

Senior Spotlight: Ben Sheppard has grown into the leader of Belmont men's basketball



Ben Sheppard soars for a layup in the season opener vs Ohio University. The 6'6 swingman finished with 18 points, seven assists and five rebounds. Landen Secret / Belmont Vision.

Naturally, Ben Sheppard doesn't do much talking, instead he lets his game speak for itself.

When facing off against George Mason University in the Paradise Jam held in the U.S Virgin Islands, that's exactly what he did.

After an 89-81 loss to Tarleton State University in the first round, the Bruins needed a bounce back effort to get back in the win column.

And No. 22 rose to the occasion, joining the 1000-points club.

En route to a 66-62 victory and a season-high 24-point performance, Sheppard didn't brag nor boast.

He remained cool, calm and collected because he always knew he'd be the type of player he is.

This season, he's taking it upon himself to become the top dog for Belmont men's basketball.

No more hiding behind more experienced players.

No more dodging media attention.

No more avoiding the inevitable.

“I’ve always been quiet. I’m a humble person,” he said. “I’m just taking things into my own hands this year, leading the younger guys and being more vocal and saying everything that needs to be said.”

For Sheppard, things have come full circle.

He couldn’t imagine eventually becoming the coverboy for Belmont men’s basketball, a team he idolized growing up.

In 2011, the Bruins played No. 6 ranked Duke University and lost by one point 77-76.

A couple years later, Belmont upset No. 12 ranked University of North Carolina 83-80 on a last second three.

Sheppard was glued to the TV for both games.

“I was watching those games live and they were super interesting,” he said. “I didn’t know who Belmont was before that and I just kept up with them, they were my favorite mid major team growing up.”

Watching some of the best players in Belmont history matchup against the nation’s best, Sheppard knew that Nashville was the place for him.

“It just felt like the place to be, especially in the city. I love Nashville, and it’s just a great place with great people.”

At heart, the 6’6 swingman is a true hooper who loves being on the court.

“What I love about Ben is that he enjoys being out on the floor, he has a lot of fun playing, he has a smile on his face all the time,” head coach Casey Alexander said.

Suiting up for the Bruins in his fourth season, Sheppard has seen immense growth across the board.

“I’ve definitely grown as a person on and off the court. Mentally, physically, and confidence wise,” he said. “There’s been a lot of growth since my freshman year, and I’m super grateful to the people around me. It’s been a fun journey.”

To Alexander, Sheppard always stood out as a leader because he took care of his business.

Sheppard has consistently been a great teammate and a ‘lead-by-example’ type of guy.

Fellow senior teammate EJ Bellinger came in with him during the 2019-2020 season and could attest to Sheppard’s infectious personality.

“Ben is a very good teammate. He’s always a bright light for everyone around him. He’s always really happy-go-lucky, always having fun,” Bellinger said. “Especially in times where it’s not as easy for ourselves, we can always look to Ben, and he’s going to get you in a better mood.”

The next step for Sheppard is to step out of his comfort zone and become a leader.

But the whole leadership thing wasn't his idea, it stemmed from a post-season meeting at the end of his junior campaign.

"After the season, the coaches basically told me I needed to be vocal on the court," he said. "I didn't have to be vocal last year with Moose, Grayson and Luke out there."

Now, those three are gone, and it's their shoes he must fill.

"He is the more experienced player now, so we need him to be more vocal and just a more obvious leader in all circumstances," Alexander said. "As our best player, he's the one that has to shoulder most of that burden."

Alexander has seen Sheppard go from a freshman with a minimal role to head honcho in his senior year.

With key moments such as earning Ohio Valley Conference Player of the Week honors in his second season and being named First Team All-OVC in his third, Sheppard had steadily improved on the court.

But it wasn't until the ESPN Events Invitational last season that Sheppard realized he could hang with the best.

"A lot of ESPN people were there, and that's where I realized 'I can actually play, I can actually do this stuff,'" he said. "I think that week was the best basketball I've played in college, it was a super fun atmosphere."

One shoutout from broadcasting legend Dick Vitale later and Sheppard gained some swagger.

Quickly, the inexperience and shyness all went away.

Ahead of this season, ESPN.com's Myron Medcalf selected Sheppard as the Missouri Valley Conference Preseason Player of the Year.

Sheppard had his first success as a three-point shooter but turned into a multi-dimensional player over the years.

Now, he isn't so reliant on his long-range ball.

He can defend and get to the rack to finish highlight reel dunks.

"The more you can do on either end, the better chance you have to be successful because you're not relying on one thing," Alexander said. "He doesn't have to have a great night from the three-point line to have a good game."

Sheppard hopes his versatility will serve him well as the Bruins take on the Missouri Valley Conference.

But there's one caveat.

Now everybody knows he's the best player on the team.

The next step is to continue improving on the 16.2 points per game mark from a year ago when he's being guarded by the opposing team's best defender.

And he'll have to guard the other team's best perimeter player.

“I think he has real versatility on both ends, defensively he can guard the other team’s best player regardless of what perimeter position they play, that’s a great asset,” Alexander said.

Sheppard is expected to play like a veteran now with four years of competition under his belt.

No doubt, there’s a target on his back, but he’s embracing it.

“My role has just grown throughout,” he said. “I think this is the biggest role I’ve had in my time here and I’m super confident in myself and I’ve grown a lot confidence wise.”

Once the Bruins finish their season, Sheppard will likely have professional reps calling for him.

He has the size, and the game to back it up.

The question is – where?

“He’ll play professionally, he’s going to get a lot of attention that he rightly deserves, and I think his versatility is a big part of that, he’s a really smart player, he doesn’t have deficiencies,” Alexander said.

Sheppard knows if he handles his business on the court this year, he’ll have more chances to play in the future.

But for now, he’s focused on maximizing his potential as a leader of the Bruin squad.

“I think I’ll have more opportunities after the season and my goal is to play professionally and I think that’s definitely my sight of view,” Sheppard said. “I’m just going to be patient with it all and focus on the team right now.”

This article was written by Landen Secrest. November 2022. Belmont Vision Student Newspaper.