVC and ranks 41st in the nation in free throw shooting percentage (88.9 percent). He's 32 of 36 from the line.

At the top of the list among things that need

work is offense.

The Tigers are last in the conference and 336th nationally in scoring (65.0 points) and last in the conference and 326th in field goal percentage (40.4). They have averaged just 53 points in their last four games.

TSU is also next-to-last in the OVC in 3-point shooting percentage (32.2).



## ***EIU, TSU men set for hard-fought game***

*Justin Rust - Journal Gazette & Times-Courier - January 10, 2018*

CHARLESTON — There are many similarities between the Eastern Illinois men's basketball team and Tennessee State. Both teams come in with 6-9 overall record, and EIU has one more OVC win at 2-2 than TSU (1-3).

Both teams are averaging 65 points per game and shooting 41 percent on the season. TSU is allowing slightly more points, 68.9 per game, than EIU, 66.0 per game, but both teams are allowing 43 percent shooting against opponents.

The only big difference on paper is that TSU shoots better at the free-throw line (71.6 percent) than EIU (64.8 percent).

So Thursday's contest at Lantz Arena, which tips at 6 p.m. and will be on CBS Sports Network, has the potential to be a tightly contested game.

"They've had the same issues we've had," EIU coach Jay Spoonhour said. "They do a lot of things to get themselves easy baskets. They rebound it hard, run and trap more than we do, and they are pretty good at it. You look at the Texas game (with TSU), and they forced them to make some tough shots."

With Dana Ford as the coach, the Tigers rely on their defense. TSU is allowing under 70 points per game, but Tennessee Tech scored 87 points against TSU on Saturday. The Tigers also allowed 77 points against Southeast Missouri State in a loss. In the Tigers' lone OVC win, they held Jacksonville State to only 60 points.

Even though the Tigers lost to Texas earlier this season, they were in the game because of their defense. TSU only gave up 47 points in the one-point loss.

"They play hard all of the time, and they make you make plays," Spoonhour said. "They

do that by putting a ton of pressure on you and (they) force you to put the ball on the floor and make a play."

EIU's offense has struggled in OVC play. The Panthers have only scored more than 60 points in one OVC game this season and are averaging 55.2 points per game in that span. EIU is only shooting 34.2 percent from the field in the last four games.

Still, the Panthers won their last two games. EIU had only nine turnovers against Morehead State and are coming off 14 turnovers against Eastern Kentucky.

TSU's defense has been able to cause turnovers. The Tigers are third in the OVC with 7.4 steals per game.

"They are going to force some turnovers and make some steals," Spoonhour said. "You can't just let them trap you and sit back. You have to go and attack. Whatever that trade off ends up being, that will be the game. (Montell Goodwin) knows his job and what he has to do. Guys like Ray (Crossland), Jajuan (Starks) and Muusa (Dama), they will have the chance to attack and make the right play."

Goodwin leads EIU with 13.6 points per game. Starks is averaging 11.3 points and 5.5 rebounds per game, and Dama is averaging 9.7 points and 6.8 rebounds per game.

The Tigers were held under 70 points in the first three OVC games before breaking through with 81 against Tech on Saturday. It was the first time the Tigers scored 70 or more points since Dec. 2 in a loss to Lipscomb.

Delano Spencer leads the Tigers with 15.4 points per game, and he's made 43 3-pointers this season. Christian Mekowulu averages 12 points and 8.4 rebounds per contest.

"We have to keep guarding and keep rebounding," Spoonhour said. "If we ever stop doing that, one of those guys can get going and (Darreon) Reddick, he can shoot. The numbers don't say that, but he can and he will start making it at some point."

"Neither team can let the other one get into the 70s or else they will probably lose. It's going to be a tough game."



## **Tennessee State 70, Austin Peay 56: 3 things we learned**

*Colton Pouncy - The Leaf-Chronicle - January 18, 2018*

Austin Peay and Tennessee State met at the Gentry Center in Nashville on Thursday night for a matchup between in-state OVC schools.

Both teams battled for much of the game, but in the end, Tennessee State (8-10, 3-4 OVC) pulled away late to defeat the Governors (10-9, 5-2 OVC) 70-56.

Here are three things we learned from the game.

### **GAME OF RUNS IN THE FIRST HALF**

Tennessee jumped out to a 14-7 lead in the first half, using an 11-2 run to go up early. Following a media timeout, the Govs responded with a 16-2 run of their own to go up 23-16 with around eight minutes left in the first half. While Austin Peay didn't shoot the ball particularly well in the first half, they took advantage of second-chance points off offensive rebounds to keep the game close.

Both teams followed up long scoring runs with long scoring droughts, each lasting more than three minutes near the end of the half. Because of that, neither team was able to grab a lead heading into the break, which they entered tied at 28.

### **TSU PULLS AWAY AS APSU STRUGGLES**

Austin Peay went cold in the second half. TSU jumped out to a double-digit lead using a 15-2 run. Unlike the first half, Austin Peay wasn't able to close the gap, missing 10 out of 11 shots at one point as TSU took a 50-39 lead with nine minutes to play. Tennessee State continued to pile on after that, seizing full control of the game in the final ten minutes. The Tigers scored from the free throw line, the three-point line, in the paint and effectively had their way against a good Austin Peay defense.

"We didn't do a very good job of preparing for them," Austin Peay coach Matt Figger said after

the game. "We got outplayed in every aspect of the game."

The Govs struggled to find consistent scoring, shooting just 31 percent for the game, while Tennessee State shot 50 percent from the field and 50 percent from behind the arc in the game. APSU freshman Terry Taylor scored 16 points and grabbed 13 rebounds in the loss. TSU had four players in double figures, led by Kamar McKnight's 13 points.

"We were very aggressive, and quite honestly, when you play someone as good as this team, as tough as this team, that's well coached, you guys really have to execute with some toughness," Tennessee State coach Dana Ford said after the win. "I thought we did that tonight for the most part."

### **OVC OUTLOOK**

With the win, Tennessee State improves to 8-10 on the season and 3-4 in the OVC. The Tigers will host Murray State on Saturday at 7:30 p.m. With the loss, Austin Peay falls to 10-8 on the season and 5-2 in the OVC. The Governors are now tied for second place in the conference and will play conference favorite Belmont on Saturday at 5 p.m.

## ***TSU's Men's Team Falls to the Murray State Racers***

*Mike Patton - Sports Awakening - January 23, 2018*

The Tennessee State men's team touched the court again Saturday night as they took on one of the top teams in the conference, Murray State, and one of the best players in the conference, point guard Jonathan Stark. The Tigers fought hard but eventually they were overwhelmed by the Racers, falling 76-57.

The Tigers came out with energy, defending the basketball well and trying to make the Racers and Stark work offensively. The result early was a 7-6 lead around the 15:39 mark in the first half. From there, the Racers began to play a little better. Stark began to make his presence known, hitting a couple three's and a layup to get up to eight points in the game. Even with him getting his points, the Tigers were still within striking distance at 21-15 with 7:38 left in the first half.

With the deficit at 6, Tennessee State made a 8-2 run to tie the ballgame at 23 with 3:56 left in the half. From there, Murray State would make a 15-3 run to close the half, highlighted by a deep three from Stark to close the half. Stark would go to halftime with 16 points while Tennessee State was led in scoring at that point by Ken'Darrius Hamilton with seven points.

Out of halftime, Tennessee State came out and tried to make a run at the Racers, but the Racers would fend off the Tigers, keeping the lead at 44-33 with a little under sixteen minutes left in the game. From there, the Racers would keep control of the game and eventually close it out. The Tigers fought hard, but untimely shooting and turnovers would ultimately doom them in this one.

The Tigers(8-11, 3-5 in the OVC) were led in scoring by senior guard Delano Spencer with 13 points and redshirt junior forward Christian Mekowulu with 10 points. The Racers (14-5, 6-2 in the OVC) were led by Stark with 25 points and senior Terrell Miller Jr.

and freshman Temetrius "Ja" Morant with 12 points apiece. The Tigers face Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville on Thursday at 7 pm while the Racers face Morehead State next at home on Thursday.

## ***Belmont and Tennessee State ride win streaks into OVC showdown***

*Mike Organ - The Tennessean - February 5, 2018*

Two of the hottest teams in the Ohio Valley Conference — Belmont and Tennessee State — are headed for a crosstown showdown.

The Bruins (19-6, 11-1 OVC) are riding an eight-game win streak and have won 14 of their last 15 games.

The Tigers (12-11, 7-5) are on a four-game win streak and have won five of their last six.

They play Thursday at TSU's Gentry Center (7:30 p.m.).

It's been a huge turnaround for TSU, which fell to 5-8 after losing five out of six games December.

TSU and Belmont will play again 16 days later in the regular season finale at Curb Event Center.

"I think we are a little unlucky that we've got to play them twice late in the year instead of catching them earlier in the year," said Belmont coach Rick Byrd, whose team is in first place in the OVC.

TSU salvaged its season by finally starting to click on offense.

The Tigers, were averaging 64.6 points per game on Dec. 31. Over the last nine games they've averaged 69.4 points.

"They've had some outstanding offensive players in the past, but it looks like their pieces are better overall offensively this year," Byrd said. "They've got really good shooters at the two (Delano Spencer), three (Darreon Reddick) and four (Ken'Darrius Hamilton) spots and obviously inside, along with (Nick) Mayo at Eastern Kentucky, they've got one of the toughest post players in (Christian) Mekowulu to guard in the league."

Spencer averages 14.7 points, Mekowulu 13.3, Hamilton 9.0 and Reddick 7.9.

Along with its improved offense, TSU has also taken charge on the boards and out-rebounded its last four opponents.

"If you don't rebound you're probably going to come out; I've got a short leash with rebounding," coach Dana Ford said. "That's what we've emphasized the last three weeks. The reason we haven't won is because we haven't rebounded. We're starting to rebound like we normally have and we're winning games again."

If Belmont wins it will mark the eight consecutive season the Bruins have won 20 games.

The Bruins have pieced together a winning record this season differently from how they've done it in the past.

Instead of relying heavily on the scoring of one player, such as Evan Bradds the last couple of seasons and Craig Bradshaw before that, the Bruins have featured a more balanced attack.

Because of injuries, illnesses and other issues Belmont has only had eight or nine players available for much of the second half of the season. And knowing that they will likely be called on to contribute has helped each of those players prepare.

"I think the fact that those guys just know that they're going to play has helped us," Byrd said. "There's value to having great depth because you can play guys when they're not tired. But there's also value when the guys get a lot of minutes and they get confident and they get better."

Most notably, Nick Hopkins is averaging 8.1 points and Mack Mercer is averaging 7.3 coming off the bench.

## ***Tennessee State basketball upsets Belmont; snaps Bruins win streak at 8 games***

*Mike Organ - The Tennessean - February 8, 2018*

Not only did Tennessee State keep alive its win streak Thursday night, the Tigers ended Belmont's.

TSU upset the Bruins 64-56 before a Gentry Center crowd of 5,411.

It was the fifth consecutive win for the Tigers (13-11, 8-5 OVC) and snapped the Bruins (19-7, 11-2) win streak at eight games.

The streak matches TSU's longest since winning its first five games last season.

The Tigers' intense defense gave Belmont fits throughout the game. TSU has the third-ranked scoring defense (66.7 ppg.) in the OVC and Belmont has the second-ranked scoring offense (77.7).

TSU held the Bruins scoreless for the final 3:54.

Belmont didn't get into an offensive groove until midway through the second half when the Bruins finally started getting to the basket.

Eight of Belmont's nine baskets in one stretch were layups or short jumpers.

Belmont finally took a 56-55 lead on an alley-oop by Dylan Windler.

That capped a 12-2 run for the Bruins.

TSU, however, answered by finishing the game on a 9-0 run.

TSU's biggest lead in the second half was 37-24. The Tigers were still up 49-39 with 9:45 left.

The Tigers held the Bruins, who shot 44.7 percent (21 of 47) from the field, to their fewest point total since scoring 54 points against Lipscomb on Dec. 4.

TSU is now 26-4 when holding opponents to

under 60 points in coach Dana Ford's four-year tenure.

Christian Mekowulu led the Tigers with a double-double (18 points, 11 rebounds). It was his sixth double-double of the season. Delano Spencer added 14 points.

Amanze Egekeze led Belmont with 16 points. He was 4 of 8 on 3-pointers.

Dry spell: Belmont buckled to TSU's smothering defense midway through the first half.

After taking the lead early, the Bruins went 6:05 without a field goal.

It allowed TSU to go on a 23-6 run.

The Tigers eventually took a 28-15 lead on a 3-pointer by Mekowulu.

A quick recovery: Midway through the first half TSU point guard Armani Chaney got sick and vomited near the bench.

He came out of the game temporarily.

When he returned Chaney quickly hit a jumper to give TSU a 25-15 lead.

Then with just 3.4 seconds left in the first half Chaney drove the length of the court and nailed a 3-pointer from deep on the right wing to give the Tigers a 32-24 advantage at the intermission.

Chaney opened the second half with another 3-pointer from the right wing.

Two out of four: The win was TSU's second over Belmont in the last four meetings in the series. TSU beat the Bruins 87-72 in the final game of the 2015-16 regular season.

Belmont won both games last season.

Next up: TSU plays at Jacksonville State Saturday (7 p.m.). Belmont plays at Tennessee Tech (7:30 p.m.).

## ***The TSU Tigers Have Hit Their Stride***

*Mike Patton - Sports Awakening - February 12, 2018*

The Tennessee State Tigers were not the team they were at the beginning of the season. Everyone was still trying to figure out their roles on the team while they were taking losses. It took them a little while, but now the Tigers have figured it out. They kept up their hot streak this week by beating the top team in the conference, Belmont, and after that, they went down to Jacksonville State and beat them on their home court. The two wins capped off a six-game winning streak and it makes seven of the last eight that Tennessee State has won. The Tigers are one of the toughest outs in the OVC and they are playing to the potential that the coaching staff expected from them. The team, which is headed towards the end of the season, have won six in a row and seven of their last eight. So how did they get this done?

The first thing that has been huge in this surge by the Tigers has been their style of play. During the start of the season, the team seemed to be more perimeter-oriented. They would hoist three-pointers while ignoring the need to attack the paint. As the season went on, however, that mode of operation has changed. The Tigers finally discovered they had a potentially dominant force that was playing center for them and his name was Christian Mekowulu. The Tigers began to feed the ball in the post to him and he began to make defenses pay. That was a great thing to see, but what was even greater was watching them feed Mekowulu on a re-post if he did not have the look he wanted the first time. The result of the Tigers playing inside-out has led to more open shots and easier offense as well. The Tigers are now a tougher team to defend because of all the attention that Mekowulu gets and that was evident in their big win over conference-leader Belmont University.

The Tigers offense has been good but what has been even better is the effort defensively. The

Tigers are contesting shots, having less mental breakdowns and are rebounding the basketball at a great clip. The key, again, is Mekowulu. The redshirt junior is a steady deterrent to those that try to attack the basket. He has been a wall in there when people try to attack the rim. He has been the anchor but the perimeter defense has been even better. Armani Chaney and Darreon Riddick have been vital when it comes to putting pressure on perimeter defenders. The combination of these three players along with the length and effort of the entire team make it a hard task for teams to score on them. The effort on that end of the court has gotten better as the season has gone on and they are now in every game because of their defense.

The Tennessee State Tigers were not a team that many thought of when the OVC started conference play. It may have taken a while, but they have now started to figure out their roles on the team and they are now a team that has to be reckoned with come tournament time in the OVC.

## ***Robert Covington Trusted The Process and It Paid Off***

*Leo Sepkowitz - Slam Magazine - February 22, 2018*

Everybody's got a favorite player. Maybe yours hit a buzzer-beater at your first NBA game and you loved him from then on. For others, it runs deeper. Think of the modest kid who feels connected to the soft-spoken Kawhi Leonard, or the baller practicing to shoot off one leg like Dirk or to fade like Kobe.

Robert Covington has a favorite, too. His was a star on his hometown team. As a kid, Covington adopted the dude's number and played just like him, or at least tried to. Actually, he still does.

"My idol is Scottie Pippen," he says. "People tell me I emulate his game."

Covington stands 6-9, 225, maybe an inch taller than Pip and roughly the same playing weight. Now in his fourth season with the Sixers, he's a modern, trigger-happy take on No. 33. A standard night has him guarding the opponent's best scorer, getting a few steals and blocks, and sinking threes—lots of them, actually, maybe 3 or 5 or 7, often from laughable distance.

Philadelphia may not have a Jordan but they do have ascending superstars in Ben Simmons and Joel Embiid, products of The Process, a rebuild so shameless it developed a cult following. Covington is the ideal complement, that elusive piece that fills the gaps. While Simmons and Embiid occupy overlapping low-post and mid-range space, Covington stands confidently 30 feet from the hoop. While Simmons and Embiid are excellent defenders, it's Covington who spends all night chasing wicked scorers around screens and staying in front of them off the dribble.

"When we got him, he was an unbelievable shooter. Deep range, great form, good size—that was the scouting report," says Lloyd Pierce, a Sixers assistant since 2013. "What we had no clue of was that he can defend 4s

because he's stronger than you think and can move laterally against wings because he's quicker than you think."

This season has been Covington's best in Philly, with nightly averages of roughly 13 points, 5.5 rebounds, 2.5 threes and 1.5 steals. In November, he signed a four-year, \$62 million extension.

"The way this team has been put together, it's incredible how everything unfolded," Covington says. "There's so much we're capable of." In addition to the big three, there is Markelle Fultz, June's No. 1 pick; Dario Saric, a creative second-year forward; Richaun Holmes and TJ McConnell, who thrive in bench roles; and JJ Redick, who is JJ Redick.

"I want to be looked at as a guy who does his job and doesn't step outside that boundary," RC says. In practice, he and Pierce have an 80-20 rule: 80 percent of their time is spent on shooting, 20 percent on what Pierce calls the random moments of basketball, like slashing or finishing with the wrong hand. "I don't step outside myself," Covington adds. "I don't do anything that will make my teammates or coaches look crazy at me like, What is that?"

Covington, 27, is spending an afternoon at Spin, a ping-pong lounge by Philly's Center City. He's a regular—in fact, he attended this spot's ribbon cutting ceremony—and he likes to boast about the backspin he puts on serves. Since childhood, he has welcomed any competition—in ping pong, basketball, football, hockey—you name it.

Covington grew up in what he describes as a stable home. His stepfather, whom he calls his dad, worked at a post office. "He was around all the time," Covington says. "How I carry myself is based off what my dad told me."

Covington's mother worked at a sporting goods store, and the family received discounts on company products. All the extra merchandise made Covington and his two younger brothers local heroes. "Our home was like a haven, everyone would come and have fun," he says. "My mom put a rim in the backyard, and all summer, we was outside playing basketball."

Still, as a teenager, Covington was unheralded. He didn't have the strength to shoot from deep, and his coach at Chicago's Proviso West High picked on him for being soft. Into his sophomore year, he rode the pine, playing behind a dude four inches shorter than him.

With limited burn, one could say that Covington's trajectory began not on court during games but on off-days in the gym. The facility had a track with lines on the court, and he used them to devise an odd training regimen.

He'd start on the track line nearest the hoop, holding a medicine ball. He had two chances to convert from that distance, and if he succeeded, he'd step back one line, and try it from there, and so on, until he could retreat no farther without missing two straight. Then he'd swap out the medicine ball for a regular Spalding and fire away. At times, he could reach past half court, back by the opposite free-throw line.

By his senior year, Covington was a force. He emerged as not only a lights-out shooter but an adaptable defender, too. At one point, he took over at center for Proviso West and set a school record for most blocks in a game with 35 (yes, you read that correctly). College coaches started coming by, but for a while, there were no D-I offers. Before graduation, he attended a showcase for unsigned seniors in Deerfield, GA. That's where Dana Ford first saw him.

## ***Robert Covington Trusted The Process and It Paid Off (CONT.)***

*Leo Sepkowitz - Slam Magazine - February 22, 2018*

"He was scoring, rebounding, assisting, blocking, stealing—a little bit of everything," remembers Ford, who had just been hired as an assistant at Tennessee State University. "His demeanor was Pippen-ish. He wasn't a very loud player, just really focused. He just went about his business, and you look at the stat sheet and he's got 2 of everything, and that's what Pippen was to me."

Covington spent four seasons at TSU (a notch up from Pippen's Central Arkansas). He posted impressive numbers but went undrafted in '13, perhaps arriving a beat too soon, just ahead of the 3-and-D boom.

After the draft, Covington signed with the Rockets and spent most of his first season in the D-League, where he won Rookie of the Year. He was waived in the fall of 2014 amid a roster crunch and the Sixers quickly signed him.

As The Process dragged on through three seasons, RC logged heavy minutes and refined his game. On a team that needed everything, he shined: a couple steals here, a few boards there, a bucket or two and so on. Last year, Embiid debuted alongside him, and this year it was Simmons' turn. And now the Sixers are in the playoff hunt.

Embiid has stated that The Process does not and cannot come to completion. Instead, one Process rolls into the next and the next after that, that "it's just a cycle," that life is The Process.

One could take this to mean that Covington's Process is nowhere near finished, and that it never belonged to or began with him, anyway. After all, he's not the first No. 33 from an unsung school whose two-way power propels a captivating team. We've seen that Process before. Robert Covington just picked it up where it was last seen—back in Chica-

go, in the '90s—and reshaped it, pushed it forward, brought it into an age when, as it happens, one 3 always demands another.



## ***TSU has OVC's top defender once again***

*David Bocclair - Nashville Post - February 27, 2018*

Christian Mekowulu is not the first Tennessee State University player to be named the Ohio Valley Conference's Defensive Player of the Year, which is a first.

The conference began naming a top defender in 2008-09. In the first nine seasons, five different players — from five different schools — won the award, including three multi-time winners led by Morehead State's Kenneth Faried, a three-time winner.

Mekowulu was named the 2018 Defensive Player of the Year on Tuesday, when the OVC announced its all-conference honors. He followed former Tigers standout Tahjere McCall, who won it each of the previous two seasons.

That made TSU the first school to have two different players earn the award.

Mekowulu, a junior, is second in the OVC with an average of 1.6 blocked shots per game and sixth in rebounds at 7.8 per contest. He blocked multiple shots in 13 contests and was the Tigers' leading rebounder 22 times. He also contributed 27 steals, third on the team.

As a team, TSU forces turnovers on 23.5 percent of its opponents' possessions. The Tigers finished the regular season third in the conference in scoring defense (66.1 points per game), fifth in field goal percentage defense (42.7) and third in turnover margin (plus-0.83).

Mekowulu also was named to the All-OVC second team.

## ***Once a 'Bambi on ice,' Nigerian big man now 'godsend' for Tennessee State basketball***

*Joe Rexrode - The Tennessean - February 28, 2018*

Christian Mekowulu may never love the food. Burgers don't do it for him. The Tennessee State junior forward from Lagos, Nigeria, is fine with some rice and chicken, but he needs those care packages from his parents.

"Fufu and egusi," he said of a starchy vegetable mixture and a popular Nigerian soup. "Kind of like mashed potatoes and gravy."

All other aspects of living in this country suit Mekowulu just fine, especially the sport that increasingly looks like it will provide him a career path. Discovered at a camp in his home country — after converting from soccer at age 13 because of his height — and signed to Dana Ford's first TSU class in 2014 as a throw-in, Mekowulu is one of the best stories in the Ohio Valley Conference. And one of the best players.

Ford called him "Bambi on ice" when he was a freshman, falling down all the time and still trying to grasp the game. Then Mekowulu tore the ACL in his right knee in a practice drill and missed his sophomore year. He returned in a support role behind Wayne Martin last season, and he's at 12.6 points, 7.8 rebounds an OVC-co-leading 1.6 blocks per game as a fourth-year junior and team captain. He was named OVC Defensive Player of the Year and All-OVC second team Tuesday.

"That's why I keep saying 'godsend' when I talk about him," Ford said of Mekowulu. "His best basketball is still ahead of him. If we can put the right pieces around him, develop the pieces we have and add a couple more in the spring, we really feel like he's a guy that could possibly get us to the next level. If he has another offseason like he's been having, we can have a shot at winning this thing."

But what about right now?

"We're good enough to beat anyone," Ford said of the OVC Tournament that starts Wednesday

in Evansville, Ind. "We're bad enough to lose to anyone."

The Tigers (15-14, 10-8 OVC) are the No. 6 seed, taking on No. 7 seed Eastern Illinois (11-18, 7-11) in Wednesday's first round at Evansville's Ford Center. A win would mean a Thursday matchup against first-year coach Matt Figgers and No. 3 seed Austin Peay. The winner of that game would get a shot at No. 2 seed Belmont on Friday — so the bracket dictates just one Nashville team can make Saturday's final for a shot at an NCAA automatic bid.

This sets up for a showdown between the Bruins and No. 1 seed Murray State, but you can't count on anything in this or any league tournament. Belmont was the top seed and clear best team a year ago and lost to Jacksonville State in the semis. If a surprise threat is going to emerge, TSU is an intriguing candidate.

"I think we've got a pretty good chance to win it all," Mekowulu said. "For real, I think we do, we've just got to stick to our game plan and what we do. We play defense and when we play our defense I think we can beat anyone in the country."

That defense, Ford's staple, was broken by 20 Belmont threes in an 84-59 loss Saturday, capping a three-game losing streak for the Tigers to end the regular season. That was preceded by a seven-game winning streak, including a 64-56 win over Belmont, with the defense suffocating and shots from Delano Spencer and others falling. And with Mekowulu anchoring both ends.

He is a rarity anymore, a big man who lives in the post. But he has the mobility to do more. And his improvement this season in diagnosing double teams and making opponents pay for them has been dramatic. Just a year ago, Ford wasn't sure if Mekowulu would get there and was hesitant to give him the ball inside.

"I think I've improved a lot," Mekowulu said, "but my potential is nowhere close to being tapped."

The second-youngest of seven children, Mekowulu moved to the United States after he was discovered, playing high school ball for Covenant Christian Ministries Academy in Marietta, Ga. He had some interest from Old Dominion and others as a big-man project, but Ford only heard about him because he hired Randy Peele to be his associate head coach.

Peele, who has been to three NCAA tournaments as a head coach, was a Georgia Southern assistant at the time and had seen Mekowulu play. He saw possibility in the frame and personality.

"TSU was the only school that actually, like, showed me they wanted me," Mekowulu said.

"At that time we didn't have a team, we had one player in the locker room when I got the job, and I just basically told Randy, 'I don't care who you've got, let's bring him in, let's put him in a jersey for this first year and go from there,'" Ford recalled. "Beggars couldn't be choosy. There's no credit on our behalf, to be quite honest."

Except that coaching is a part of player development, and Mekowulu's game is miles from what it was when he arrived. The 22-year-old social science major also does everything right off the floor, Ford said, adding: "If my sons grow up to be like this kid, I'll be a proud Dad."

He has not yet embraced American food. He has not yet realized his potential. But Mekowulu has something that isn't easy to find in players, let alone big men, regardless of national origin.

"I'm obsessed with basketball," he said.

# **Tennessee State basketball season ends with loss to E. Illinois in the OVC Tournament**

*Mike Organ - The Tennessean - February 28, 2018*

Tennessee State limped to the end of the regular season on a three-game losing streak and then made an early exit from the Ohio Valley Conference Tournament Wednesday night after coming up short against Eastern Illinois 73-71.

The No. 6 seed Tigers (15-15) tried to rally in the final 48 seconds after falling behind 69-62 at the Ford Center in Evansville, Ind.

They took advantage of seventh-seeded EIU missing six of its last 10 free throws and cut the deficit to two after Delano Spencer made a 3-pointer with 10.5 seconds remaining and a layup with 4.7 to go.

Spencer, however, missed a long 3-pointer at the buzzer.

"I was proud of our guys for consistently challenging down the stretch," TSU coach Dana Ford said. "You have to give (EIU) credit; they were able to answer all of our challenges."

Spencer led TSU with 17 points while Armani Chaney, who fouled out with 43.2 seconds left, and Christian Mekowulu each scored 15. EIU held Mekowulu to just two points in the second half.

"They were doing a good job on Mekowulu, especially in the second half," Ford said. "He couldn't break loose. Honestly, I don't know if EIU did a lot to stop Mekowulu. I don't know. I've got to go back and watch the tape."

Mekowulu posted a double-double by grabbing a game-high 12 rebounds. It was his ninth career double-double.

Montell Goodwin led EIU with 20 points and freshman Mack Smith added 15.

It was EIU's first win in the OVC Tournament since beating Austin Peay in 2001 at Municipal

Auditorium.

The Panthers (12-18), who lost to TSU twice in the regular season, advanced to the quarter-finals where they will play No. 3 seed Austin Peay Thursday at 8:30 p.m.

EIU failed to ice it  
The Panthers had a 73-66 lead with 15.3 seconds left.

Spencer cut it to 73-69 with his third 3-pointer with 10.5 left and the Tigers were forced to foul as soon as EIU took possession.

The Panthers could have put the game out of reach at the point, but missed their last four free throws in the final 4.7 seconds, which left the Tigers with a chance at the end.

"We're a never quit group," Chaney said. "Coach always tells us to keep grinding. We always feel like we've got a chance to win the game regardless of what the score is."

EIU made just 58.1 percent (18 of 31) of its free throws.

## **Tigers starting center benched**

TSU starting center Ken'Darrius Hamilton did not play. The explanation for his benching was a coach's decision.

The 6-foot-9 senior started in 26 of 28 regular season games.

He averaged 8.5 points and 4.2 rebounds.

Junior Stokley Chaffee, a transfer from Las Positas College (Cal.), got his second start replacing Hamilton in the lineup.

He finished with nine points and six rebounds.

## **TSU was sloppy early**

Turnovers were a huge problem for much of

the game for TSU.

With 3:39 left in the first half the Tigers had 10 turnovers and just 13 points.

Then early in the second half they had 12 turnovers and 12 field goals.

They cleaned it up as the pace of the game finally picked up midway through the second half and committed just three turnovers in the final 13:15 to finish with a total of 15.

The Panthers weren't much better. They had 14 turnovers.

## **Finishing in a slump**

TSU put together a seven-game win streak from Jan. 25-Feb. 15.

The Tigers, however, ended the season with four consecutive losses, marking their worst finish since coach Dana Ford's first year (2014-15) when they lost their last eight games.

TSU has not won an OVC Tournament game since 2013.

## **Where's the crowd?**

This is the first year the OVC Tournament has been played at the Ford Center.

It previously was played at Municipal Auditorium in Nashville.

The announced attendance for the TSU-EIU game was only 654.

## ***Missouri State hires Dana Ford of Tennessee State as next head coach***

*Jeff Goodman and Jeff Borzello - ESPN.com - March 21, 2018*

Missouri State has hired Tennessee State basketball coach Dana Ford.

Missouri State will introduce Ford at a Thursday news conference.

Ford, 33, has been the head coach of the Tigers for four seasons. He led them to records of .500 or better in each of the past three seasons, and they advanced to the CIT in 2016. Ford is 57-65 in his four seasons, but 52-39 since a 5-26 debut campaign.

Prior to taking over at Tennessee State, Ford spent time as an assistant coach at Illinois State, Wichita State, Tennessee State and Chipola College.

Ford replaces Paul Lusk, whose teams failed to finish better than third in the Missouri Valley Conference in his seven seasons at the helm.

## ***Nashville native named TSU basketball coach***

*David Bocclair - Nashville Post - March 26, 2018*

Brian “Penny” Collins, a Nashville native and former Belmont point guard, is Tennessee State’s new men’s basketball coach.

that lend well to success in this business. He is here to build champions and win championships.”

The school announced the hire Monday morning and will formally introduce Collins at a press conference Monday morning.

Collins replaces Dana Ford, who left last week to become head coach at Missouri State.

“It means the world to me to be the Head Coach at TSU,” Collins said in a release. “Once I decided to get into the business, my eyes were always set on this job. To have the opportunity to not only unite an institution, but also a city where I grew up in, is priceless. This is truly a dream come true that I will not take for granted.”

Collins began his coaching career as a graduate assistant at TSU (2007-08). After one year, he was promoted to director of operations.

He spent last season as an assistant coach at Illinois State. In between he was head coach at Columbia State for three seasons (2012-15), where he went 54-11 and led his team to back-to-back appearances in the National Junior College Tournament. He also was an assistant coach at Cumberland University (2009-12) and East Tennessee State (2015-16).

As a player, Collins was a four-year starter at point guard and a two-year captain under Rick Byrd at Belmont. He scored 1,199 points for his career and helped lead the Bruins to their first NCAA Tournament appearance.

A graduate of Whites Creek High School, he played professional basketball for one season before he embarked on his coaching career.

“I am extremely pleased to have one of our own as our new head men’s basketball coach,” athletics director Teresa Phillips said. “Coach Collins will bring fresh enthusiasm to our program as well as an energy to the Gentry Center that is much needed. He is a thinker, leader, motivator and competitor — all attributes

## **Brian Collins will switch recruiting focus to local talent for Tennessee State basketball**

*Mike Organ - The Tennessean - March 26, 2018*

Tennessee State has signed just two local high school basketball players over the last three years.

That's about to change.

New TSU coach Brian "Penny" Collins grew up playing basketball in Nashville and vowed Monday to target the local community in recruiting.

Even before he found out how many scholarships he has to offer, the former Whites Creek and Belmont standout said his search for new players will start in town.

"We're going to recruit locally, and we're going to try to get the best players out of the city," Collins said. "Even when I was away from Nashville, I wanted to get the best guys from the city for whatever school I was at."

The only local players former TSU coach Dana Ford signed in his four seasons were M.L. King's Jalen Duke and Lighthouse Christian's Tripp Davis in 2015.

Before that Jaleel Queary, who graduated from Maplewood in 2011, transferred to TSU in 2013 after attending Lawson State Junior College.

### **It's what he's always done**

Collins has a long history of recruiting in Nashville. He scoured the area when he was on the staffs at TSU (2008-09) and Cumberland (2009-12), the head coach at Columbia State Community College (2012-15), an assistant at East Tennessee State (2015-17) and at Illinois State (2017-18).

"When I was at Columbia State we tried to get the best guys from Nashville, and then when I went to East Tennessee State I brought the best guys from the Middle Ten-

nessee area," Collins said.

Most notably, Collins lured two-time Class AA Mr. Basketball Bo Hodges from Maplewood to ETSU last year. Hodges was named the Southern Conference Freshman of the Year in February.

In the one season he spent at Illinois State Collins signed 6-foot-9 Summit post Demontay Dixon.

Even before he had been introduced as TSU's new coach at a news conference Monday, Collins said he had received tips on local players he should check on.

"I've already gotten an enormous amount of phone calls and text messages about 'Recruit this guy, recruit that guy,'" he said. "I'm going to try to get the best player out of Nashville every year and they're going to have to tell me 'no.' Obviously, you can't say, 'I'm going to have a team full of only Nashville players.' I am also going to recruit nationally. But there are plenty of good players right here."

### **Local talent draws bigger crowds**

TSU's average attendance at Gentry Center over the last three seasons was 2,360.

A roster with more local players could improve fan support.

"That's definitely going to help," Collins said. "We're hoping that the hiring by itself should get the party started. But we're definitely going to recruit people that the community can recognize. Once those guys commit and sign, that should increase attendance for our games."

Athletics director Teresa Phillips is counting on it.

"That's a no-brainer, that you're going to get more local support if you have local players out on the court for you," she said. "Brian believes that he can develop people from out of this area."