

THE TAO OF SHAKA

VCU's run to the 2011 Final Four catapulted its charismatic coach into the national spotlight. But Shaka Smart is about much more than just winning games.

By Michael Litos - Associated Press

Shaka Smart took his position under the far basket at William & Mary's cavernous Kaplan Arena. The pregame shootaround just wrapped, but instead of heading back to the hotel the VCU head coach beelined to the south basket's baseline.

It wasn't really his position. Graduate assistants generally rebound for players working on their shooting, not the head coach. But the young, charismatic coach has never shied away from participating in drills with his players. He also had a good reason to work with seldom-used sophomore Troy Daniels.

Smart knew Daniels' role would change that night. Brandon Rozzell, the Rams' best three-point threat, broke his wrist at UNC Wilmington and was out for six weeks. Daniels played one minute of mop-up time during VCU's previous game; Rozzell had hit six threes. In fact, Daniels had played 25 total minutes and shot 1-11 *combined* during the previous seven games.

"We were all panicking a little but (Smart) told us on the way to shootaround before the game that Troy would be fine," recalls Will Wade, an assistant coach on that team. "That was his way of saying 'I believe in you and tonight will be no different.'"

Belief is important to Smart. Instilling confidence in those around him is not as much a part of his job as much as it is his responsibility.

"He believes in people more than they believe in themselves," says current assistant coach Mike Morrell. "He does that with players, GAs, managers,

assistant coaches. He's done it to me. He sees what we can be better than we can. He sees what's in us."

Daniels hit two of three 3-pointers that night, which helped VCU take a big lead and coast to an 18-point win.

Three years later, playing the Portland Trail Blazers and not the William & Mary Tribe, a confident Troy Daniels hit a game-winning 3-pointer with 11 seconds left in overtime to help the Houston Rockets win game three of the NBA playoffs.

The funny thing about Shaka Smart is that he is 37 years old, looks 27, and has the wisdom of a man who is 57.

Smart doesn't carry a commanding physical presence. He's typically average in build and form. If he weren't a popular basketball coach consistently in the media glare, he could be in line next to you picking up dry cleaning and you wouldn't notice him.

He can go the route of the screaming coach, and he has, but Smart prefers pointed feedback, typically a positive spin on concepts like having a growth mindset. No matter the first half performance of his VCU team, he doesn't peel paint in locker rooms. It's the same thing, a consistent message of what needs to be done to create success.

No, Smart is not a commanding physical presence, but he commands the room through his relentlessly positive words and his caring actions. Spending time with his players is very important to Smart.

That's perhaps the potion that allows him to connect with players as the leader of the VCU basketball program while helping, as he says, "move them forward" in their life.

That occurs outside the gym and basketball offices, where they see firsthand what types of advantages college basketball players have.

Each holiday season the players shop for Christmas gifts with underprivileged children in their community through a program with Target. It's jarring for them to have a 10-year-old ask for a winter jacket as their gift. He gives them leadership opportunities as well. Junior Melvin Johnson spoke at a Richmond TEDx event. Smart has meditated with players to help them deal with the pressures of basketball and school life. He is not afraid of the concept of love in a decidedly manly atmosphere. The word love hangs on a plaque outside his office. In fact, he called or texted one of his players, who grew up without a father, to tell him he loved him.

Every day.

It was important to Smart that the player understood that he could have a strong, positive male role model in his life. It's the *real life* part of his job that Smart very much enjoys and very much takes seriously, even amid being the overseer of college basketball's havoc.

The system, which employs full-court pressing and relentless energy and enthusiasm, is designed to unravel an opponent. VCU has racked up impressive turnover totals and led to a bevy of victories.

VCU is known for its 2011 Final Four run, but Smart's Rams have since proven it was no fluke. The team has been to four consecutive NCAA tournaments and is one of only three programs to win 26 or more games during the past three seasons. Duke and Syracuse are the other two.

But havoc isn't only a style of play. It's a mindset. It's about everything VCU does in its program. Two of his closest confidants embody the approach for their roles.

Smart relies on his strength coach, Daniel Roose, and his academic advisor, Sofia-Hiort-Wright, to mold the players' bodies and minds.

Roose came to VCU from Appalachian State and keeps workouts fresh. He won't take credit, but it was his idea for the team to begin training in the summers, Navy SEAL-style. Hiort-Wright played tennis at VCU and is more than an academic counselor.

Darius Theus, a former point guard and Smart's first recruit to VCU, tabs Hiort-Wright as the most important person in his life outside of his parents and Smart. Roose earns similar accolades.

“I thought I knew everything, but I was mentally soft,” Theus says. “Roose helped me build mental toughness. Willpower. Fight. Those two people are life changers. Coach Smart has changed everybody’s life. But Roose’s effect is amazing.”

It isn’t exclusive to players. Smart cares about everyone and everything, and a part of that caring is holding people accountable and challenging them. Attention to detail matters. Wade was Smart’s first hire, and he remembers the very first scouting report he prepared. It was for Bethune-Cookman, a game where VCU wrote a check to get an easy victory at home to open the season.

“I thought I had everything for him,” recalls Wade. “He started peppering me with all sorts of questions I would’ve never anticipated. I thought I was thorough but I wasn’t close.”

(Getty Images)

Smart wanted video of the Bethune-Cookman freshmen, which meant Wade had to call high school coaches. Smart wanted every detail on the seventh or eighth man in the rotation.

“He stretches you,” says Wade. “He’s always asking questions and you better have the answers. I thought ‘that’s how we are going to do it.’ You think you’re prepared but not at that level. I learned that’s how you do it in the big time. And I appreciate that from him.”

Appreciation began early for Smart.

He remembers his first dinner party. He was five years old, and the guest list consisted of his mother, Monica King, and his three favorite kindergarten teachers. It was a thank you dinner for the teachers. Smart doesn’t remember if the idea was his mom’s or it was his and mom was playing along, but he knows the lesson, a lesson he carries forward to this day.

“That’s the kind of person she is,” Smart says. “At the end of every school year my mom would have me write thank you cards to all my teachers. I just kind of felt like that’s what you do, but that’s not what a lot of people do.”

Appreciation tops his list of five core values. The others are enthusiasm, competitiveness, unselfishness, and accountability. It comes directly from his mother.

“She pretty much she shaped what I care about and what I value,” says Smart.

It’s a special relationship between Smart and his mother. King was a single parent in a mixed-race household in Madison, WI who challenged her three sons and made education, consideration, and perspective everyday musts. Her sons were given uncommon freedom as teenagers, but the boys’ expectations were always clear and lines were drawn. There existed a culture of learning. That factor has molded Smart’s inexhaustable curiosity.

Smart never speaks of his father unless it’s to point out that he wasn’t around. His strength came directly from his mother, blended with his life experiences, and that relationship is just as strong today.

King can be found behind the bench at many VCU games, not necessarily cheering out loud alongside the rabid fan base VCU enjoys but more willing the Rams to victory.

It’s clear that presence Smart carries with him was given to him by King, and he appreciates that. Smart said earlier this year that his mom would be most proud that “when I was 21, 22 years old, when I decided to start this journey in coaching and a lot of people around me were critical of that decision, she was always extremely supportive because she knew it’s what I wanted to do. She would be most proud that I’ve never wavered in my passion and my work ethic and drive to get better in coaching and to create good experiences.”

That attention to people’s experiences and appreciation plays out consistently. Smart rarely sits alone on planes and buses. He is most often with an assistant, reviewing film or giving pointers. It’s the relationship aspect. It’s family, but then again it isn’t. It’s more.

Theus admits he didn’t think much about college basketball as a high school senior. Theus was an above average high school player at IC Norcom in Portsmouth, Va., the kind of player who could overwhelm lesser-skilled and lesser-built high school players. But would that translate to college?

Theus was undecided — until he met Shaka Smart.

It wasn't easy for Theus. He was a point guard. Smart, a point guard himself at Kenyon College in Ohio, hands control of his team to his point guard and is demanding.

Leadership is integral. So is trust. That's not easy for a teenager, balancing what the coach wants alongside maintaining the respect of his teammates. Theus also recalls, in his word, being a knucklehead.

"You have a hard time being on your coach's side or your teammates. You don't want to be that guy," says Theus. "I put it together one day at the end of my sophomore year that the stuff he's telling me makes me a better man and a better player. So I put all my trust in everything he said. He could've told me to jump into the ocean. I would've done it."

Theus ended his career the poster child of a Shaka Smart point guard — a strong leader who knew what to do on the court, and who held the respect of his teammates.

"Later I started watching his every move and saying 'One day, if there's somebody I'd love to be like, this is the guy.' He molded me into the man I am today. It's a beautiful thing that I can say that. My dad is a strong father, but he was an hour-and-a-half away. Through those situations, all those things you face in college as a young man, and it could be anything, coach Smart was there."

But it didn't end with his eligibility. Theus remains close to the program, and when he had a career choice to make, Smart was his first phone call. Theus was able to play overseas in Europe, but that meant being away from his family, which includes a baby girl.

"I tell him thanks whenever I can for the things he did for me," Theus says. "I mean, he's got a whole team to deal with and he's a busy man, but to put his life on pause to have a 45-minute conversation with me whenever I call ... Of course he did it when I was in college, but that he will still do it today, that's the type of person he is."

"Man, it's beautiful."

Theus does his best to relate this dynamic to the current VCU roster. He tells them the stories and the hugs and the help and the conversations about their daughters. They wonder how a player and coach can be so close but he tells

them it's okay to be close with your coach and still be loved by your teammates.

"If it weren't for coach Smart I don't know where I would be. Would I be the Darius Theus I am now? I can't say. I view things so different," he says. "Without him recruiting me I probably wouldn't be the man I am today. This man may be the blessing that my life needed."

David Hinton was not a college basketball star. In fact, the recruited walk-on spent most of his career sitting next to Smart during games. Hinton's college highlight: drawing two charging fouls against Wichita State's Garrett Stutz during the 2012 NCAA tournament.

Hinton knew early on that athletics might be a way for him to get a solid education and a start on a career path. In the marketing parlance of the NCAA, Hinton would go pro in something other than basketball. Smart saw the same things, immediately, and before Hinton saw his own possibilities.

"He always wanted me to be a leader, even from the beginning," Hinton says. "Once a week he brought me to his office. I didn't always understand what he was saying, and once he told me 'it's a daily decision to be uncommon.' I never knew what he meant until my junior year but a light bulb went off. You can be a leader whether your position is on the court or off the court."

Hinton paid attention. Smart continued to pepper Hinton with probing, thoughtful questions.

"On that journey he always asked me what I wanted to do," says Hinton. "All the lessons he gives you on the basketball court you can take into life. He's big on mental toughness. Complacency. Don't get satisfied, always be hungry and attack. Accountability. In everyday life you don't even think about it but it's there. All those things translate. He made me who I am today."

There's a reality in college athletics. Basketball coaches are held accountable for results, not just good feelings or rebounding for a struggling sophomore or talking to an ex-player about his daughter.

Sometimes what's best for a player's life conflicts with what is needed on the basketball court. Smart holds himself to his own standard.

"You try to do both because we are judged and held accountable for results," Smart says. "We understand that it's the system everyone has at least somewhat agreed upon. We keep that in mind. But at the same time why we do this, why we coach, why we've chosen this line of work, is because we enjoy the development piece. The sheer enjoyment you get out of seeing someone come so far over a four-year period, even after they leave, seeing the growth. While you're in it, it can seem like the growth only occurs at the speed of a glacier moving and sometimes you want to bang your head against a wall. But then when you look at with perspective you look how far guys are able to come."

Smart understands that what he enjoys, what lights him up on the inside, is also in conflict with the young men under his charge.

"We have these five core values that, to be honest, we literally jam down our guys throats on a weekly, if not daily, basis," he says. "When you're 18, 19, 20 years old you get tired of hearing about appreciation, accountability. Those things are a pain in the butt for these guys. I make them memorize them, give examples. I've made them write papers on them."

They used to joke, wondering whether or not Troy Daniels had ever been in fight. Daniels was a nice kid from Roanoke, Va., an idyllic hometown set in a valley just off interstate 81 in the southwestern Virginia mountains.

Roanoke is best known for producing shooters. Duke's JJ Redick and Virginia's Curtis Staples hail from Roanoke. Both are among the NCAA's all-time leaders in 3-pointers made.

Daniels arrived at VCU with that sweet Roanoke shooting stroke, and not much else. The staff assessment: he was a kid they liked, but also someone who was totally ill-equipped to translate his basketball talents into any type of meaningful game setting.

"We saw he wasn't ready, but we saw this great gift in him that is maybe the best gift you can have offensively in the game of basketball," Smart says. "It was kind of a paradox, and I remember early on us making a conscious decision that even though this guy is the 12th man, the 13th man as a freshman, we're going to spend a lot of time with him on and off the court. As a head coach it was important to spend a lot of time with him so that he knows we care about him and think about him."

(Getty Images)

Time spent, like rebounding for him instead of passing the service duty to a graduate assistant.

"I've never worked so much with a guy that wasn't playing," laughs Smart. "We saw this future in him that we thought we could help him get to. To his credit he stuck with us. Troy was terrific in his dedication, the best guy that since I've been here at following directions and doing what we asked."

But it wasn't all swishes and glory. Daniels struggled for two seasons. Early in his sophomore year there remained a distinct difference in what he did in practice and what carried over into the game. Then Daniels broke his foot midway through that sophomore season. The time between the end of the Final Four and beginning of his junior season was crucial.

So Smart began working on his mental game, giving Daniels one-word cues to change his mindset.

"We had to build confidence in this guy's mind," says Smart. "At that time the work we did was on his mentality. He was a different guy when that (junior) season started, and a lot was due to the psychological work that we did. And he had two great seasons with us."

And then Daniels was in the NBA, this kid with an uncommon skill from a little valley in Virginia, winning a playoff game with ice-cold confidence.

“I’m most proud of Troy, and I don’t want to sound like I’m patting myself on the back, but I feel like we were able to put him on a path that’s taken him to where he is today, to put a mentality in him” Smart says. “One critical thing, being Troy or any other guy graduating at age 22, is that that’s not the end of the path. You’re still fairly early in the journey.”

T here are themes that become clear when people talk about Shaka

Smart. At the top of the list is belief. Treveon Graham, a senior on this year’s team, has the opportunity to become VCU’s alltime leading scorer by the time this season ends.

It didn’t start that way. Graham started his VCU career 1-16 (and 3-23) from the field and struggled to adapt to college.

“Coach never wavered in his belief of Tre,” says Morell. “This guy believed in Tre so much that it never crossed his mind whatsoever that he might have been wrong about what Tre could accomplish. He did that same thing for Troy Daniels and Darius Theus.”

Says Wade: “He has an unbelievable belief and confidence, and gives the players that kind of confidence.”

Smart’s 2015 recruiting class is full of highly-rated recruits. It’s the second-straight season national pundits have pointed to the recruiting prowess of Smart and his staff, most notably Morrell. But their focus on the VCU family doesn’t end there.

Darius Theus is raising his daughter and gave up a basketball career in Europe to enter the coaching profession as an assistant at Mills Godwin High School in Richmond.

Troy Daniels finished his VCU basketball career, earned his degree, and now plays in the NBA for the Houston Rockets.

David Hinton earned his graduate degree and has begun a high security position with the Department of Homeland Security.

Four VCU assistant coaches are now head coaches. Mike Jones (Radford), Jamion Christian (Mount St. Mary's), Will Wade (Chattanooga), and Mike Rhoades (Rice) all lead their own programs now. Christian employs a style called Mayhem, and it isn't named after the Allstate character, and Wade has brought Chaos to his Mocs program.

Moving people forward, the Shaka Smart way. It has little to do with highly-branded havoc. Shaka Smart is simply a difference-maker in the lives of the people he touches, and it has nothing to do with basketball.