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Hope For The Future

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HARRISONBURG - Brian Rodriguez grew up a wide-eyed basketball fan, watching star-studded pick-up games on the streets of Harlem. "They're everywhere, like in every street," Rodriguez recalled of the New York City neighborhood's plethora of outdoor basketball courts. "Up the street, they would have leagues that I'd go watch the older kids go play in - like the street league. And celebrities would come up there sometimes, like Chris Brown and Ron Artest. Sometimes they'd play."

The Harrisonburg High School junior guard, who moved here during his third-grade year, is no longer a spectator. He's developing his own game.

The reserved Rodriguez, a spindly 5-foot-11, 150-pound first-year varsity player, has a mean crossover, the prettiest jump shot on the team and the potential to be a star **for** the Blue Streaks.

That potential is already beginning to surface, as No. 6-seed HHS (4-16) travels to face third-seeded Heritage (14-10) in the Region III, Division 4 quarterfinals today in Lynchburg at approximately 7:30 p.m.

"I think we're just starting to see what he's capable of, and I think he's going to be a guy that's potentially 20 points a game, if he wants to be," HHS coach Kevin Tysinger said of Rodriguez, who averaged just over 8 points per game during the regular season.

The HHS scouting report always starts with 6-foot-8 senior center Salim Charles and junior Seth Kardos, a talented slashing guard. Kardos led the Streaks with 16.3 points per

game during the regular season, followed by Charles (11.4 ppg) and Rodriguez.

Senior guard Corbin Whitelow (7.3 ppg) is the only other player on the team averaging over five points a game.

It's been a long road to varsity **for** Rodriguez, who had to wait his turn behind more experienced players.

But playing countless pick-up games with Charles at the Cecil F. Gilkerson Community Activities Center in Westover Park, and sharing minutes with Kardos during one of his two JV seasons, has helped Rodriguez fit in immediately with the Streaks this season. At open gyms and at the Westover rec center is where Rodriguez is at his loosest.

"That boosted my confidence, just trying out moves that I work on with my uncle [Michael Hunter]. He'd always tell me to go to the Rec and just try it on people there," said Rodriguez, who worked out with Hunter this past summer, honing his shot on narrow double-rims at the outdoor courts near Ralph Sampson Park.

Just don't call Rodriguez a shooter. He dislikes that label, even though he's canned 71 percent of his free throws (34-**for**-48) and 35 percent of his 3-pointers (21-**for**-60). Rodriguez simply thinks of himself as "a basketball player."

But, the fact is...

"He's the best shooter we have on the team - mechanics, everything," Tysinger said. "He has a pretty, pretty shot. He stays in line. He doesn't get off balance. ... He can shoot from anywhere."

And yet, Rodriguez can also run the point and has shown the ability to beat opponents off the dribble in Harrisonburg's spread offensive sets.

"That crossover, nobody can really stop it," said Charles, also a former AAU teammate of Rodriguez. "I mean, he gets to the hole and you're going to have to foul him or he's going to make it. He's a baller at heart."

As an outside threat, Rodriguez - who said his most comfortable shot is an elbow jumper off a crossover - has started to take more and more attention off Kardos and Charles. With a game on the line at home against Valley District rival Broadway earlier this season, Rodriguez was the first option to shoot a potential game-winning shot, but he never got the chance as there was a turnover off a late inbounds pass in the 65-64 loss.

"[Rodriguez] comes in and makes a lot of key shots," Kardos

said. "3-pointers really help with the momentum of the game, especially when we're down and we're getting a lot of pressure. We can usually find him open."

Rodriguez started playing basketball at around 6 or 7, and he started taking it seriously in the ninth grade. He's so passionate about the game that basketball tends to creep into his other hobbies and spare-time activities. **For** example, the 16-year-old enjoys playing NBA2K tournaments with his friends on Xbox 360, and his favorite movie is "Love and Basketball" - a romantic drama starring Omar Epps and Sanaa Lathan.

His best quality on the court might just be his cool demeanor, with the ability to quietly make an impact as a strangely confident and mentally tough first-year player. But like Charles and Kardos, Tysinger saw Rodriguez coming.

"[Before the season started] I just asked him, I said, 'I know what you can do in practice. I know what you can do in open gym,'" Tysinger recalled. "I said, 'I've seen you now, even the JV stuff. My question is: when the lights come on, the other team's out there, there's people in the stands - can you get it done?' And he said, 'Don't worry, Coach. I can do it.'"

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