

The Fresh Seven: Kierstan Bell Highlights Ohio State Freshman Class With 'SheBron' Potential



The Fresh Seven is a seven-part series on the seven freshman players joining the Ohio State women's basketball team in the upcoming season. Week seven is on five-star guard Kierstan Bell.

Motivators are key to the success of any player in any sport.

It can be as simple as a drive to be great, or maybe to make a family member proud or to prove everyone who doubted them wrong.

For a second grade Kierstan Bell, her motivation was something a little more simple: money.

"My stepdad, he used to bribe me with money," Bell told Buckeye Sports Bulletin. "Money used to give me everything, so when I played basketball, he used to be like, 'If you drop this many points and get this many rebounds, I'll give you this much money.'"

That motivation from stepdad B.J. Cunningham which, according to Bell, was \$100, gave the second grader, who was already playing well above her age in a church league against middle schoolers, all the confidence and inspiration that she needed to drop 50 points against those nearly double her age.

But even that was not the first time Bell — who was a five-star prospect, a three-time Ohio Ms. Basketball Player of the Year and who was given a nickname due to her similarities to one of the best players to ever pick up a basketball — knew that she was born to be a talented athlete.

"I picked up a ball when I was really young, and my mom said my first word was 'ball,'" Bell said. "They knew I was going to get into sports."

Basketball was not Bell's only sport for much of her life. The now-Ohio State commit dabbled in gymnastics, track, softball and even football, which she played in against boys until she started high school.

Eventually, all of the other sports took a backseat to basketball, and, while Bell was at Canton McKinley

High School, basketball is what turned the OSU guard into a true phenom that garnered national attention.

After a freshman season averaging 20.4 points, 10.0 rebounds, 3.5 steals, 2.9 assists and 1.9 blocks per game, a year that Bell described as a time where she was “just getting used to things,” but was facing pressure to perform from coaches that saw her potential, she used that potential for an explosive sophomore season.

In her second year for the Bulldogs, Bell put up averages of 26.2 points per game, 8.9 rebounds, 4.2 steals, 3.0 assists and 2.3 blocks, and became the first sophomore to win Ohio Ms. Basketball in the award’s history.

“That was a big accomplishment as a sophomore, that was really big because I didn’t expect it,” Bell said. “Coming from a small town, like I didn’t think these type of awards existed, so when they say Ms. Basketball is a big thing, and then when I won it, it was like ‘Wow, this is amazing.’”

Sophomore year was also when Bell believes she was first called her nickname: SheBron.

The name is made in reference of LeBron James, who played high school basketball at St. Vincent St. Mary’s in Akron, Ohio and is currently on the Los Angeles Lakers. James is a three-time NBA champion, a four-time MVP and a 15-time All-Star and is often in the conversation for the best player in NBA history.

Bell earned the nickname for her similar style of play to the future hall of famer.

“It was a huge accomplishment,” Bell said of earning the nickname. “I wasn’t trying to have a big head about it, I usually let other people talk about me, instead of me being cocky, I like to just be humble and let other people do the talking.

“That’s one of the players that my game, I really play like. I can shoot, he can shoot, he drives to the basket, gets to the bucket, I could do the same thing. Helping his teammates, passing is one of my biggest things, and he’s really good with passing to his teammates and getting his teammates involved, and that’s really how my game is.”

Eventually, after more hype and more impressive performances, it was time for LeBron to see what SheBron was all about.

On Jan. 24, 2017 during her junior season, in a game against Massillon Jackson, James was in attendance to watch Bell. She responded by putting up 38 points, eight rebounds and five steals in a Canton McKinley win.

“I didn’t even know he was in the gym. We were standing for the national anthem, and we were just standing there, and everyone’s like ‘LeBron’s here,’ and I’m like ‘Y’all lying,’” Bell said. “I looked up, and I was like ‘Wow, I really see LeBron,’ and then I saw his wife, so I was like ‘Yeah, he’s in the gym for real.’”

Having LeBron in the crowd was only the tip of the iceberg for highlights in Bell’s third year for the Bulldogs. During her second straight season winning Ohio Ms. Basketball, she put together a stat line of 33.3 points, 9.6 rebounds, 5.0 steals, 3.9 assists and 2.5 blocks per game while shooting 52.7 percent

from the field.

Before she even began her final season at Canton McKinley, Bell had already made her decision to commit to the Buckeyes, officially making the commitment on Aug. 25, 2018, mostly due to her relationship with Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff.

“They’ve been with me for a long time, since I was young,” Bell said. “I love McGuff and I knew a lot of people would come here, so as you see, I played against some of them, and I played with them, so we just had a good chemistry and I just liked the team.”

McGuff said he saw Bell at an early age because of all the accolades and her close proximity to Columbus, and said it was her offensive prowess that really started garnering the attention nationwide.

“Recruiting is really competitive, and certainly I knew it was going to be the same with her,” McGuff told BSB. “She can really score in bunches, she put up a lot of points and her stats are really gaudy, so I think that just created a lot of awareness about how good she is.”

After a whole year of being the center of attention at Canton McKinley, which led to double and triple teams, Bell’s numbers dropped to a modest 28.8 points per game, 7.9 rebounds per game, 4.4 blocks per game, and 3.8 steals per game. They were still enough to win her a third straight Ohio Ms. Basketball trophy, edging out her current teammate in Jacy Sheldon.

Bell joined James as the only two players in the state’s history to become a three-time player of the year. She is the highest rated of seven freshmen in Ohio State’s No. 4 ranked recruiting class in 2019, and the one that has garnered the most attention.

After all the talk of the potential that Bell possesses, she had her first opportunity to turn all the expectations into reality in an exhibition against an overmatched Urbana team.

She capitalized, tying Sheldon for a team-leading 25 points on 10-of-14 shooting and 3-of-7 shooting from three, while also tallying two rebounds, two assists and four steals with zero turnovers.

But even with those numbers — numbers that were reminiscent of the “gaudy” figures she put up in high school — Bell came out of the exhibition unsatisfied.

“The first scrimmage was a little iffy because it was our first time on the court,” she said. “But once we got into practice, we really focused on defense.”

The sky is the limit for a player known for her comparison to the best basketball player to ever come out of Ohio, and she will be the face of one of the most talented freshmen classes in the country.

Bell has had to face heightened expectations for the better part of the past two years, and has yet to bend to the pressure, simply answering “nope” when BSB asked if outside pressure ever gets to her.

Whether it be \$100 from her stepdad, an intense work ethic from her high school coach or an inner strive to be the best player on the court every time she steps on it, Bell has made a name for herself, and is now bringing SheBron with her to Ohio State.

Photo Credit: Courtesy of Ohio State Athletics

For the full story on Bell, as well as access to the other stories in the Fresh Seven series and a full season preview of Ohio State women's basketball, subscribe to the print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin.

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