

You Can't Coach Height, But You Can Coach Heart: The Meteoric Rise of Hoover's Khloe Ford

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

It's Tuesday, February 10, and in just a little more than 24 hours, the Hoover Bucs girls basketball team will open the Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA) playoffs against Oak Mountain. The team's center, captain, and leader, Khloe Ford, is talking about what the team needs to work on in order to win their sixth consecutive state title.

It would also be Ford's fourth in a row, an inside straight for one of the state's best, if not the best, girls high school basketball players in Alabama. The 18-year-old high school senior is confident but, at the same time, humble. She knows the team has a great shot to make history, but is also aware of what they need to work on to reach that summit once again.

"I have a really good feeling that we're going to win state again," says Ford. "There is just some stuff that we really do need to focus on. We really need to focus on our defense more and make sure that everybody on the court communicates."

"I feel like we need to start communicating more on defense and offense, making sure people know the plays or know what defense we're in," adds Ford, speaking like a ten-year veteran in the WNBA.

In case you're wondering, the last time Hoover played Oak Mountain, the Bucs won by the score of 74-20, so the Bucs are pretty dam good, and Ford is a major reason why.

At six feet, four inches tall and super-athletic, Khloe Ford is, at the time of this writing, the top-ranked player in Alabama, the 12th-ranked center in the nation according to the high school recruiting website 247Sports.com, and No. 94 nationally in the SportsCenter NEXT 100.

Ford has backed up the hype with production and championships at Hoover. She helped lead the Bucs to three state titles, including a 32-4 finish this past season, and was named State Tournament MVP as a sophomore. That year, she averaged 13.4 points, 8.2 rebounds, and 1.2 blocks per game, earning first-team All-State honors in Class 7A.

A four-star recruit, Ford was recruited by many major universities, including Alabama, Auburn, Arizona State, Mississippi State, and Clemson, just to name a few. In the end, Ford chose the University of Missouri, an up-and-coming program in the SEC, and a university that said it would accommodate her desire to study nursing instead of an easier major.

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Still, it's hard to imagine a scenario in which Ford doesn't light up the scoreboard at the next level - and maybe beyond. Not bad for a kid who not only didn't play basketball at all until the seventh grade, but didn't want to play basketball at all. But, as the saying goes, "you can't coach height."

Ford's first sports love was softball and, despite the fact that she was growing taller than her classmates, had no interest in basketball. However, while attending Simmons Middle School, the seventh-grader was approached by then head coach Keon Williams about trying out for basketball. She said "thanks, but no thanks," but, according to Ford, Williams hatched a plan to bamboozle her into trying out.

"He got a police officer to stand in front of my bus to make sure I wouldn't get on the bus so I could go to basketball tryouts," says Ford. "The next thing I know, my mom comes in with some basketball clothes, and then the rest is history. I made the team."

While she easily made the squad and began playing right away, Ford readily admits she was far from a complete basketball player. Taller than all of the other girls, the team's offensive strategy largely consisted of tossing the ball to Ford, over the outstretched arms of their opponents, for easy layups. Beyond that, Ford

says, she didn't have a clue, but it didn't take her long to warm up to the sport.

"When I first played, I didn't know what I was doing. I'm just out there putting the ball in the hoop. They told me to just turn around and lay it up," Ford says. "I remember I made my first basket, and I was like, I was like, 'okay, this ain't that bad.'"

By ninth grade, she not only had the hang of the game but also started to excel under Hoover High School Head Coach Krystle Johnson. One of the top basketball coaches in the nation, Johnson has guided Hoover to seven state titles since taking over in 2016. Ford says she has flourished under Johnson's leadership, crediting her for developing her skill set while being a confidant and mentor through the craziness of the recruiting process.

"She's helped me a lot with the recruiting process because she has so many connections with college coaches," says Ford. "And since she played the same position I do, she's helped me develop my post moves and understand the game at a different level."

"She's like a second mom to me. Since I'm with the basketball team so much, she's really stepped into that role and kind of become the mother of the team," adds Ford. "I'm very comfortable telling her anything. We joke around a lot, but she's always there for me."