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Larkin's Wheeler-Thomas stars on both ends of the court ---

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By Craig Brueske



Larkin Damari Wheeler-Thomas makes a basket during the first quarter Friday during the sectional final against DeKalb held at Huntly High School. *David Toney/for Shaw Local*

Larkin basketball coach Deryn Carter remembers the first time Damari Wheeler-Thomas entered the gym as a freshman for varsity tryouts.

"We knew he had a ton of potential," said Carter.

Wheeler-Thomas remembers being one of the smaller players on the court four years ago.

"I was one of the little guys -- maybe 5-8 or 5-9," said Wheeler-Thomas. "I remember how hard the practices were being thrown into it as a freshman.

"Looking back, it allowed me to grow.'

And grow he did.

After helping lead the Royals to an 8-4 record during an abbreviated junior season (due to COVID-19), Wheeler-Thomas saved his best for last.

While lifting Larkin to majestic heights, which included an unblemished 18-0 Upstate Eight Conference season, Class 4A regional and sectional championships, and a school-record 31 victories, the now 6-foot-1 Wheeler-Thomas also elevated his game -- and team - to the stratosphere level this season.

For his efforts, Wheeler-Thomas has been selected as the captain of the 2021-2022 Daily Herald Fox All-Area Boys Basketball Team.

Believe it or not, Wheeler-Thomas' athletic career nearly didn't include basketball.

"I played basketball when I was younger but then I left it alone for a while," recalled Wheeler-Thomas. "I was playing football as a running back.

"When I was in seventh grade, one of my teammates now (Jakob Blakley), his dad wanted me to come back to basketball. He talked my mom into it, and I've fallen in love with it (basketball) ever since."

During his sophomore campaign, things began falling into place for Wheeler-Thomas despite the Royals' 9-21 finish.

"Sophomore year, you could see it coming," said Carter.

While the pandemic shortened Wheeler-Thomas' junior campaign, you could see the transformation process beginning to take shape, as he added 15 to 20 pounds to his now-muscular frame.

"I think people would be less surprised with Damari's success if we had a normal junior season," said Carter. "Now, it kind of looks like he has come out of nowhere the last 18 months."

As a senior, Wheeler-Thomas finally got the full season he was hoping for, and he didn't disappoint.

Averaging 19.3 points per game, Wheeler-Thomas amassed 674 points this season, as the Royals finished with a 31-4 record.

He could have padded those numbers -- had Carter let him.

"There were 14 games where he didn't play in the fourth quarter because we already had built big leads," said the coach. "He averaged 25.5 points per game in the 16-17 games where he played regular minutes."

Wheeler-Thomas was at his best when his team needed him most.

Trailing 51-46 with 3:25 remaining in their first meeting with UEC rival Bartlett, the Royals scored 17 of the next 22 points -- 9 of them from Wheeler-Thomas -- during a 63-58, come-from-behind victory.

"You get used to it, but you don't stop appreciating it," Carter said after Wheeler-Thomas finished with 29 points, 7 steals and 4 assists. "We're glad he's on our side."

In mid-January, Wheeler-Thomas enjoyed one of the best games of his career, scoring 38 points on 13 of 16 shooting from the field, including a perfect 6-for-6 from beyond the 3-point arc, during the Royals' 69-53 rematch win over Bartlett.

"He can shoot it," said Carter. "He's as good a shooter as there is in the area."

"My 3-point shot has definitely improved," said Wheeler-Thomas. "I can score at all three levels."

Playing on his homecourt for the final time last month, Wheeler-Thomas tallied a game-high 26 points in Larkin's 58-42 Class 4A regional title triumph over Dundee-Crown.

"Whenever they (the Royals) needed a basket, he was there," Chargers coach Lance Huber said of Wheeler-Thomas. "He controlled the game all night long. He was the best player on the floor -- I don't think there's any question about that. We just didn't have an answer for him."

Few teams did.

"Damari is going to get his -- unless you're putting three guys on him," Bartlett coach Jim Wolfsmith said following his team's second meeting with the Royals. "When he's hitting threes, you can't stop him. He's that kid."

Wheeler-Thomas also excelled at the other end of court despite being matched up against opponents' top offensive threats.

"I love playing defense," he said. "It's a different feeling knowing when other players can't get by me. I enjoy making them feel uncomfortable."

"He's special in every sense of the word," said Carter. "Defensively, he got to the point where when we game planned, you begin to take guys out of the game. That's a huge thing for your defense because you can start strategizing on who other guys are going to guard and how you can make it tough on other people."

"I've been here a long time, and Damari is right up there with Ryan Boatright (former East Aurora standout) as the most unguardable players we've ever had in our conference, but I'll

tell you what separates the two of them -- as good as "Boat" was, he didn't play defense like Damari does."

Wheeler-Thomas ended his high school career scoring a game-high 20 points during Larkin's 60-34 Class 4A supersectional loss to nationally ranked Glenbard West (35-1) Tuesday night at NIU.

The Royals trailed 24-21 at halftime, as Wheeler-Thomas hit all 5 of his first-half field goal attempts.

"He's a great on-the-ball defender," Hilltoppers coach Jason Opoka said of Wheeler-Thomas. "Our game plan was for whoever he was guarding -- to get the ball out of their hands."

Wheeler-Thomas finished his high school career with 1,610 points, good for third in school history.

"If not for the pandemic, he would have finished first (on the list)," said Carter.

Next season, Wheeler-Thomas will take his talents to North Dakota State on the Division I level.

"One of my goals is to play right away," he said. "I plan on continuing to get stronger."

"After two years of college, I feel Damari will be one of the two or three best players on the team," said Carter. "He's a great kid -- very selfless, humble, and appreciative."

"We knew he could be special, but he exceeded any expectations we ever had."

