

Jayden Quaintance glad he has second chance with Cats

BY LARRY VAUGHT
Contributing Writer

No way was Jayden Quaintance going to pass up a second chance to play basketball at the University of Kentucky.

The 6-10 Quaintance planned to play at Kentucky for coach John Calipari but instead ended up at Arizona State for the 2024-25 season after Calipari left UK for Arkansas.

"We always liked Kentucky," Haminn Quaintance, Jayden's father, said. "We were always hoping it might work out so they would recruit him again."

That didn't happen when Mark Pope got the UK job after Calipari left but when Quaintance put his name into the transfer portal one of the first coaches to reach out was Pope.

"Jayden is a 17-year-old phenom who is as explosive as he is skilled, and he is just scratching the surface of what he's going to become in this game," Pope said. "He's an incredibly bright kid who is already postering anyone in Big Blue Nation in a game of chess and he and his family couldn't be more excited to finally get to wear the Blue and White."

Obviously, Kentucky was not the only school to reach out but Kentucky had one edge. Signee Jasper Johnson, a Kentucky native, and Quaintance played on the same AAU team and kept a good relationship.

"They set (Nike) EYBL on fire. They like each other and competing with each other," Haminn Quaintance said. "Jasper talked to the (UK) coaching staff about Jayden. They were talking and that did definitely influence the decision (about coming to UK)."

"We were locked into Kentucky before the Cal thing happened. We felt a part of it. Jayden always loved UK. We just wanted to be there and they wanted us to be there. We didn't have to do another visit."

Quaintance averaged 9.4 points, 7.9 rebounds, 2.6 blocks, 1.5 assists and 1.1 steals per game last season when he shot 52.5 percent from the field. He was named to the Big 12 Conference All-Freshman and All-Defensive teams. He started all 24 games and averaged 29.7 minutes per contest. His 63 blocks combined with 27 steals made Quaintance the only player in the country to reach a combined 90 blocks and steals in fewer than 25 games last season.

He was also the youngest player in college basketball last season and only two players on this year's McDonald's All-American Team were younger than Quaintance. The family didn't want



New UK signee Jayden Quaintance was the youngest player in college basketball last season but still averaged 9.4 points and 7.9 rebounds per game last season. (Arizona State Athletics photo)

to "drag out" a decision because Himann Quaintance thought that might only make the choice more confusing.

"It was already so hard with the Auburn situation. I was impressed with Kentucky. So was he. Kentucky already felt like home. I didn't want to have a school like (national champion) Florida call or another school that I might really like calls," Himann Quaintance said. "It's just too much and too many hard decisions. When you already have a school you like, you do not need another one complicating the decision because my phone was on fire. There was just no need to drag it out."

Despite the numbers Jayden Quaintance had at Arizona State, his father never felt the system was the best fit for his son.

"It was guard ball. He could dominate at times but the system just did not utilize his playmaking ability," Haminn Quaintance said. "They just didn't have an emphasis on getting the ball in the post even when we had mismatches. He's up to about 250 (pounds) or so now. He looks big but to me he is still slim and can get bigger."

"I feel like what Pope does is made for him. I know what he can do and he'll have a chance to grow his game at Kentucky. I saw Kentucky play some last year. They are one of my favorite teams and I would get an alert (on my phone) when they played. When Pope called, I knew exactly what he was talking

about with his team. He plays his bigs similar to how I played. Pope likes his passing ability and ball handling. He likes he can guard one through five."

Quaintance is already being projected as a top 10 pick in the 2026 NBA draft even though he suffered a knee injury in February and had surgery on March 19 to repair his torn ACL.

"If everything goes as planned, being ready when the season starts is the goal. I really think that is going to happen," Quaintance's father said. "He is attacking rehab. We expect to be back in time for the start of the season. Jayden will do the work to make sure that happens."

A LIFE-LONG LOVE

For as long as he can remember, Kentucky quarterback commit DJ Hunter of Knoxville has had a football in his hand and grew into loving football.

His father, Deveyon, started his collegiate career at Eastern Kentucky University before later transferring to two other schools.

"We tried basketball and a little bit of T-Ball but they just were not football," the 6-1, 190-pound Hunter said. "Dad realized when I was about 6 that I had a chance to be pretty good. I could always throw the ball pretty far."

Hunter, a sophomore, estimates he can comfortably throw the ball 60 yards now. He's considered a dual-threat quarterback but says he is more on the "passing side" of the pass-run quarterback.

"The UK coaches came out to school to see me in

early January. They wanted to see me and they offered (a scholarship) which surprised me a little bit. From then on they really recruited me hard," Hunter said. "I already had other offers. My first offer came last summer from Virginia Tech."

Hunter thought it was easy to tell that Hamdan was "really interested" in him quickly in the recruiting process.

"He told me I was the top guy on their (recruiting) board and I felt he was the coach that could get me to the next level,"

Hunter said. "He is a good person and I just like him. I just felt Kentucky was the right place for me."

Hunter and his father had talks last summer about committing early once the right offer came along. When the Kentucky offer came in January, that's when the Hunters got serious about possibly committing even though he's just a sophomore.

"My father has always been able to push me to make me better. He has been very hard on me at times," Hunter said. "He

always asks me if going to the next level is what I want and when I say yes then he tells me what I need to do to make that happen."

He played his freshman season in Mississippi before the family moved to Knoxville where he played for Bearden High School last season. He completed 76 of 142 passes for 1,431 yards and nine scores and ran for three scores in eight games before a knee injury ended his season.

"I tore my ACL in November and am rehabbing now," Hunter said. "I had surgery on Jan. 4. I have already been back working out in the weight room and I will be fully cleared for fall camp in late July."


BLUE CHIP PEDIGREE

New Kentucky volleyball assistant coach Amaya Tillman earned All-American honors playing for Louisville and helped the Cardinals reach the Final Four her senior season. Since Tillman was from Kansas, she knew former UK star Madison Lilley, a Kansas native who led UK to the 2020 national championship and was named the nation's best player.

"I played against Madison a lot, and we actually played for the same club but not on the same team, but for the same club since she was a couple years older than me," Tillman said. "I played against her in practice when our teams would scrimmage."

"I always looked up to the way she played and how competitive of a player she was. We were never super close, but she was always someone that I could look up to, especially being in the Kansas City area."

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