



Point guard Shannon Sharpe hopes CU's win against K-State was his 'breakthrough' game.
Photo Courtesy: Tony Harman



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Brooks: Smiling Sharpe Offers Boyle Reason To Believe

BOULDER - If there's a lone "complaint" James Hardy can register about Shannon Sharpe, it is this: The guy won't (or can't) stop smiling.

Hardy is Colorado's strength and conditioning coach for basketball. The epicenter of his world in the Coors Events Center is a second-floor room that last year was converted to a modest weight/fitness center for hoops. By most BCS basketball school standards, it's ... well, we'll go there another day.

Hardy doesn't demand that the Buffs enter his domain with expressions as blank or as grim as a runway model's. He does expect focus, which Sharpe gives him daily. But "Deuce" also has a grin that a Black & Decker sander couldn't get rid of, and it's usually supplemented with a joke or three.

If Sharpe is working in close proximity to best bud Alec Burks, CU's sophomore sensation and leading scorer, Hardy sometimes has to perform an intervention. Their work always gets done, and

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Sharpe doesn't mean to be a distraction. Really.

But what amazes Hardy about Sharpe is his attitude.

"If you know anything about this guy's past, you'd think he's got little reason to be so upbeat . . . to be smiling as much as he does," Hardy said, referring to Sharpe losing both parents in high school - his father to a heart attack when Shannon was a freshman, his mother to respiratory problems when he was a junior. Sharpe became more of a parent than a brother to his younger sister, Shari.

No, Sharpe wasn't close to living a privileged childhood in Corona, Calif., and his freshman season at CU had its valleys as well. A preseason knee injury required surgery and kept him rehabbing for the entire year.

He's back now, and heading into the final five regular-season games of his redshirt-freshman season. All things considered, his left knee is good, although not problem free. It will benefit from extended rest and more of Hardy's strength work.

Said Sharpe of his knee: "It's not the best it's been, but it's the best it's going to be for now. It can get better."

His game got better in CU's 58-56 win last weekend against Kansas State. He scored eight points in 21 minutes and submitted what Coach Tad Boyle hopes was a "breakthrough game . . . sometime everybody has (one) in their career. Hopefully it's your freshman year, sometimes it might not be until sophomore year where it's, 'Hey, I can make plays out here.' Shannon did that.

"Guys who come off the bench are thinking, 'I don't want to come in and make a mistake.' But sometimes you have to have the attitude of, 'I'm going in and making something happen.' I don't know if that was his mindset, but he came in and made plays for us when we needed plays to be made."

Boyle and Sharpe were buoyed by his performance, particularly his ability to play to his strength - taking the ball to the basket, as he did on three impressive drives.

"Hopefully he can continue to get the ball in the lane and make plays, which is what this team needs - and that's what he did the other night," Boyle said. "He got it to the rim; any good point guard is going to have to be able to do that - attack the rim and if they shut it off, then he's got to make plays for everybody else."

Still, Sharpe is reluctant just yet to say he's experienced a breakthrough: "Honestly, I don't know because I haven't played the next one . . . but I do feel like that was a good thing for all of us. That whole game came down to defense and rebounding - the things we've been stressing we have to do to win. I mean it felt good (to perform well), but all that mattered to me was that we got the win. I didn't care about anything else, anything individual."

A solid 6-foot-1, 200-pounder, Sharpe also had a hand (or two) in defending Wildcats guard Jacob Pullen. The Buffs held him to 12 points and forced him into three turnovers. In retrospect, those numbers speak very well for CU's defense. A game later against newly minted No. 1 Kansas, Pullen scored a career-best 38 points and contributed five assists in a stunning 84-68 K-State win.

"The way we guarded him the first 34 minutes, we doubled him off every ball screen and tried to get the ball out of his hands," Boyle said. "We said if K-State is going to beat us, it's going to be with the rest of their guys. But we want to try to limit (Pullen's touches). When he has the ball in his hands, he's pretty good. He makes plays for himself and his teammates. You're not going to take him out of the game; it's hard to take a guard out of the game. You just try to get the ball out of his hands as much as you can."

With their 74-66 win at K-State last month, the Buffs swept the Wildcats for the first time since 2003-04. The games, said Sharpe, were of the night-and-day variety: "It was tougher playing them at our place than it was at their place. It was almost like we were playing a whole different team."

That's what he and the Buffs might encounter Saturday (noon, ESPN) in Lawrence, Kan. CU faces KU for what could be the final time in Allen Fieldhouse, if the two schools don't resurrect the series for a non-conference encounter when the Buffs leave the Big 12 for the Pac-12.

Given the Jayhawks dominance in the series - the Buffs haven't won at KU since 1983 - Sharpe figures the trip's degree of difficulty would have been in double digits no matter how the Jayhawks fared in their previous game.

"What it's going to come down to with us is toughness and execution - rebounding and playing defense," he said. "That's been our motto all season, and we're not going to change now."

Sharpe is averaging 13 minutes and two points in 11 conference games, but his playing time figures to increase if starting point guard Nate Tomlinson can't shake the pain associated with an ankle injury that's sidelined him for two games.

Earlier in the season, Sharpe believes he was vacillating between being too aggressive and too passive: "It was like, 'I've got to do this or that when I come in.' But lately, I've just been letting the game come to me and I try to do whatever's necessary."

He admits his perimeter shooting needs work and notes that next season, when CU is faced with replacing some of its outside firepower, "It might be mandatory for me to take more shots and for me to be more of a leader."

In conference play, he's missed six three-point attempts. Otherwise, he's 8-for-18 from the field in 11 Big 12 games, with nine assists, four turnovers and three steals.

But he thinks he's a better shooter than many people realize.

"Definitely," he said. "You watch my tapes and all my threes are in and out - all of them. I'm not shooting a good percentage, but you look at all my tapes and all my threes are right there. I'm a much better shooter than people take me for, and I'm a better player than people take me for."

He's also much more resilient than most people realize. He's managed to hang onto his smile, an achievement that says much more about him than his jump shot.

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