

The Vandal sharp shooter: Freshman Connor Hill making impact for Idaho

By Devin Rokyta/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

Idaho basketball coach Don Verlin will readily admit he made a mistake when it came to his handling of Connor Hill.

No, not when he signed the 6-foot-2, 180-pound guard out of Post Falls to play with the Vandals, but his decision prior to the start of the season to redshirt the reigning Idaho 5A high school player of the year.

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"I probably shouldn't have even tried to redshirt him, looking back on it," Verlin said. "... He can really shoot, and we knew that all along."

To give Verlin credit, it only took him three games to realize his error. In the 10 games since, Hill has established himself as one the Vandals' top pure shooters and a reliable sharp shooter off the bench, hitting on 45.7 percent of his attempts from 3-point range and averaging 5.7 points and 9.2 minutes per game.

"You've got to give him credit," Verlin said. "He believes he can shoot and believes he can play, and that's a large part of this game is having confidence in your ability."

For Hill, it's just about doing anything he can to help his team walk off the court victorious.

"I'm just trying to contribute in any way I can," he said. "What minutes I get, I get in there and play as hard as I can and do what I can to help."

Hill admits he was disappointed by Verlin's original decision to redshirt him, but his coach's reversal has piqued his confidence.

"Obviously, coming in I wanted to play, but if I had to redshirt it was up to the coaches and it was for the better of the team. But I think (Verlin) noticed I could help the team win," Hill said. "... It makes me feel good that coach trusts me and knows that I have a future here. I am trying to work as hard as I can, every year progress and get better and better."

Verlin expects that progress to manifest sooner rather than later, comparing Hill to the Vandals' star sophomore guard, Stephen Madison. As a freshman last season, Madison sparked Idaho off the bench by contributing 3.7 points per game while shooting 37.5 percent from downtown. This season, Madison has stepped up his game to become one of the Vandals' top and most promising players, averaging 12.2 points and 5.9 rebounds per game.

For Hill to follow a similar path, Verlin said the young guard needs to get more comfortable on the court and, specifically, improve on the defensive end, which would allow him to see more minutes.

Verlin said Hill needs to make gains in every area defensively, but Hill's No. 1 area of emphasis needs to be guarding the ball. Verlin said Hill can no longer rely on his athleticism to get by as a defender, as he was able to in high school. Now he's facing players bigger, stronger and faster than he is.

"He's getting better, but it's just going to take time," Verlin said.

If Hill's tireless dedication to becoming a top-notch shooter is any indication of the effort he will put toward his defensive game, it's safe to say the freshman will be seeing more playing time - and soon.

From the time he first picked up a basketball at age 3 or 4 - when he learned his stroke from his father, who played high school ball at Moscow High School - it's been difficult to pry Hill away from the game he loves. When he wasn't playing horse or taking shots in the gym with his father, Hill was in his driveway draining shot after shot prior to college. Since joining the Vandals, Hill can frequently be found sneaking in shots before or after practice.

"It's just practice and time," he said.

And they say practice makes perfect.

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