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Why Villanova's terrifying offense is so hard to slow down

By Jeff Borzello

SAN ANTONIO -- While spending Saturday night on the River Walk with his family, new Louisville coach Chris Mack caught some of the Final Four games -- including Villanova's record-setting avalanche of 3-pointers against Kansas.

And he wasn't surprised.

"I've seen that barrage happen, up close and personal," Mack said.

As the coach at Xavier, Mack played Villanova at least twice a season for the past five years -- and won just once, back in 2016. The Wildcats hit double-digit 3-pointers in seven of the 11 games they played against Xavier. Just this season, a campaign in which the Musketeers beat out Villanova for the Big East crown, the Wildcats still beat Xavier by 24 points in their first meeting and then hit 11 first-half 3-pointers in the second game -- going on a 30-9 run to essentially end the game.

"Teams in [the Big East] understand it," Mack said. "I don't think anyone else in the country truly understands it."

"It" being the terrifying, sustained runs Villanova seems to go on every game. The runs in which the Wildcats suddenly can't miss from behind the arc, the runs in which nothing the opponent does can stem the tide, the runs in which Villanova turns a five-point game into a 20-point blowout.

Mack is right in that teams in the Big East are more familiar with that phenomenon, but the rest of the country is starting to figure it out. Villanova shot 51.9 percent from 3-point range against Radford in the first round; made 17 3-pointers and opened the second half on an 18-1 run against Alabama in the second round; went on a 22-6 run against West Virginia in less than 5 ½ minutes in the Sweet 16; and outscored Texas Tech 35-14 in the final 17 minutes of the first half in the Elite Eight.

And then came Saturday night's performance. Against a Kansas team that had lost just once since Feb. 10, Villanova won the game by the second media timeout. The Wildcats jumped out to a 22-4 lead in the first seven minutes, hitting six 3-pointers, and set a Final Four record with 18 for the game.

"You feel like you don't really give yourself a chance to win," Kansas guard [Malik Newman](#) said. "You put yourself in a deep hole. And it's hard to climb out of it."

So what is it? Why is Villanova so terrifying, and how is it able to go on these runs every single night?

The easy answer is the Wildcats' shooting ability. Under coach Jay Wright, Villanova has been known for its smaller lineups and reliance on the 3-point shot -- but the Wildcats have a new wrinkle this season with [Omari Spellman](#).

The redshirt freshman big man is shooting nearly 44 percent from 3-point range and has made nine 3-pointers in the past three games. With Spellman at center, Villanova legitimately has five guys on the court at all times who can make 3s consistently. Kansas might be better-suited than anyone in the country to deal with Villanova's quickness and versatility on the perimeter, but the Jayhawks didn't have an answer for Spellman. There are always four guys on the floor who can make shots already, but with Spellman -- and [Eric Paschall](#), who made four 3s against Kansas -- opponents need to be aware of five.

There are no weak points on the offensive end, which makes it nearly impossible for defenses to stop Villanova once it gets going.

"Once we start knocking a couple down," guard [Donte DiVincenzo](#) said, "that confidence just builds, and when that confidence builds, everybody wants to get everybody else involved, and when you're doing that and everybody is knocking down shots, then we go on that run like that."

Wright also enables his team to get comfortable offensively, giving his players the freedom to take shots early and often. There's no fear of being pulled out of the game after a missed shot or two. That omnipresent green light creates a massive amount of assertiveness for Villanova's players on the offensive end.

"As long as it's the right shot and an open shot within the offense, it's a good shot," guard [Phil Booth](#) said. "Coach puts confidence in us to just take open shots and trust each other to do that; we all play off each other well."

And that's where it gets difficult for opposing coaches. It's not just telling your players to be prepared for a 20-5 run; it's the fact that Villanova doesn't play any differently during that run. The Wildcats don't stray from their game plan, they don't speed up, they don't get out of sync. They're unselfish at all times and will make passes to find better shots. As a result, the run can come at any time, and it's hard to see it coming.

"They're always playing that way," Mack said. "They're always spaced behind the 3-point line with hands ready. There are always four guys on the perimeter equally spaced with their hands ready to shoot it to the ball. It's deflating when you feel like your guys are on top of what's happening, when they're contesting shots, when they're not getting back-doored. That's when it becomes deflating because [Villanova] will take -- and make -- some contested 3s. It's just a relentless approach."

Forgotten in all the attention given to Villanova's shooting? Defense. Villanova players, without fail, point to the defensive end of the floor as the catalyst for the bombardment of 3-pointers at the other end. The Wildcats have improved dramatically over the past month, after going through a stretch during the middle of Big East play in which they were way too soft defensively. They lost three of six in the middle of February and allowed at least one point per possession to opponents in eight of 10 games.

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Weird stat: Saturday's win over Kansas was actually Villanova's worst defensive performance since Feb. 17 against Xavier. Both games ended 95-79.

"We don't worry about scoring. We worry about defending," forward [Mikal Bridges](#) said. "We've got confidence in each other to try and get stops. Once we start missing shots, we don't worry about that, we go and get stops. That's what fuels us offensively is our defense, just keep playing off our defense."

Eventually the run will end.

But by the time the 3-pointers stop, opponents are exhausted physically and demoralized mentally.

There's very little chance for a comeback, and Villanova makes sure momentum doesn't build. If an opponent makes a shot or two in a row or hits a big 3-pointer, watch how long it takes the Wildcats to inbound the ball. They stand around, let the ball bounce three or four times, toss it to the referee, get it back and then walk it up the court. Wooden Award winner [Jalen Brunson](#) is deliberate in the way he runs the offense, taking all 30 seconds. He'll back down his defender and score against a point guard who isn't prepared to defend the post. He'll wait for a double-team and find a teammate for an open 3. The entire time, Villanova won't stray from the fundamentals it drills every day in practice: shot-fake, jump-stop with two feet, pivot, pivot, pivot, move the ball.

Suddenly, it's 45 seconds since the opponent scored -- and Villanova is already on the verge of another run.

"I thought we played our balls off, you look up [at the score] and it's like, 'What?'" one Big East coach said. "We're playing as hard as we can, so it's just deflating. You feel like you're there and it's like, 'Damn, they don't miss.'

"It's the fear they create. That's what makes you nervous about playing them. [Shooting] opens up everything else for them. They're never going to drive out of control, they're never going to run you over, they'll never get called for a charge. They just put you in binds. You foul them, and every time they make two. And they fight so hard."

In Monday's national championship game, Villanova will go on another run at some point. It's inevitable. And Michigan will have to find a way to weather the storm and stay in the game -- something very few teams have been able to do over the past few years.

The scariest part for the Wolverines? A game in which Villanova scored 95 points, set a Final Four record, had 20 assists and beat a 1-seed by 16 points wasn't considered out of the ordinary.

"We definitely didn't play a perfect game," Booth said.
