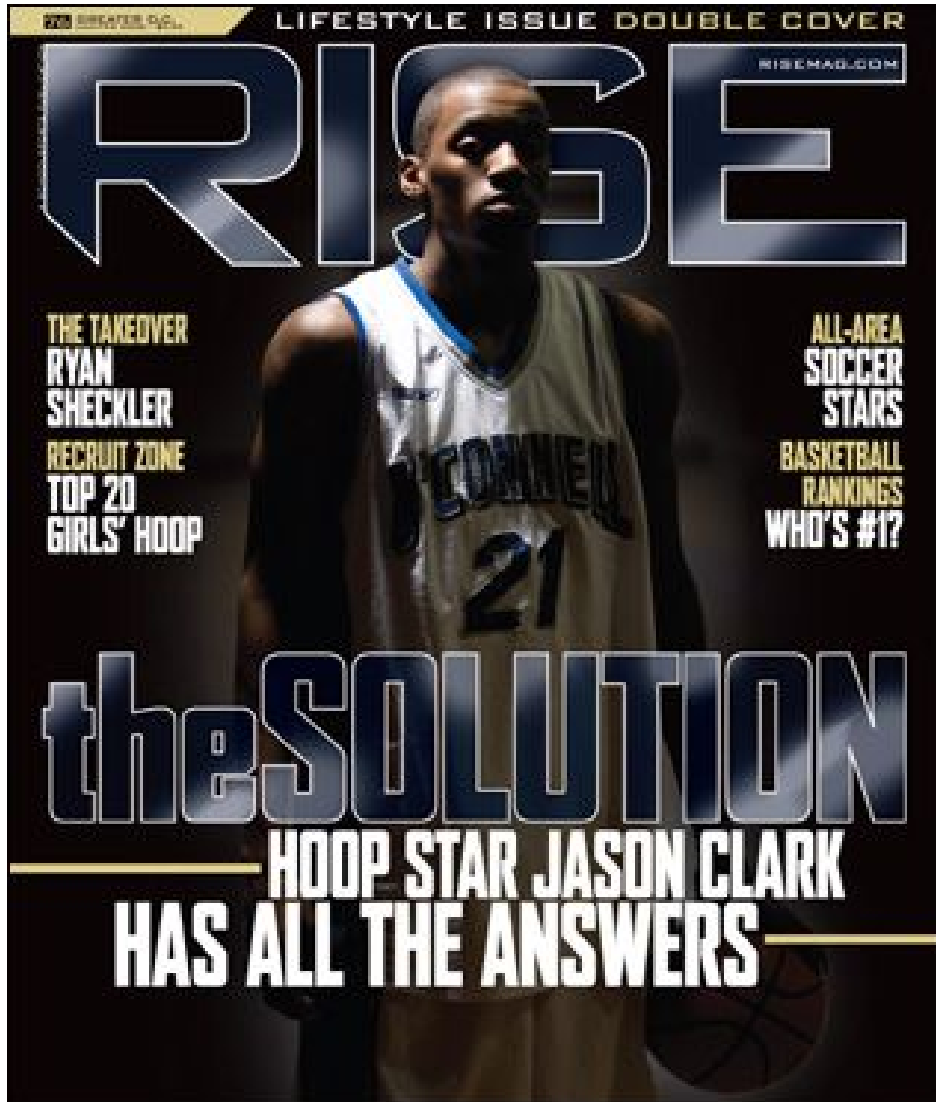


Step Ya Game Up

Georgetown recruit Jason Clark entered Bishop O'Connell as an intimidated freshman, but he has since taken his game to a higher level

By: Jon Mahoney 1/24/08

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Jason Clark has never been one to back down from a challenge. Whether it's locking down an opponent's top scorer or hitting a game-changing shot during crunch time, Bishop O'Connell knows it can always count on its senior leader. However, the challenge of playing for one of the nation's top high school basketball programs was almost too daunting for Clark when he entered O'Connell in the fall of 2004. Back then, the Knights featured a trio of talented seniors who now play college ball — Marcus Ginyard (North Carolina), Dave Neal (Maryland) and Bryant Majors (Marymount).

Clark found his first couple practices so tough and intimidating that he flirted with the idea of transferring. But after a talk with his mother, Audrey, he decided to remain with the Knights.

"My mom was never going to let me leave," Clark says. "She just told me that I have to keep working hard and that will help me in the long run. Quitting won't."

Heeding his mom's advice, Clark stopped acting scared in practices. Instead, he used them to his advantage day after day by going one-on-one against Ginyard, a four-year starter who was the Gatorade Virginia Player of the Year his senior season.

Those battles with Ginyard prepared Clark both mentally and physically for O'Connell's demanding schedule. And his play in practice didn't go unnoticed. After coming off the bench to begin the year, Clark pushed his way into the starting lineup by mid-January and played a key role on a squad that went 31-3 and won both the Virginia Independent Schools Division I state title and the Alhambra Catholic Invitational.

Clark credits that freshman year success with instilling in him a great deal of confidence. Now in his last year of high school, the 6-foot-2, 160-pound combo guard takes on every obstacle thrown his way, and that tenacity has taken his game to higher levels. Rated the nation's No. 89 recruit in the Class of 2008 by RISE, Clark has signed with Georgetown. O'Connell coach Joe Wootten is proud of his star pupil's development. Of course, Wootten has known Clark had that competitive fire ever since seeing him play AAU ball as a seventh-grader.

Clark's desire to succeed was on full display his sophomore season, a year in which he had to elevate his game after the graduation of Ginyard, Neal and Majors. After a stellar regular season and postseason, Clark came down with the flu just before O'Connell's game against Blue Ridge in the Virginia Independent Schools Division I state finals. Despite not being 100 percent, Clark willed his way to a game-high 26 points, including 15 in the fourth quarter, to lead the Knights to a 58-56 win and their third consecutive state crown. Clark was selected tournament MVP for his inspiring performance.

"The thing about Jason, he'll always respond to challenges and step up," says Wootten. Clark especially relishes the task of guarding an opponent's best player, something he picked up while watching Ginyard.

With his combination of quickness, length and strength, Clark can cause myriad defensive problems for opponents while still saving up enough energy for the offensive end. In a 64-62 loss to WCAC rival DeMatha last season, Clark matched up with current Georgetown freshman Austin Freeman. Clark poured in a game-high 35 points and chipped in six boards and three steals while pestering Freeman all game long and making him work hard for his 22 points.

Clark was an All-Met first team selection by The Washington Post last year after averaging 21.6 points, six rebounds and 4.5 assists per game for O'Connell, which lost to Benedictine in the state finals. But perhaps the stat that best epitomizes Clark's playing style was his average of 5.5 steals/charges taken per contest (O'Connell combines the two for one stat).

"He's not a flashy player," says Wootten. "He's an efficient player who gets the job done. He does all the little things. That's what makes him so special."

He's also developed into a terrific leader for the Knights. Wootten says Clark has been able to draw from his struggles as a freshman to teach his teammates how to deal with adversity and get acclimated to playing for O'Connell.

That guidance was especially valuable to guard Kendall Marshall, who averaged 10.4 points per game as a freshman last year. Marshall is now rated the nation's No. 6 recruit in the Class of 2010 by RISE and has committed to North Carolina.

Clark's willingness to help out others also speaks to his off-the-court personality. This past fall, Clark bused tables at a local restaurant. His bosses were so impressed with how respectful Clark was that they welcomed him back any time.

"That fits Jason to a T," says Wootten. "He's a quality individual more so than a quality player."

That's saying something for a player who has lit up the scoreboards in the WCAC, perhaps the nation's toughest conference. It also means Georgetown is getting a player who appears to be the total package in terms of talent and character. And while Clark is sure to have some growing pains playing in the ultra-competitive Big East, it's a challenge he won't back down from. After all, he's learned a lot since his freshman year.