



'I didn't know, Mom': The force that drives the most improved player in college basketball

CJ Moore Feb 3, 2023

120 🔖

Editor's Note: This story is included in *The Athletic's Best of 2023*. [View the full list.](#)

LAWRENCE, Kan. — When KJ Adams moved into McCarthy Hall back in August 2021, his mom, Yvonne, approached [Kansas](#) coach Bill Self with one request: “I’m bringing you a great kid,” she said, “but I need you to make him an a—hole.”

It’s mid-December, a year later, when Yvonne sits in the front row at Mizzou Arena, and that mean streak she desired is lacking on the opening possession. Kansas sets up a post pin play for Adams, who pushes Mizzou forward [Noah Carter](#) up the lane. Point guard Dajuan Harris feeds him the perfect pass. Adams might have the thickest legs in the country — “He had calves from birth,” Yvonne says — but he doesn’t use them here, barely lifting off the ground as he misses a contested layup.

At the first stoppage, Harris approaches his 6-foot-7 teammate, who’s built like an [NFL](#) tight end. “Dunk everything,” he tells him. “Dunk every freaking thing.”

Two minutes later, he feeds Adams on the same play. This time Adams explodes off his feet, scores and draws a foul. In the final four minutes of the first half, he does as he’s told three times, dunking the ball with authority.

Behind the Kansas bench, his parents are there together for the first time all season. Yvonne tries to sit tall so she can see her only son schooling the [Tigers](#). She arrives that day in a wheelchair, the first time she's had to be wheeled to her seat to watch her son play.


Adams sets a new career high by halftime, scoring 15 points as the Jayhawks race to a 17-point lead. Midway through the second half, his left shoe has had enough — and the sole tears. He throws his white Adidas sneakers to a manager and puts on a backup pair that are much heavier. He scores only four more points as Mizzou adjusts to Kansas's middle pick-and-roll, but he adds three assists to his stat line.

Adams opened the season scoring in single figures in seven straight games, just trying to blend in. This marks his third consecutive game in double figures, a streak he'd extend to 11 games.

With a couple minutes left, the most improved player in college basketball checks out of the game. Self walks down to where the Adams family sits and yells out for Yvonne, who is distracted. Her husband nudges her, and she looks the coach's way.

"Aren't you glad you came?"



 (Courtesy of Yvonne Adams)

A

Every day in elementary school, Adams would hop off the school bus and race to the gym at St. Stephen's Episcopal to watch his mom coach the varsity girls basketball team. The family lived on the Austin campus, where Yvonne is the director of equity and inclusion. Adams was always in that gym, watching practice, running the scoreboard and getting up shots. He'd eventually practice with the boys team. His parents encouraged him

to try all sports — he played lacrosse, football and soccer — but when he was dunking as a seventh grader, it became clear he was destined to follow in his mother's footsteps.

Yvonne starred at Texas A&M as a sharpshooting guard under her maiden name of Hill, leading the [Aggies](#) in scoring as a junior and senior. After college, she passed up opportunities to play overseas to stay close to her mother and returned to Blinn Junior College as a graduate assistant. She lasted only a year — she couldn't handle investing in a recruit and then hearing no — but the pit stop was worth it. It was where she met Kevin, a running back on the football team.

KJ is the middle of their three children and only boy.

Kevin and Yvonne were a coach's dream. Early on, she preached fundamentals and the value of passing the ball. But as Adams got older, Yvonne let his coaches coach him and nurtured the intangibles she valued: how he responded to teammates, how he responded when he got a foul and his demeanor on the bench.

"These are way more important than whether or not you can shoot," she told him.

During one game the summer after his freshman season, Kevin yelled out that KJ needed to get up the court faster and rebound. KJ looked in the stands with some attitude.

"It was dead quiet," Yvonne says. "And I said, 'If you ever look this way again like that, I will come down from these bleachers and beat your (butt).'"

Attitude has never been an issue since.

Adams thrived in sports, but academically, he struggled. Yvonne knew there was something off as early as kindergarten, but she came up with excuses. *He's a boy. He has a late birthday.*

When Adams was in fourth grade, his school decided to move him to special ed. Yvonne demanded they do some testing first.

The testing revealed Adams is dyslexic.

"From the moment he knew he had dyslexia, you could feel the weight of the academic pressure be lifted," Yvonne says. "And we were like, 'OK, this is what it is, this is how you process.'"

Adams remained in the general ed population, but he struggled when he enrolled at St. Stephen's in sixth grade. In particular, foreign language was a problem, because it was graded by spelling. Yvonne fought for him, asking the teacher to grade his work based on what he intended to say. It was a 40-point difference. But the school wasn't right for Adams because it didn't have the learning specialists he needed. He wasn't invited back for seventh grade. "I struggled with it professionally," Yvonne says, "with peers and colleagues who said, 'Your son is not good enough.'"

Adams moved to a school with the resources he needed, and it was there that he was paired with Nuala Judycki, a learning specialist. Judycki would work with him once a week, specifically with his reading, but he would visit her every day because she kept food in her office. Their bond grew quickly.

"KJ was the Pied Piper," she says. "People are just drawn to him. It wasn't so much that I helped him; I just encouraged him. He's so capable, but I think at times he doubted himself academically. And so it was just building up that confidence and making him see the successes he's making."

Yvonne could see a change. KJ was motivated to work; getting him to do his homework was no longer a nightly struggle.

"He took ownership of his academics and sort of pushed us away and said, 'Let me just work on this with Miss Judycki,'" Yvonne says.

While Judycki was a godsend, it became apparent during Adams' freshman year that he needed a change both socially and on the basketball court. That spring, he and Yvonne made a trip to Westlake High, the public school in their area with a powerhouse basketball program.

When Adams and his mom walked in, the secretary immediately told them that they didn't accept transfers. Yvonne asked to see a supervisor, who delivered the same message. Yvonne pulled out her driver's license, showing their address. After getting that cleared up, she spoke with a special education coordinator who walked in to enroll him in that program.

Adams had last been in the public school system in elementary school, so they assumed that he would need to be in special ed because of his dyslexia. Yvonne started fuming.

"I was ready to come in (hot)," she says.

Then Adams stepped in.

"I got it, Mom," she remembers him saying. "This is based on when I was in fifth grade."

"Oh, well, the information we have..."

"Is years old," Adams said.

Yvonne nodded along, as they questioned how he would stay eligible for basketball and Adams made clear he'd progressed.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh," she says. "I was proud. Prouder of him than when he signed with Kansas."

In August 2021, KJ returned for a short break before the fall semester. He went to the St. Stephen's gym to work out with Kevin, who had news to deliver to his son.

A few weeks before, Yvonne had gone to the doctor for what she presumed to be a urinary tract infection. The doctor ran tests for diverticulitis. He cut out a growth in her bladder and sent it to pathology. She figured that with medication, her symptoms would dissipate.

When she returned for a follow-up, the doctor asked if she wanted to call her husband. Yvonne looked back at him, confused. "It's cancer," he said.

Next thing she knew she was getting a port. She started chemo the next week.

"It was such a shock," she says. "Things moved so quickly."

Kevin is an optimist and a helper. He immediately hopped in his Chevy Silverado and drove to the doctor's office. "We're gonna fight," he told Yvonne. "We got this."

That was his message to KJ as well.

"We have a process to take care of it," he told KJ, "so we just have to go through the process."

They knew it was going to take time for KJ to process the news, but once he discussed it with his mom, he had taken on his dad's positivity.

"It don't even really matter, Mom," he said. "You're gonna beat it."

"That's the hope, K."

"The last thing that you think about my mom is that she's weak," KJ says. "So it was kind of really hard for her to be vulnerable and tell us about that."

The next week KJ left for Kansas. The C word was rarely brought up. Everything felt ... almost normal. Yvonne still attended games. She barely lost any hair. She was mobile.

And in December, she received great news: all clear.

"I told you," KJ said. "We're good. I don't even know why we were worrying."

KJ, meanwhile, was learning his place at Kansas. He'd get a few minutes here and there in games. He hadn't expected much more than that. When KJ showed up that summer, Self told his parents that if he was starting as a freshman, then that would mean the Jayhawks were not very good. He needed to develop.

Adams immediately earned Self's respect by the way he practiced. He roomed with [Christian Braun](#) and followed his lead. "Him just seeing how hard I went in practice, he went just as hard," Braun says. "We'd play no fouls, and he's running into the wall, diving on the floor."

“I was practicing my butt off just to get two or three minutes of playing time,” Adams says.

Most of his minutes were at center, primarily defense, where he thrived. Offensively, he struggled to memorize the playbook. Yvonne told KU assistant coach Kurtis Townsend he just needed some extra time; he processes things differently because of his dyslexia. Townsend sent him play clips on his phone so he could get more mental reps.

“My mom taught me this,” Adams says. “In life, everything’s not equal, you know? Like, for me, reading and studying 20 hours a day is not going to be the same as a classmate next to me that can study for four hours and not really care as much, and they might have a higher grade than me just because of how their brain connects stuff.

“I realized that I have a lot of disadvantages. Even though I’m working harder and working for a longer time, it still might not translate. That just makes me want to even go a little more harder, so I can earn it.”

Earning trust as a freshman is difficult under Self, but Adams got there. He was in on the final possession of the national championship game, right by Braun’s side contesting the final shot.

Everyone around the program was euphoric in the months that followed, and Adams was happy to just be a part of it. He prepared himself for the next stage, figuring he’d see his minutes increase as a backup forward as a sophomore.

Before returning for the fall semester in August, the Adams family went to the beach in Padre Island. KJ’s oldest sister Brittany noticed a change in him. “It was the first time I saw him kind of excited to be home for so long,” she says. “Before when he came home it was very much like, ‘Oh, let me see all my friends. Let me go to my favorite spots.’ This time, he was so happy to be home. He just wanted to hang out with us.”

Before the trip, Yvonne had learned her cancer was back. A year earlier it had been stage one. This was stage four. This time it was metastatic.

Kevin told her she needed to tell the kids before the trip. “I need this moment with them,” she said. “A happy time.”

She got that. Then came the hard part.

Every Sunday the Adams sit down to dinner as a family. It’s mandatory. No excuses. No distractions. After dinner, they move to the living room and play a game. Once they moved to the living room, Yvonne shared her news.

“It’s back, y’all.”

At first, KJ was angry. “This is stupid,” he kept repeating.

He and his sisters needed to get away and left to go to a local cookie shop. On the way, KJ asked his youngest sister Jaila how she was feeling about it.

“It’s fine,” Jaila said. “She’s going to beat it, so I’m not worried about it.”

“At that moment, that’s when I realized, OK, they don’t understand the magnitude of what we’re dealing with,” Brittany says. “We just came off of this super high as a family, and so I think we were almost just like in shock. Didn’t know what to do. Didn’t know what to think.”

Adams did not see his mom again until Late Night in the Phog on Oct. 14. The intervening months were hard for Yvonne. Her kidneys were shot. She’d started to lose her hair and lose weight. It took some time to figure out the right cocktail of drugs to control her pain.

Eventually, she got into a routine.

On Thursdays, she’d go for chemo. The days after were awful. Pure exhaustion. Vomiting. Pain. On Saturday, she’d start to feel better. Sunday through Wednesday were her good days. Then she’d start the cycle over. Three weeks on. One week off.

Still, it wasn’t until that mid-December trip to Missouri when Adams figured out this was different. He didn’t realize she might need a wheelchair for long walks. For the first time, he could really see the struggle.

But Yvonne still had plenty of sunshine in her life. In June, Brittany had a baby boy, the first grandchild. And before Kansas’s opener on Nov. 7, Adams called and said he was starting.

“What?” Yvonne remembers saying. “You ain’t told us you were starting. You at the four?”

“I’m at the five,” he said. “See y’all tomorrow.”

Yvonne looked at Kevin. “We cannot win the friggin’ national championship with him at the five,” she said. “He’s 6-7.”

She worried about rebounding and rim protection, but she watched with pride as KJ was a steady force in the opening weeks. He thought he’d just be a placeholder until his younger, taller teammates came along. But by that Missouri game, he’d only widened the gap. Afterward, Self compared him to a young Draymond Green. That wasn’t the first time he’d used that name to motivate Adams, telling him in the preseason that he could play like Green for Kansas. Adams went to YouTube and watched every clip of Green he could find.

In the final moments of that Mizzou game, when Self came down to ask if she was glad she came, the pride bubbled up for Yvonne. It took everything she had not to just break out in tears.


After the stars of that day — Harris, Adams and Kevin McCullar — finished their news conference, Adams raced out to the court still in full uniform. He went straight to his mom and gave her a hug. As she tends to do, she used humor not to lose it there.

“You scored all these points in the first half,” she told her son. “What the f— was going on in the second half? Like you didn’t do anything.”

He pointed to his shoes. “Ma, I had to play in these freaking rocks. But Coach Self told you I did good. Didn’t he? He stopped everything to tell you.”

“It was the pinnacle, because he knew it was an important moment,” Yvonne says. “It was like everything clicked for him athletically and with the family. Like he knew his role and how important it was for me and he knew what my struggles were.”



 (Courtesy of Yvonne Adams)

A

When Adams climbed on the bus after the [Missouri](#) game, his emotions hit him all at once. The tears came, but they were happy tears. “I started thinking about how lucky I am that everybody’s still here with me,” he says.

The next Saturday Yvonne was back in Lawrence to watch the Jayhawks play Indiana. KJ stopped by the hotel to visit with his girlfriend that Sunday. As Yvonne lay in bed, KJ turned to his girlfriend and asked her to step out for a moment.

“What you need?” Yvonne asked.

He approached the bed and pulled back the white scarf on her head. “I just need to see what I’m working with,” he told her. “I didn’t know, Mom. I didn’t know.”

Ever since that day, he calls more. Yvonne always had to call him. Now his name pops up on her screen just about every other day. *What are you doing, Mother? How are you doing, Mother? What are you cooking? Are you coming to the game or are you sending your husband? I’m calling to check in, Mother.*

“I would love it when he was sick (as a kid),” Yvonne says. “Because that was the only time he would cuddle, right? He knows that I need those moments now. So he’ll come and hug in ways that he hadn’t before. He’ll come and lay in my lap — 6-7, big ass — in ways he hadn’t before. That to me has really meant a lot.”

Yvonne has always fought for KJ. And it’s not like he needed the inspiration — finding a way to get on the floor had already been a driver — but the hardest days of being a college basketball player are easier now.

“Sometimes I wake up, I’m like, *damn man, I don’t want to do this*. I know it’s gonna be a hard practice,” Adams says. “But like, just seeing what my mom is going through, and how positive she tries to stay through it, it’s amazing. It helps my drive.”

Last month before the 125th anniversary of Kansas basketball, Yvonne arrived in Lawrence on Friday and was met by four colleagues, all decked out in Kansas and KJ Adams gear. She tells her friends she’s in awe of what’s happened with her son.

“My son is playing for Kansas,” she says. “Like, what’s really going on? Bill Self is talking to my son. My son is on ESPN.”

Her friends sit in a hotel lobby the next day and listen to her and her son’s story for 90 minutes. She tells them they can do something else, but you can tell they love listening to her and being there for her. “You pour and give so much to people,” she says, starting to choke up. “The kindness that we’ve received since my diagnosis has been phenomenal, in ways that I just, there are people that I’ve met or have been friends with for years, that have shown up in ways that I just did not expect.”

She is 53. There is no cure for her cancer. “This is something we will fight until I’m done,” she says.

Whenever Self sees Yvonne, he tells her that KJ isn’t an a-hole yet, but they’re getting really, really close. She tells the story of his recruitment, and how KJ’s commitment kind of surprised the coaches. She remembers telling her husband: “He’s not a priority for them, but he will become one.”

She beams now, seeing Self growing closer to her son. “There are moments in a game where I can see him pat KJ on the back or get on his butt for not doing something or get a technical because he’s mad with the refs because KJ shouldn’t have gotten a foul. I see him fighting for my kid,” she says. “That, to me, and their relationship is bigger than any double-digit (scoring) game ever.”

Those points sure are fun, though. And on this mid-January afternoon against [Iowa State](#), with the sun beaming through the windows at Allen Fieldhouse, she sits in a stadium seat cushion with a back that helps her sit tall and watches as KJ scores 15 points. His final basket with 11.4 seconds left is the game-winner.

She’ll keep fighting for days like this. She’s glad she came.

“There are some dreams that I had for myself,” she says. “And to see those being fulfilled in my children might be even better than having them fulfilled in myself.”

(Illustration: Eamonn Dalton / The Athletic; photos: Michael Hickey / Getty Images)

What did you think of this story?



MEH



SOLID



AWESOME

C.J. Moore, a staff writer for The Athletic, has been on the college basketball beat since 2011. He has worked at Bleacher Report as the site’s national college basketball writer and also covered the sport for CBSsports.com and Basketball Prospectus. He is the coauthor of “Beyond the Streak,” a behind-the-scenes look at Kansas basketball’s record-setting Big 12 title run. Follow CJ on Twitter [@cjmoorehoops](#)

National		US		Canada	Share
Boxing	Men's World Cup	Arizona	Memphis	Calgary	Buy a Gift
Bundesliga	Mixed Martial Arts	Atlanta	Miami	Edmonton	HO
Champions League	MLB	Baltimore	Minnesota	Montreal	About Us
Championship	MLS	Bay Area	Nashville	Montréal (français)	Careers
College Football	Motorsports	Boston	New Orleans	Ottawa	Code of Conduct
Copa America	NBA	Buffalo	New York	Toronto	Editorial Guidelines
Copa del Rey	NFL	Carolina	Oklahoma	Vancouver	Business Inquiries
Culture	NHL	Chicago	Oregon	Winnipeg	Press Inquiries
Europa League	NWSL	Cincinnati	Orlando	Partners	Support
European Championship	Olympics	Cleveland	Philadelphia	Tickets by StubHub	FAQ
FA Cup	Opinion	Columbus	Pittsburgh		Forgot Password?
Fantasy Baseball	Premier League	Dallas	Sacramento		Redeem Gift
Fantasy Basketball	Scottish Premiership	Denver	San Antonio		Contact Us
Fantasy Football	Serie A	Detroit	San Diego		Terms of Service
Fantasy Hockey	Soccer	Houston	Seattle		Group Subscriptions
Fantasy Premier League	Sports Betting	Indiana	St. Louis		Newsletters
Formula 1	Sports Business	Jacksonville	Tampa Bay		The Pulse
Gaming	Tennis	Kansas City	Utah		The Bounce
Golf	UK Women's Football	Las Vegas	Washington DC		The Windup
International Football	WNBA	Los Angeles	Wisconsin		Prime Tire
La Liga	Women's College Basketball				Full Time
League Cup	Women's Euros				
League One	Women's Hockey				

League Two

Women's World Cup

Until Saturday

LNH

The Athletic Ink

Men's College Basketball

Podcasts

Headlines

The Athletic

©2024 The Athletic Media Company, A New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Support](#)

[Sitemap](#)

