



ETHAN HYMAN ehyma@newsobserver.com

N.C. State head coach Kevin Keatts hugs Michael O'Connell (12) after the Wolfpack's 76-64 victory over Duke in their NCAA Tournament Elite Eight matchup at the American Airlines Center in Dallas, Texas, Sunday, March 31, 2024.

NC State basketball's Michael O'Connell helped Wolfpack win. Now, it wants more from him

BY JADYN WATSON-FISHER
jwatson-fisher@newsobserver.com

CHARLOTTE
N.C. State men's basketball coach Kevin Keatts remembers reading articles and tweets that said Stanford transfer Michael O'Connell wasn't good enough to be the Wolfpack's point guard. He was listed as the 36th-best point guard and ranked in the 220s overall.
He's not a guy who asks for all the attention, and you won't see him donning a giant diamond necklace or constantly posting on social media. He wasn't the Cardinal's best scorer. But, Keatts and his staff saw the value O'Connell could bring to the team, and their decision to bring him in paid off.
O'Connell enters his second year with the Wolfpack and is taking on

a larger leadership role this season, but the process to becoming someone his teammates look up to started in Year 1.
"I looked around in one huddle and he's talking to somebody," Keatts said at ACC Tipoff on Wednesday. "I was like, 'Hold on, is that Michael?' Because he hadn't said a word all year long."
Keatts doesn't remember what game that was, but DJ Horne was "going off about something" and O'Connell was there to talk him down, to provide calmness in a moment of chaos.
That's what makes him a special leader, too. O'Connell not only began talking to his teammates, but he learned how to communicate with them on an individual level.
Guard Jayden Taylor said O'Connell knows which players can take getting yelled at and

when. Others may need a softer approach. He can read situations and make adjustments in his communication style.
"It's huge. You've got to know your teammates," Taylor said. "If Michael comes at a teammate kind of crazy and he gets in his feelings about it, now we've got a disconnect. That's the thing I love about Michael. He knows how you're talking to, who you're talking to; it matters. It all matters."
O'CONNELL 'FOUND HIS VOICE'
That's something Keatts admires about his fifth-year senior. He's always been a hard worker, and Keatts recognized O'Connell's selflessness last season, saying the guard was OK with leading the team in assists instead of points.
But, the head coach said on Sept. 19 the 2023-24

team became better when O'Connell "found his voice."
Then, this week, Keatts said the graduate student became great at his position when he "realized his words matter" and truly became an extension of the coaching staff.
"He learned how to motivate some guys, and he learned how to pat some guys on the back," Keatts said. "He learned how to say this to a certain player and say this to a certain guy. I think when he learned the power of words is when he really took off as a point guard."
Last season, O'Connell scored 83 of 185 field goals (44.8%) and 30 of 80 from 3-point range (37.5%). But his postseason performances lifted those averages.
O'Connell shot 31 of 66 (46.9%) from the field and 16 of 31 (51.6%) from deep during the ACC

Tournament and March Madness runs, while dishing out 38 assists. He finished with 130 on the year, and his season high (8) took place against Oakland in the NCAA Tournament Second Round.
He also pulled down a career-high 11 rebounds in the Elite Eight win over Duke.
BEING A LEADER
Becoming a vocal leader came at the right time, it hasn't been the easiest transition, though. O'Connell isn't known for being chatty. He's treated this, however, like basketball and pushes himself to encourage a teammate — even if it's saying good job — or provide constructive feedback.
"You can't get comfortable with something if you never do it," O'Connell said. "It's almost like getting reps in — like if

you're getting shots up — to do that. I think that just leads to just becoming more comfortable with talking to guys in different moments."
Beyond his new confidence in the role, O'Connell appreciates and values the position he's in. He values what it means to be a leader.
O'Connell said there are different aspects of leadership, but it all comes down to others wanting to follow a person's example. It's done out of respect and belief in what the leader is doing — not fear.
Taylor is just one example. He was inspired by his elder teammate and hopes to emulate O'Connell in his own way.
"It helped us win. I literally watched it help us win," Taylor said of O'Connell. "It's big time for me to be able to use my voice the same way. Hopefully, I can affect winning the way he did."
Michael O'Connell's recruitment might not have impacted much belief from the outside. Instead, he won the locker room and that's what continues to matter most.

Jadyn Watson-Fisher:
jwatsonfisher

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count of her athletes, Cone began to work on a plan — with Hill and other N.C. universities as well as the NBA's Charlotte Hornets, who'd also reached out.
This week, the UNC Asheville swim team went to live and train at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs. Track went to Emory & Henry in Virginia.
But most of the Bulldogs' teams playing now or training for the upcoming winter sports seasons came to Charlotte.
The men's and women's basketball teams moved into hotels near UNC Charlotte. The men's and women's soccer and volleyball teams are living in dorms on Charlotte's campus. The Asheville teams are practicing and training at Queens University and at Charlotte. The men's and women's basketball teams will practice at the Hornets' up-town facility, beginning Thursday.
In all, that's about 140 athletes on five teams. They will practice here

and the teams currently in season will travel for all away games. Basketball starts next month.
"Athletics is just a small part of the story of what's happened to western North Carolina," Cone said. "It's horrible up there, but it's getting better each day. But it will be a long time before these communities in Asheville and around Asheville recover. But I want people to understand that due to the generosity and hospitality of these college athletic directors and college presidents that it's allowing our student-athletes to continue to practice and play and have a semblance of a fall semester on a college campus."
"And we're grateful for that."
THE MILLION DOLLAR QUESTION
Chris Thomasson, the Charlotte 49ers' executive associate athletic director for internal affairs, said he isn't sure how long the Asheville students will be on campus.

But he said it doesn't matter.
"Look this is what athletics is all about," Thomasson said. "We hear so much about college athletics and how we're turning, more and more, into a pro model, but it really is about helping young people and developing them for life and putting them in positions where they learn and are exposed to life lessons. It makes me feel great as a university and athletic department that we're able to do this. And we're excited to do this."
Thomasson said the Asheville athletes moved onto campus at Charlotte on Monday and have been using the 49ers' team facilities or campus rec centers for things like weight training and watching film. The Asheville athletes eat in the 49ers' dining hall.
In a statement provided to The Observer, the Hornets said they have "a long-standing" relationship with UNC Asheville, including hosting the NBA team for training camp and a preseason game.
Beginning this week, the Bulldogs' basketball teams will use the practice facility at Spectrum Center,

including the Novant Health Training Center. On days when the space is not available, the Hornets said they will secure additional facilities for the Asheville teams to use.
"We're proud to return the favor and host them at our home, especially during this time of need," the team said in its statement.
'NO PLAYBOOK FOR SOMETHING LIKE THIS'
There are about 95,000 people who live in Asheville, which is bordered by the French Broad and the Swannanoa, which makes the city and the region susceptible to floods.
And when the city was blanketed by heavy rain, ahead of Helene last week, men's basketball coach Mike Morrell knew it could be bad.
He canceled a Friday practice and prepared for the worst.
He said the worst of the storm blew through Thursday night and, the next morning, he walked to a bridge that look out over the famous River Arts District near where he lives. Morrell said he literally had to crawl through trees to get there.
"I wanted to see what the river was like," he

said. "They had talked about how high it could get."
He stood there looking, he said, with about 30-40 people. And when he tried to go back, just a few hours later, the bridge he had been standing on was under water.
"That was the first time, I was like, 'Oh my gosh, this ain't good,'" Morrell said.
Morrell said his players lost power about 7:30 a.m. Friday and he lost it about 30 minutes after that. Phones worked for little while longer, but when they went dark, it was hard to know what was going on.
"It was like you were in 'The Truman Show,' or 'The Hunger Games,' where everybody can see what's going on top of you," Morrell said, "and you don't know what they're seeing."
Morrell checked on his family in Tennessee, also affected by the storm, and then circled back to his players, who by then, had lost running water.
"We had to get the guys out of town, man," he said. "This is not safe."
The mother of fifth-year guard Josh Banks — who played at Charlotte's

Olympic High School — drove up and Morrell said she took some guys back to Charlotte. Two other players, Kam Taylor and Jordan Marsh, both from the Charlotte-area, also drove back, taking teammates with them.
By Monday, all of Morrell's players had all gotten to Charlotte and in the team hotel.
"I told our players there is really no playbook for this," Morrell said.
"You're asking for a lot of grace from a lot of people in Charlotte. It makes you feel good but it's really not surprising. I would like to think that we would do the exact same thing. So we're just inconvenienced right now. That's all this is. We're not without power and water the way some people are in western North Carolina or Tennessee or Georgia, or people in Florida having to evacuate (due to Hurricane Milton).
"So we're inconvenienced, but we're also thankful. It's probably not the only time in life you'll find yourself in a situation like this."
Langston Wertz Jr.:
704-358-5133,
@langstonwertzjr