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Jordan Wright's Senior Night performance vs. MSU a sign of how far Vanderbilt basketball has come
Aria Gerson - Tennessean
March 4, 2023

Jordan Wright committed to play for Jerry Stackhouse before the Vanderbilt basketball coach had even filled out his staff.

Since then, he's mostly endured losing. But in a season that has been full of ups and downs, Wright has finally turned his fortunes in what could be his last handful of games at Vanderbilt.

Wright, who participated in the team's pregame Senior Night ceremony, led the way with 19 points in a 77-72 win over Mississippi State (20-11, 8-10 SEC) after scoring 23, including the game-winning shot, in a win over Kentucky. Wright hit all six of his free throws to help seal the victory.

Vanderbilt (18-13, 11-7) clinched its first winning SEC season and first time finishing in the top half of the league since 2016-17, thanks in part to Wright's performance.

When asked what spurred his success from the line, Wright said simply: "I've been around for a long time."

Wright has come off the bench for most of the season and averaged 9.8 points per game, a step back from 12.3 a year ago. But when Vanderbilt has needed him most, after center and leading scorer Liam Robbins went down with a season-ending injury, Wright stepped up and led the team down the stretch.

"Jordan came out, he was assertive from the start of the game," Stackhouse said. "... Without Liam, now we got to do a little bit more collectively but we do need Tyrin (Lawrence) and Jordan and those guys to assume more of a role for us as far as producing, not just scoring but facilitating as well, and I thought they both did a great job."

In addition to his scoring output, Wright added six rebounds, three assists and a steal. His 33 minutes tied a season high. Before the Kentucky win, Wright hadn't scored in double digits since a Feb. 11 win over Florida.

Wright, who still has one more year of eligibility remaining, hasn't officially announced whether he will return for a fifth season. It's also unclear if Vanderbilt will have any more home games this year. If selected for the NIT, the Commodores could host much like they did last season. But none of that is guaranteed, and if this was Wright's final home game, he made sure it was a strong way to go out.

"The love that I have for these guys and this whole coaching staff," Wright said. "... I was here before a lot of people that are here today. So I'm just watching the program change. I'm just talking about, in my freshman year I didn't win a game in January. And in the month of March and February, I haven't lost yet (at Memorial Gymnasium). So just to show that things could turn around and the job that coach Stackhouse is doing, I'm just proud to be a part of it."

Why Jerry Stackhouse promised Tyrin Lawrence he'd be his father figure at Vanderbilt

Aria Gerson - Tennessean

Feb. 7, 2023

Vanderbilt basketball coach Jerry Stackhouse said that he has a father-son like relationship with guard Tyrin Lawrence.

Lawrence was held out of a 101-44 loss to Alabama last week after Stackhouse was upset with his demeanor in practice. But Lawrence subsequently scored 18 points with 10 rebounds in a win over Ole Miss four days later, the first double-double of his career. After that game, Stackhouse said the two were on the same page following a one-on-one meeting.

Stackhouse elaborated on that Tuesday, saying he promised to serve as a father-like figure for Lawrence after the death of his father.

“Tyrin lost his dad and a lot of the reason that he came to Vanderbilt was because I promised him that I would be a father figure and to his mom, so ... it's a lot more than just a damn game,” Stackhouse said. “We're in the business of affecting these guys' lives in a lot of ways. I'm going to be at Tyrin Lawrence's wedding. When he had his first child, we were the ones that was encouraging him and letting him know that you know, we still had his back, that (chief of staff Adell Harris) would change some diapers for him if we needed to, so that's what we're about.”

Stackhouse said he felt Lawrence had enough talent to play professionally but that he wouldn't get there if he didn't step up, and that it was a message Lawrence needed to hear. Stackhouse said he has done similar to other players on the roster; he benched wing Jordan Wright in the second half of a loss to Kentucky due to low effort.

Vanderbilt (11-12, 4-6 SEC) faces No. 5 Tennessee (19-4, 8-2) on Wednesday (6 p.m. CT, SEC Network).

“Even though I critique them and I coach them hard at the same time I tell them I love them,” Stackhouse said. “And it's not just fluff. I mean if it came down to it and I had to go and do something to protect Tyrin Lawrence and his family, that's what I would do.”

This win at Rupp Arena was Jerry Stackhouse's Vanderbilt basketball masterpiece

Gentry Estes - Tennessean

March 2, 2023

This was both terrible and terrific, the kind of awful moment that can instantly kill a season becoming this milestone moment.

Vanderbilt basketball lost star center Liam Robbins to injury, probably for the rest of the season, and then it won in Kentucky's Rupp Arena for the first time in 16 years.

So much emotion poured into a couple of hours that it spilled out in funny places, those you'd least expect.

Through Vanderbilt coach Jerry Stackhouse, for instance.

Yes, he teared up after this one. One of the baddest, toughest, most fearsome players the NBA has seen. That Jerry Stackhouse. His eyes watered up as he sat next to senior Jordan Wright, the Vanderbilt player who'd scored 23 points and the biggest two of a 68-66 victory, nailing a clutch jumper for the win with 2.7 seconds remaining.

"This is the first guy that I signed at Vanderbilt," Stackhouse said of Wright. "I get a little bit emotional with this one right here. That's what it's about.

"This is a great moment for us," he continued, choking up, "a great moment for our program."

Indeed.

This was Stackhouse's Vanderbilt masterpiece thus far. Not just because Vanderbilt needed this win. Not just because it came after Robbins' injury or by way of heroics from Wright or Tyrin Lawrence, who had 21 points, or whoever else. Not just because it made victories in seven out of Vanderbilt's last eight games, a brilliant run that still probably won't be enough for the NCAA Tournament unless it can manage to win the SEC Tournament next week.

"I mean, they've won some good games and they've beaten some good teams," UK coach John Calipari said, "and we're one of them."

And not just because Calipari's resurgent Kentucky was on fire, having won four in a row, beating Tennessee by a dozen points in Rupp Arena before whipping Auburn by 32 here this past weekend.

It's because Stackhouse stood in this same building four seasons ago and guaranteed, "We're going to come in here and get these people one day. I can promise you that."

He lived up to it Wednesday night, and I'm still not sure how without Robbins.

That injury — coming less than five minutes into the game — felt like a harbinger of the end. And not just for tonight. For Vanderbilt's lingering hopes this season.

It was bad. It looked bad. For a player with a history of foot injuries, it was even worse. Robbins was clearly in pain. He sat on the hardwood, holding the area near his right foot. He was helped off the court, not putting any weight on that foot. It was bad.

The timing was so cruel, too. Robbins had been crushing it lately. The past five games, he'd averaged 24.2 points and 10 rebounds. He has been a big-time player — blocking shots, shooting 3s, all of it. A team doesn't just lose that in Rupp Arena and keep going all the same.

But just as you are crafting the obit on Vanderbilt's season, the Commodores kept playing, and the Wildcats kept missing shots, and the game stayed close and before you knew it, Vandy had an 11-point lead.

Without Robbins, the Commodores had adjusted. They played small. UK's big man Oscar Tshiebwe began getting the ball on every possession. He had 20 rebounds and 21 points, 11 of them coming on 15 free throws, and he nearly rescued Kentucky's Senior Night on his own. After a night of trying to hang with Tshiebwe on the boards, three of Vanderbilt's better players — including Wright — had four fouls in the final moments.

Vanderbilt guard Jordan Wright (4) drained a bucket for the lead as the final seconds ticked away as the Commodores faced off against the Kentucky Wildcats in Rupp Arena on Wednesday evening. Kentucky fell to Vandy 68-66. Mar. 1, 2023
When Tshiebwe scored over Quentin Millora-Brown (and his four fouls) with 1:10 remaining, Rupp erupted and Kentucky had its first lead of the second half.

OK, surely, that would sink the ship, right?

This win at Rupp Arena was Jerry Stackhouse's Vanderbilt basketball masterpiece

Gentry Estes - Tennessean

March 2, 2023

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Silly us for thinking it. Wright scored. Kentucky missed, giving Vandy the last shot. Ezra Manjon dribbled toward Stackhouse, seemingly ready to call a timeout. But he didn't. Stackhouse wanted to keep going, thus taking advantage of the transition and not allowing UK's players to set up defensively after easing up and expecting Vandy to call that timeout.

"Kind of a fake timeout there," Wright said. "We wanted to get Ezra down here and catch them off-guard. They were kind of ready for it. But after that, I just told him, 'Ezra, give me the ball.' Coach trusted me in that moment. I just got to my spot and made the shot."

As Stackhouse noted through tears, it was perfect for Wright to be the one to deliver this victory.

And yet the night was so flawed, too. Robbins' injury was a major blow to the Commodores' chances at the SEC Tournament at Bridgestone Arena next week. It's ridiculous to suggest otherwise. And if they don't win out at Bridgestone, well, it'll probably be the NIT again. Again, that's just realistic. It's the consequence of too many poor performances early staining the NCAA resume too much to be scrubbed clean now.

For about the past month, though, Vanderbilt has looked like an NCAA Tournament team. It's a team that continued to work to find itself, and it did, albeit later in the season than you would have liked.

Nonetheless, Stackhouse and his players should be proud of what they are accomplishing.

And never more so than Wednesday night.

For Jerry Stackhouse, this win over Tennessee — and the smile it created — was long time coming

Gentry Estes - Tennessean

Feb. 8, 2023

Ever seen a heavy burden lifted off someone's shoulders in an instant?

Once the 3-point shot heard round the state splashed through the net at Memorial Gymnasium, I watched Vanderbilt basketball coach Jerry Stackhouse throw his hands in the air, carefree, child-like, and start high-stepping on the hardwood, barely noticing his players celebrating as students swarmed the court.

But then he stopped abruptly, turned and looked frantically for a striped shirt.

Did it count? Had Vanderbilt's Tyrin Lawrence released it in time? Stackhouse wasn't certain.

They were going to review the replay and make sure, referee Tony Greene told him. But the officials already knew the answer. Lawrence had beaten the buzzer, just barely, and Vanderbilt's 66-65 win had finally halted its 11-game losing streak against rival Tennessee — just barely as well.

"I couldn't contain myself," Stackhouse said. "I hugged Tony Greene."

This creaky, old gym has seen a lot of unforgettable moments over the years, but Lawrence's shot will rank up there for a long time, largely due to the circumstances. It was a long time coming for Vanderbilt's program. Not just to beat Tennessee. But to win any game of this magnitude at home, where Memorial had gradually lost its magic, attendance declining along with results on the court.

In his fourth season at Vanderbilt, Stackhouse was toiling without a so-called signature win. Beating Rick Barnes and Tennessee would qualify, but it wasn't likely. These Commodores entered Wednesday night a mediocre 11-12 and 4-6 in the SEC, having just swallowed a humbling 57-point whipping at Alabama, hinting at a team drifting further off course and away from a realistic chance at Vanderbilt's first NCAA Tournament bid since 2017.

Fans have been grumbling. Pressure has been mounting.

This win may not change everything for Vanderbilt's season. But it sure does boost the Commodores' spirits and confidence, making them a tougher out for opponents the rest of the way.

"Now they believe," Stackhouse said of his players. "I've been telling them, because I believe in them, and I believe in what they are capable and able to do. But you need something like this to happen for them to really believe it, too."

Indeed, big wins can change a basketball season. Few finishes, though, are like what Stackhouse and Vanderbilt enjoyed Wednesday night, frustration having built up and being alleviated at once in stunning fashion. A frantic finish to a highly entertaining, close game that looked to have — once again — fallen the other way despite the Commodores' best efforts.

That made it a brutal loss for fifth-ranked Tennessee. The Vols had it won in the final seconds, up 65-63 with the basketball.

About five different things had to happen in order for them to blow it.

Vanderbilt had to deliberately foul five times in about seven seconds to reach the bonus. During that stretch, Vols freshman Julian Phillips turned down an open dunk that could have pushed the lead to four points, unwisely opting to dribble and run an extra second or two before getting fouled.

"He'll learn from it," Barnes said, "but he's got to (score) that."

Santiago Vescovi — a career 80% free-throw shooter — missed the front end of a 1-and-1. The Vols, the SEC's best on the offensive boards, failed to secure the rebound.

Then what irked Barnes the most is that the nation's best defensive team did what it hardly ever does. It broke down defensively to leave Lawrence alone in the corner behind the 3-point line, where Ezra Manjon found him.

Wouldn't you just know it'd be Lawrence, too? The talented junior that Stackhouse benched last week against Alabama for what the coach said were disciplinary reasons.

"Everybody wants to feel like you can go from skyscraper to skyscraper, but that's not life," Stackhouse said. "That's not how you grow. You've got to have those peaks and valleys. You've got to have those ebbs and flows."

For Jerry Stackhouse, this win over Tennessee — and the smile it created — was long time coming

Gentry Estes - Tennessean

Feb. 8, 2023

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Then he paused for a moment.

“We’ve had some ebbs. Now it’s beginning to flow a little bit. It feels good.”

Amid the melee that followed Lawrence’s shot, Barnes was classy as ever. He walked past midcourt, around the swarm to embrace Stackhouse. “I’m so proud of you,” the former Clemson coach of the 1990s told the former North Carolina star player of the 1990s. “Those words mean a lot,” Stackhouse said. “I respect that guy so much and know what he’s about.”

Stackhouse dedicated the win to Vanderbilt’s fans, students, players, their families, his assistant coaches, their families and to his boss, athletics director Candice Lee, who was beaming in the back of the press conference room.

While I’m sure everyone above could use a win like this, none needed it more than Stackhouse himself.

On Tuesday afternoon, Stackhouse answered a question on another topic when he changed the subject and griped about how much the newspaper prints photos of him frowning during games. “I don’t frown all the time. I smile. I’ve got a pretty smile,” he said, flashing it in my direction.

It occurred to me that I really hadn’t seen the man smile. I hadn’t had much reason to see him smile.

On Wednesday night, that was no longer the case. A weight had been lifted, if only for an evening.

“I’ve stopped trying to fight all these battles and let the man upstairs fight them,” Stackhouse said. “He saw fit for us to win this one tonight. I’m thankful for that.”

At times, when his schedule allows, Liam Robbins will take long walks by himself.

These walks give him a moment to clear his mind, to pray and to reflect on how far he has come, where he is today and just how far he has to go.

“My uncle once told me that comparing is a fool’s errand,” Robbins said, introspectively, about his journey. “Not everyone sees success at the same time.”

Having played 31 games at Vanderbilt, Robbins is starting to find some consistent and major success with the Commodores. The senior leads Vandy (8-8, 1-2 SEC) into another crucial league matchup at 1 p.m. Saturday against visiting No. 15 Arkansas (12-3, 1-3 SEC). He is intent on nothing more than getting Vanderbilt back into March Madness.

The Does will need everything Robbins has to return to that promised land.

LOOKING UP AT LIAM

It doesn’t take long to find that Robbins’ story has been detailed thoroughly for the past five or so years. Local newspapers, regional television, the Big Ten Network—they have all chronicled how Robbins went from a high schooler of average height to an overweight 7-footer to a college basketball standout.

Going into his junior year of high school, Robbins was about 6-foot-2, maybe inching toward 6-foot-3. Over the next 12 months, though, the Davenport, Iowa, native began a sustained, gradual growth pattern: quarter-inch here, a half-inch there. It was exhausting. And Robbins was constantly hungry.

So he ate and ate and ate, but he was too tired to do much physical activity. By the time his senior season of basketball started at Assumption High School, he stood 7 feet tall—and weighed 300 pounds.

“I was just putting on weight and not even realizing it,” Robbins said. “When you’re 7-foot and weigh 300 pounds, that might look a little different than someone who might be 6-foot.”

Robbins was not a star at Assumption. He played enough to be an integral part of the team, but he was not by any means a high-level college basketball prospect.

Still, Robbins was contacted and recruited by programs at the Division II and Division III level.

“I actually felt very blessed to have D-II teams looking at me. I didn’t really play a lot in high school, so the fact that a D-II team wanted me to play—I was excited about that,” Robbins said. “At the same time, I was competing against D-I guys and was like, ‘You know, I’m not that far off. I just hit this growth spurt, and I’m still figuring out this body.’”

“I didn’t love the prep school idea at first because I was going to graduate and all my friends were going to start college. But then if I went to junior college, your eligibility clock starts.”

At a crossroads in his basketball journey, Robbins rolled the dice and left home for the first time.

A SUNRISE IN KANSAS

Robbins had long conversations with his uncle Duffy Conroy, also a veteran basketball coach, about his athletic future. In the end, the two decided, the best route was for Robbins to buy more time.

Conroy got in touch with Achoki Moikobu, the head coach at Sunrise Christian Academy in Bel Aire, Kansas, and called in a favor. His nephew needed a place to play, to grow and to develop.

“I was very blessed to have someone in my family to make that call,” Robbins said. “(Moikobu) called me and said, ‘This is going to be the hardest year of your life.’ But he said, ‘If you do what I ask you, you’ll be a better basketball player.’ And that really intrigued me.”

In the summer of 2017, Robbins left Iowa for Kansas. What would follow is what Robbins now refers to as “hell month.”

At 5 a.m. each day, Robbins and his teammates would walk to a nearby football field (half a mile away, Robbins estimates) and do conditioning. That workout was followed by Bible study and class, then an hour of skill work and an hour of weightlifting before a small break. From 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., the team practiced.

Blockin' Robbins

Chad Bishop - VUCommodores.com

Jan. 13, 2023

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Robbins, meanwhile, had also been put on an intermittent fasting plan to help him lose weight. The struggle was doubly tough on him.

When Robbins returned to Iowa in December on break, he had lost 60 pounds and was nearly unrecognizable to family and friends.

“It was tough, but I think that was one of my favorite times of my life,” Robbins said.

DESTINY IN DES MOINES

Robbins argues that the Quad Cities region of Iowa and Illinois is brimming with basketball talent. It was there that Robbins learned and fell in love with the game.

Kyle LaMonte, a former Southern Mississippi guard and professional, organized pickup games for area prospects, college players and pros in the area—including Robbins. Thus, Robbins was competing against high-level basketball talent before he ever began his own collegiate career.

That gave Robbins the confidence to gamble on spending a year at Sunrise. It then allowed him to be fearless in a chance competition against former Drake star Nick McGlynn.

Still somewhat under the radar as a Division I recruit, Robbins originally committed to play basketball at Western Illinois. When new Drake assistant coach Matt Woodley phoned Robbins and asked if he'd be interested in an open tryout to play for the Bulldogs, however, Robbins began to reconsider.

Robbins showed up to the Des Moines, Iowa, school one spring day and admits he doesn't really recall what happened next. He knows he worked out for nearly two hours and held his own against McGlynn.

“I had just decided to stay at Drake for my senior year,” McGlynn said. “Woodley brought Liam in, and I might have been there by coincidence? Or I was brought in for my regular workout and Liam just happened to pop in.”

Hours after the workout, Robbins was offered a full scholarship to play for Drake.

Robbins would play 65 games for the Bulldogs between 2018 and 2020. He averaged more than 14 points and seven rebounds to go along with 2.9 blocks per game while being named All-Missouri Valley Conference.

When the 2019–20 season ended, Robbins began to wonder if he would have as much success competing against better competition and if he could find a home inside his dream conference.

Robbins was born in Wisconsin and grew up rooting for the Wisconsin Badgers even after he moved to Iowa at the age of 6. His uncle, Duffy Conroy, spent two separate stints on the Badgers' staff and was part of back-to-back Big Ten Conference regular-season titles.

But it was another Conroy, former Vanderbilt assistant coach Ed, who floated the idea of Robbins joining a Big Ten program. Ed Conroy was an assistant at Minnesota when Robbins decided to transfer there in 2020.

Robbins played 23 games for the Golden Gophers and averaged 11.7 points, 6.6 rebounds and 2.7 blocks before a foot injury in February 2021 ended his season and, ultimately, his Minnesota career.

PERSPECTIVE

Ed Conroy joined Vanderbilt's staff in 2021, and Robbins soon followed.

Despite the injury, Robbins said, head coach Jerry Stackhouse and his assistants gave Robbins the peace of mind that no matter how long recovery and rehab took, they would support him 100 percent.

That road to recovery was almost over in the preseason, Robbins thought. But a setback boomeranged Robbins back to ground zero.

It turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the now senior center.

“The silver lining for me was more outside of basketball. I consider myself a pretty smart guy, so I feel like I would have learned whether I was playing or wasn't playing,” Robbins said. “But I had only identified myself as a basketball player. The injury made me realize I'm more than that. I'm a student, I'm a grad student at

Blockin' Robbins

Chad Bishop - VUCommodores.com

Jan. 13, 2023

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Vanderbilt, I've done this and that.

"And people also don't really care if I play basketball. I had started heavily associating my identity as a basketball player. I realized that I have aspirations in life other than basketball. Life will move on past basketball. That kind of helped me prepare for when the time comes when I do have to walk away."

Robbins finally made his debut Feb. 2, 2022, at Kentucky. It had been almost one full year since Robbins had last played in a competitive game.

"I'm really happy to see him develop into such a dominant big man," McGlynn said. "It's night and day, honestly. His tendencies haven't really changed, but his efficiency has been through the roof. I knew he had a large frame, good touch around the rim, could shoot a little bit. But when you go against a freshman you know you can take away those tendencies."

"I watch him now, and I still think I could take him, but clearly he has made leaps and bounds in his game. I'm so happy for him and I'm so happy for his development and I'm so happy that he's definitely got a bright future in basketball ahead of him."

BLOCKIN' ROBBINS

"I think it helps that I'm tall," Robbins grinned.

Robbins goes into Saturday's game with 47 blocks this season. He needs three to enter the top 10 for most blocks in a single Vanderbilt season and needs 41 to pass Festus Ezeli's all-time record of 87 set in the 2010-11 season.

Robbins, who wears a size 18 shoe, needs to average 2.5 blocks over the next 16 games to own the record.

"I don't know if it's an art, it's just something I've always tried to do," Robbins said. "I think a lot of it is a mindset. If you have that mindset you're going to at least walk into a few blocks."

"I think it's something I do better than most people, so I think that helps our team. It's something of value that I provide on the floor. It adds an intimidation factor."

Robbins already holds a program record for blocks. He swatted 99 shots at Drake in the 2019-20 season.

And in November, against Fresno State, Robbins blocked eight shots, two shy of Vandy's single-game record held by Luke Kornet.

"The records and stuff like that don't concern me," Robbins said. "The only record that concerns me is the win-loss one. Obviously we have work to do."

THE ROAD AHEAD

Robbins will turn 24 in July. In the weeks and months ahead, he will play his final games as a Commodore and a collegian.

"It goes without saying that my wife and I are just unbelievably proud of just how hard he has worked," said Mark Robbins, Liam's father. "He has persevered through a lot. Not just the (weight loss), but three different programs—I don't think people understand what the student-athlete goes through. These kids go through a lot."

"Then at Vanderbilt with the academic standards that they have. They don't get a lot of leeway that you would at other institutions. To keep their nose to the grindstone, get good grades ... so we're proud about the academic side and his athletic pursuits that he's moving forward with."

Robbins is averaging 13.2 points, 6.1 rebounds and almost three blocks per game. He scored 22 points in a victory over South Carolina on Jan. 3, pulled down 11 rebounds against Southeastern Louisiana on Dec. 30 and made a season-high nine field goals as the Dores defeated Temple on Nov. 15.

Now weighing 250 pounds, Robbins joked he also thinks he plays better when his brother, Declan Robbins, a student manager for the Lipscomb men's basketball team, is in attendance at Memorial Gymnasium.

Liam and Declan are two of four Robbins children. Sister Erin is 15, and sister Isabel is 21.

Liam has a special bond with the latter. Isabel, or Izzie as the family calls her, has Angelman syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes delayed development and problems with speech and balance, according to the Mayo Clinic.

The night Jerry Stackhouse took down Tennessee and talk of Vanderbilt dysfunction

Joe Rexrode - The Athletic

Feb. 9, 2023

Jerry Stackhouse took “Three Quarter Fist” with him from Toronto, from out of the Raptors playbook of Dwane Casey, his boss in 2015-16 when Stackhouse embarked on a coaching career.

That’s what he went with on the bench, after his team called timeout with 4.0 seconds left, after Santiago Vescovi missed the front end of a one-and-one that could have cemented an unprecedented 12th straight win for Tennessee over Vanderbilt in men’s basketball, after UT freshman Julian Phillips opted to keep dribbling rather than score because the Vols were trying to kill the clock and the Commodores had fouls to give. That’s just a slice of the chaos that went on in the late stages of No. 6 UT’s visit to Vandy on Wednesday at Memorial Gym, in front of a crowd of 10,483 that sounded twice that size when it was over.

Stackhouse let assistant coach Adam Mazarei call a lot of the offensive plays during the game — he’s delegating more, at the urging of Vanderbilt athletic director Candice Lee — but this one was his with the Commodores trailing 65-63. “Three Quarter Fist” was an oldie but a goodie, updated with some Stackhouse tweaks.

“None of this stuff is really original,” he would say of the play, honest words to cap two days of a whole bunch of them pouring out of him. “We all steal stuff.”

Jordan Wright would inbound from the sideline across from where Stackhouse stands during games, calm and emotionless except in rare circumstances. Wright, whose 12-point second half made this upset opportunity possible, would get it to the top of the key to big man Liam Robbins, whose 14-point, nine-rebound, three-block night was equally critical. Shooters Tyrin Lawrence and Colin Smith would crisscross and head to opposite corners. Point guard Ezra Manjon, the fastest Commodore, would start from behind halfcourt and gather speed heading toward Robbins and the ball. Robbins would hand it to him. Manjon would essentially run three-quarters of the court toward the rim.

All of this happened as drawn up. The 6-foot Manjon went left around Robbins, losing 5-9 Zakai Zeigler for just enough of a fraction of a second to gain a step on him. The best defensive team in college basketball was about to give up a layup on the biggest play of the game to go to overtime. Except that Vescovi had helped all the way off Lawrence in the corner and was under the rim to contest Manjon. He still may have been able to convert for the tie. But now he knew he had a chance to win.

“Remember your bailouts,” Stackhouse had said to Manjon in the huddle, referring to the corner shooters, and with 1.2 seconds left, a two-handed laser from Manjon was on its way to Lawrence. With 0.2 of a second left, it was out of Lawrence’s hands. When it fell through, a perfect swish, Vanderbilt men’s basketball had a moment like it hasn’t had in a long time. Certainly not in four seasons of Stackhouse struggling to get this program where he believes it can be, nor in the three mostly turbulent Bryce Drew seasons that preceded it.

Vanderbilt players and students mobbed each other until you couldn’t tell who was who for a few seconds. Stackhouse jumped around, his arms in the air, and found Robbins for a joyous hug. Then got into the mass of bodies. Then found himself hugging Rick Barnes, the Tennessee coach who has a team good enough to do special things, who sought out Stackhouse even amid the disappointment of a loss that could cost Tennessee a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

“So much class,” Stackhouse said. “Coach Barnes came over there and was just like, ‘Man, I’m super proud of you.’ Those words mean a lot. I respect that guy so much and I know what he’s about. He’s about the right things.”

Stackhouse said he hugged official Tony Greene, too, when Greene quickly confirmed for him that the shot had left Lawrence’s hands on time. And somewhere in there, he got his hands on Lawrence, the 6-4 junior lefty whose perfect shot created a Vanderbilt-Tennessee moment that won’t soon be forgotten. This rivalry needed one of those.

“Stuff you dream about,” Lawrence said of the three points that left him with a game-high 19.

“Might be my favorite shot in my career,” Stackhouse said. “Playing and coaching. And again, things come full circle.”

The ups and downs of Stackhouse’s tenure — which stands at 51-66, this team at 12-12 and 5-6 in the SEC with extremely faint hopes of his first NCAA bid — have never been more extreme than in the past eight days. He benched Lawrence for a Jan. 31 game at Alabama because he didn’t think Lawrence was taking things seriously enough in practice. The Crimson Tide destroyed the Commodores 101-44, Stackhouse calmly watching it unfold, eschewing timeouts to stop runs, a bit of a sacrificed game to make a point.

The night Jerry Stackhouse took down Tennessee and talk of Vanderbilt dysfunction

Joe Rexrode - The Athletic

Feb. 9, 2023

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Winning coaches do things like that at times and get commended for it, but Stackhouse isn't a winning coach. Not yet, anyway. The angry noise from Vanderbilt fans, folks who used to be able to count on quality teams and NCAA bids but haven't seen one since Drew's debut season of 2016-17, reached high volume. Stackhouse has been sensitive and defensive in the face of critics from early in his tenure, and this season those critics have been fueled by some angry outbursts from him on the sidelines. Plus the benching of Lawrence, and before that, of Wright. And losses to Grambling State and Southern Miss, which were early body blows to NCAA hopes. And as of a week ago, what appeared to be a program in turmoil.

Modern unicorn: Jordan Wright is the rare fourth-year senior in today's college basketball

Bryce Smith and Jonah Barbin - The Vanderbilt Hustler

March 4, 2023

"We started this thing together. He's my very first recruit. He's the first guy that I signed to Vanderbilt," a teary-eyed Jerry Stackhouse said about Jordan Wright after Vanderbilt's first win over Kentucky since 2016. "I get a little bit emotional with this one right here. This is what it's about. This is a great moment for us, a great moment for our program."

May 3, 2019, to be exact, was the day Jordan Wright put pen to paper and officially signed his National Letter of Intent to play for Stackhouse and the Commodores. Nearly four years later, much has changed.

"He's been here since day one, and understands the ups-and-downs," Stackhouse added on Wright. "He committed to a program that was 0-18. That takes some courage. You have to come here with a chip on your shoulder to be able to do that."

But after 2,500 minutes, 1,000 points, 500 rebounds and 117 games (and counting) in the Black and Gold, one thing has remained constant: Wright's presence is ingrained in the fabric of Vanderbilt Men's Basketball. In a college basketball era defined by change, that makes the true senior's dedication to the Commodore program both rare — and beautiful — in the scope of today's game. With NIL, the transfer portal and extra eligibility now in the picture, Wright's status as a four-year Commodore represents the rarest breed of all in today's college hoops: a modern unicorn.

"When I first committed here I had no idea what I was walking into," Wright said. "Coach [Stackhouse] hadn't even filled out his staff yet. It's an honor to have played a part in the return of Vanderbilt basketball."

Jordan Wright came to campus in August of 2019 as the No. 331 ranked recruit in the Class of 2023 per 247Sports. Alongside fellow freshmen Scotty Pippen Jr. and Dylan Disu, Stackhouse uncovered an emerging trio of youngsters to pair with future pros Aaron Nesmith and Saben Lee on Vanderbilt's 2019-20 squad. Wright, a Baton Rouge native, quickly outperformed his prep rating, playing in 27 games — and starting 10 of them — including an 11-point performance in a win over hometown LSU.

"My favorite memory would be beating LSU my freshman year and getting our first SEC win. It was huge for the program to finally get

an SEC win and end the losing streak," Wright reflected.

With the focus on rebuilding in year one of the Stackhouse era, it seemed as if Vanderbilt had found its future core in Wright, Pippen Jr. and Disu. In 2020-21, the trio started in 15 games together and were the Commodores' top three scorers.

"[Pippen Jr. and Disu] are my two best friends," Wright told The Hustler in 2021. "I'm with them everyday, all day, and we talk all the time. I think with us being as close as we are, we know each other's games, [and] we know what each other likes to do. I think we all complement each other well. We all bring something different to the table."

Vanderbilt's burgeoning 'Big 3' didn't last long though as Disu opted to enter the transfer portal in summer 2021, landing at Texas. Pippen Jr. declared for the NBA Draft but withdrew his name in July.

Both Disu and Pippen Jr.'s defections represented new avenues of offseason freedom for college basketball players at the time: the transfer portal (Disu) and an option to withdraw from the NBA Draft after entering (Pippen Jr.).

Pippen Jr. chose to return for his junior season and set the single-season record for points along the way. While the star point guard and transfers Liam Robbins and Rodney Chatman stole most of the offseason spotlight, Wright quietly continued to ascend. As Robbins and Chatman battled injury, Wright emerged as Vanderbilt's iron man, starting all 36 of the team's games. He finished his junior campaign second in the team in points (12.3) and first in rebounds (6.4) per game.

As a junior, Wright not only excelled on the court, but off it as well, earning SEC Scholar Athlete in 2022.

"He's a great ambassador for us as far as what he's done not only on the basketball court, but in the classroom," Stackhouse said about Wright. "He was the SEC scholar of the year [in 2022]. He did an internship here with Nashville speedway [that summer]. He has aspirations to be a general manager one day."

Personal accolades and an NIT run that sniffed the precipice of a Madison Square Garden invite scratched the surface of what Wright could do. But without Disu, and without Pippen Jr. (for real this time), it was Jordan Wright's turn to prove what he could do as the

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Commodores' alpha.

"It's been tough, especially this year," Wright told The Hustler about losing both Disu and Pippen Jr. heading into his senior year. "Those were two of my best friends, and guys that I will be friends with for the rest of my life. We have a great group of guys in this locker room who definitely have made the carrying of the torch, per se, a lot easier."

It's that reality — losing two best friends and having to make new ones — that is often lost in the grand scheme of things in today's college basketball. COVID-19 cancellations and shutdowns, something Wright, Pippen Jr. and Disu saw first hand after an abbreviated first two seasons, only complicated matters further.

"These kids have dealt with a lot during their tenure here," Stackhouse added of Wright and the class of 2023 on Friday. "They dealt with COVID-19. They just haven't had a normal four year experience."

Nonetheless, Wright returned to Nashville for his senior year to 'carry the torch' as the lone member of the 'Big 3' left. Despite losing Pippen Jr. to the Los Angeles Lakers, team expectations were higher than ever in the Stackhouse era, as the program welcomed a top-25 recruiting class (247Sports) and looked to build upon 2022's NIT run.

The non-conference portion of Vanderbilt's schedule brought with it a few sobering realities, however. Vanderbilt lost four of its first seven as Wright battled hip and back injuries that caused him to miss the Wofford and Grambling State games entirely and parts of others.

From there, Wright's season became a bit of a rollercoaster ride. As injuries and early-season disappointments mounted, the senior had some uncharacteristically low scoring outputs, including just six combined points against Fresno St., VCU and NC State.

As the calendar turned to 2023, the senior began to find form, however. Vanderbilt started off SEC play 3-3, with Wright playing an important role in victories over South Carolina (13 points), Georgia (12) and especially Arkansas (17).

As the season rolled on, though, Wright found himself struggling at times and, again, injured after sustaining a concussion against Alabama. His role on the floor became a bit murky as the stardom

of Liam Robbins, the rise of Tyrin Lawrence and the ever-improving play of Ezra Manjon made earning minutes in Stackhouse's rotation progressively more difficult.

Despite the downs, Wright's role as the leader of the team never wavered.

"Jordan has been here the longest out of anybody," said Manjon. "He's kind of like the head honcho guy. He's got the most experience in the SEC on our team. He's a vocal guy, a leader on our team."

After the team's historically-bad loss to Alabama on Jan. 31, it seemed as if the season was lost. But in his first game back from injury, Wright (12 points, 3 rebounds, 2 steals) helped the Commodores stun No. 6 Tennessee, sparking an epic turnaround.

From there, Vanderbilt would begin a scorching-hot stretch, winning four of their next five to propel themselves right back into the thick of the NCAA Tournament conversation.

The run set the stage for a massive game at Rupp Arena against No. 23 Kentucky on March 1. Only four minutes into the game, the season took another unexpected turn for the Commodores, as Robbins went down with a lower leg injury and immediately headed to the locker room. Suddenly, in their biggest game of the season, Vanderbilt was staring down 36 minutes of basketball without the lifeblood of their offense.

In times of hardship, successful teams have a leader to turn to. Luckily for Vanderbilt, all Stackhouse had to do was shoot a glance to his bench and tell the man who he started his journey with to come to the rescue.

Wright answered the call, putting together a herculean effort including a season-high 23 points on an ultra-efficient 8-12 shooting.

No points were bigger than this final two, though. With just six seconds remaining in regulation, Wright, guarded closely by Chris Livingston, drove to the paint, spun and released a beautiful fade-away.

Swish.

In one fell swoop, Vanderbilt's March Madness hopes remained alive and the Commodores beat the Wildcats in Rupp Arena for the first time since 2007.

Modern unicorn: Jordan Wright is the rare fourth-year senior in today's college basketball

Bryce Smith and Jonah Barbin - The Vanderbilt Hustler

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“For him to be on that ride and to be able to have a moment like he had against Kentucky, a rival, it’s special,” Stackhouse said.

Just two days after the victory, Stackhouse confirmed what many feared: Vanderbilt would have to finish their season without Robbins. Still though, the Commodores goal for the NCAA Tournament remains the same.

In an era where jumping ship is practically a given, Vanderbilt will hand the keys over to their fourth-year senior to try to achieve their goals.

“I think it would be awesome to be able to succeed and allow [Wright], those guys, our fans and our students that have endured so much to get the chance to experience some March Madness,” Stackhouse said. “I’m happy about where we are and being able to have something to play for at this point of the season is a lot of fun, and I know it’s fun for our fans as well.”

From being the first signee to a program that went winless in the SEC to now having the opportunity to lift his squad to their first NCAA tournament appearance since 2017, Wright’s undying loyalty to Vanderbilt has resulted in the most poetic conclusion possible.

“I’ve thoroughly enjoyed my four years, even through the ups and downs,” Wright reflected. “Coming here was one of the best decisions of my life and I’m thankful for all the support and love I’ve received from Commodore nation.”

Liam Robbins finds a home on West End
Sam Curtis - The Vanderbilt Hustler
Dec. 9, 2022

Six years, five schools. Liam Robbins has seen his fair share of the United States through his basketball journey.

The 7-footer had changed locations for all but one year prior to coming to Vanderbilt, but before he could embark on this ever-changing college basketball career, Robbins had to do some transforming.

“I was a late bloomer, and I grew like eight inches in my junior and senior year [of high school]. So, I had a lot of weight on me, and I was pretty uncoordinated due to the massive growth spurt,” Robbins told *The Hustler*. “I didn’t really get any playing time my freshman, sophomore, even junior year. I didn’t really see playing time until my senior year.”

With just a year of starting experience under his belt and still learning how to play with his newfound height, Robbins needed an extra year of high school. Ideally, somewhere that he could get seen by college coaches across the country. So, after four years at Assumption High School in Davenport, Iowa, Robbins decided to travel across the midwest and plant a pin at Sunrise Christian Academy in 2017. Vanderbilt fans’ ears might be ringing already, as Robbins isn’t the only current Commodore the school has produced: Junior Tyrin Lawrence attended Sunrise two years after Robbins made his mark.

Aspiring college basketball players often take a post-graduate year at the academy because of its reputation in the high school basketball world. Despite being in the remote suburb of Bel Aire, Kansas—essentially the middle of nowhere—it is nationally recognized as one of the premier talent producers in the country.

At Sunrise Christian Academy, Robbins evolved into a full-fledged center who now received heightened interest from colleges, originally deciding on Western Illinois before de-committing in favor of Drake.

“I decided [Western Illinois] wasn’t really a good fit. So, I de-committed and played in some open gyms that coach [Darian] DeVries at Drake was having. They offered me a scholarship, and that [location] was pretty close to home,” Robbins said. “It was in MVC [Missouri Valley Conference] which was a conference I really wanted to play in, so I ended up just deciding to go there.”

Drake, a 5,000-person university in Des Moines, Iowa, was Robbins’s third stop on his tour of the Great Plains.

During Robbins’s freshman year, he contributed as a role player on the team’s way to a regular season conference championship. However, once he secured a starting role his sophomore year, Robbins exploded onto the scene, capturing All-MVC Second Team, MVC All-Defensive Team and MVC Most Improved honors. Stat-wise, Robbins posted 14.1 points per game and a school record of 99 blocks on the season. That block total was also good for the third most in MVC single-season history.

After this performance, Robbins had eyes for a bigger stage.

“I’d watch a lot of Big Ten basketball—I grew up a Wisconsin Badger fan—and I felt like I could compete with the Big Ten bigs and other bigs at Power Fives,” Robbins said. “My dream has always been to play in the NBA, and so I felt like I needed to move up to Power Five basketball to prove I could play with these bigger guys.”

Robbins put his name into the transfer portal to see what was out there. Luckily, he made a connection pretty quickly. His uncle, Ed Conroy, was a coach at the University of Minnesota at the time. Robbins felt that the fit was right, and he initiated the transfer.

Just like that, it seemed that Robbins had found a home up north. He was playing Big Ten basketball and had a strong relationship with both the players on the team and the coaching staff around him. Robbins excelled during his sophomore year, averaging 11.7 points and 6.6 rebounds per game, good enough for second and first on the team, respectively. Similar to his time at Drake, Robbins was a monster shot-blocker, racking up 62 on the season and finishing as the Big Ten’s leader in that category.

However, after injuries plagued the rest of the squad and the team underperformed, head coach Richard Pitino was fired, leaving Robbins looking for a new home—his fifth in six years. Robbins’s Uncle Ed first made the move to Vanderbilt, and the 7-footer, technically classified as a rising senior, would also decide on Nashville as his next home.

“I actually talked to [head coach Jerry] Stackhouse the first time I was in the portal. I really liked what he had to say, but Minnesota was just a really good fit at the time, especially because it was closer to home than Nashville was during the pandemic,” Robbins said. “I went on some zoom calls—talked to [Stackhouse], Coach Curry, Coach Fox, and it just seemed like the right fit for me.”

Liam Robbins finds a home on West End

Sam Curtis - The Vanderbilt Hustler

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Once again, Robbins was ready to dominate the court. However, he would be sidelined before the regular season began due to a stress injury to his foot. The knock kept him out of the lineup for much of the season; he played only 15 of the team's 36 matches.

Robbins described still feeling supported by Stackhouse and the Vanderbilt coaching team throughout his recovery.

"There was no rush on the process. The only thing he'd ever say to me is, 'Just take your time. The most important thing is getting healthy and the basketball stuff—we'll deal with later.' I can't be more appreciative of that," Robbins said. "[Stackhouse] really cared about me as a person before anything else."

Robbins came back late in the 2021 season and helped Vanderbilt make a deep run in the NIT. This stretch made Commodore fans all the more sad about Robbins's earlier absence, as he suddenly added a new dimension to a fringe NCAA Tournament team that was in serious need of depth. Luckily, Robbins had an extra year of eligibility due to COVID-19 NCAA policies. The fifth-year senior decided to come back for another year of tutelage under Stackhouse.

"He [Stackhouse] played in the NBA for a long time—he scored 17,000 points. He understands everything we're going through and everything we're trying to accomplish. He's accomplished it," Robbins said. "I feel like I've gotten better as a basketball mind, not just as a player since I've gotten here."

Already, Robbins has played an integral role in this year's squad. He is averaging 12.1 points and 4.6 rebounds per game while characteristically dominating the boards—Robbins has 21 blocks overall thus far, with the next highest on the team being Quentin Millora-Brown with 4.

Though Vanderbilt has had a rocky 5-4 start to the year, Robbins feels that the squad has a lot of potential moving forward.

"We have good chemistry, good trust, and you're going to keep seeing that build as the year goes on," Robbins said.

The battle-tested center is nearing the end of his college basketball career, and while this could lead to bigger and better things, Robbins is simply trying to enjoy the here and now.

"This is my last college basketball season. I'm really trying to enjoy

it with my team and I want to win," Robbins said. "I'm hoping that maybe we can hang a banner, something to make the fans of Vanderbilt proud and something I can remember with my teammates that'll last a lifetime. So, that's my only goal for the future right now."

Robbins started at Assumption. Then, he took a year at Sunrise. Afterward, he committed and subsequently de-committed at Western Illinois in favor of Drake. There, he dominated so much that he decided to trade up to Minnesota, where things went awry in just a year. But, after a great deal of change, life has a funny way of working out: Robbins finally found a home at Vanderbilt. The perpetual traveler has settled down on West End.

Oh, and if you've ever wondered what it's like to be seven feet tall, Robbins filled me in on what we're all missing out on.

"You hit your head a lot. You'll find that a lot of places aren't built for 7-footers. Then, clothes and shoes can be a little tough to find, but outside of that, it's not too much different," Robbins said. "You'll get the occasional stare from someone in the supermarket—they'll make some joke about you being able to reach the top shelf, which is a perk."

How a 14-year-old cancer patient designed Jerry Stackhouse's sneakers for Vanderbilt vs. UK

Aria Gerson - Tennessean

Jan. 24, 2023

Jayden Bailey comes from a basketball family. He's a small forward who models his game after Kevin Durant. But in June, Bailey had to put his basketball career on hold. He saw a doctor after experiencing more pain than usual after an AAU tournament. That pain was found to be cancer.

In January, Bailey, 14, was given a unique opportunity from the Monroe Carrell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt and Seacrest Studios. They knew Bailey loved basketball, so they gave him the opportunity to design the sneakers Jerry Stackhouse would wear during the Commodores' matchup with Kentucky on Tuesday.

The shoes are part of the Suits and Sneakers initiative, an event sponsored by the American Cancer Society where basketball coaches wear custom sneakers with their suits on the sidelines to raise awareness for cancer prevention.

"As a program, we are touched to help bring continued awareness to the fight against cancer through the Suits and Sneakers initiative," Vanderbilt coach Jerry Stackhouse said in a statement to The Tennessean. "We hope our efforts inspire those fighting this awful disease. ... Our Commodore program is always ready and honored to help support Jayden and all those fighting. We are all in this fight together."

Bailey came up with the idea for the shoes, which took inspiration from both Vanderbilt's black and gold and the gold ribbon for childhood cancer. His mom, London Elie, helped draw up the design.

"I wanted to put his face on it and everything, but he's like, no, I just want to go with the ... as long as we got the Vanderbilt and childhood cancer, the colors were kind of similar, and we originally were going to put the gold ribbon on there, but we just kept it."

Though Bailey's face isn't on the shoes, his name is embossed on the back: "Jayden's journey." In addition to the shoes, Bailey and his family got a special spot for the game just behind the Vanderbilt bench.

"I think it's really cool," Bailey said of seeing Stackhouse wear the shoes he designed. "This is probably the nicest gym I've been in."