

Special Report

Kevin Roberson would turn 50 this month if not for a car crash that killed him and his sister over 27 years ago. In his 23 short years, he made a difference at the University of Vermont on and off the court that reverberates there today.

A short life, long legacy

By Matt Craig

Every college basketball fan in Vermont knows the name Kevin Roberson. Truth is, there might not be many college basketball fans in Vermont were it not for him.

As a point of fact, few student-athletes have ever been more beloved by their campus community than he was at UVM in the early 1990s. His accomplishments on the court showed that greatness was possible there, his degree in electrical engineering fulfilled the student-athlete ideal and the social responsibility he shouldered as one of the only African Americans in Burlington, Vt., at that time dwarfs them both.

On Oct. 25, 2020, he would have celebrated his 50th birthday, had he not lost his life some 27 years earlier in a car accident. The tendency with those who die too young is to canonize their lives, but Roberson's legend was recognized even before his sudden death. Standing at midcourt before his final home game, while still an active player, Roberson's impact on the university was honored by having the first jersey retired in Vermont basketball history.

In order to understand the magnitude of that accomplishment, one must first know a little history. Take a look at the state of Vermont basketball now, after 12 straight 20-win seasons and several NCAA Tournament appearances, and one might assume a rich tradition of success. That simply wasn't the case when Tom Brennan took over as head coach in 1986. The program had posted three winning seasons in the previous two decades. The bleachers in Patrick Gymnasium remained mostly empty, even as Burlington locals lined up at 3 a.m. for tickets to the school's hockey games.

Back then, the basketball program only had nine scholarships. Road trips often included passenger vans when buses weren't in the budget. Brennan begged that "Vermont Basketball" be printed on their reversible practice jerseys, only to learn they might be needed for the lacrosse team in the spring.

And at one point, Brennan remembers his athletic director seeing him on campus during the summer and asking what he was doing there. "I said, 'What do you mean what am I doing in the summer? I'm trying to get players!'" Brennan recalls. "He said your contract is only nine months, you don't have to come here in the summer."

What the program lacked in resources, it made up for in patience. Brennan went 5-23 in the first season and 3-24 the next. He'll be the first to admit his job was saved by the recruiting class of 1988, highlighted not by Roberson but Kenny White, a classic New York City workaholic point guard recruited away from a number of Ivy League programs. Roberson, on the other hand, was basically unrecruited out of Hutchinson Technical Central High School, far from a basketball powerhouse in Buffalo.

It was risky for Brennan to even pay to fly Roberson in for a visit. He was 6-foot-3, rail thin, and when he first stepped foot on campus, his skin was shades of gray.

"Was this your first plane ride?" Brennan asked. Roberson nodded his head squeamishly. Brennan cracked, "And did you enjoy it?" Roberson flashed his signature smile.

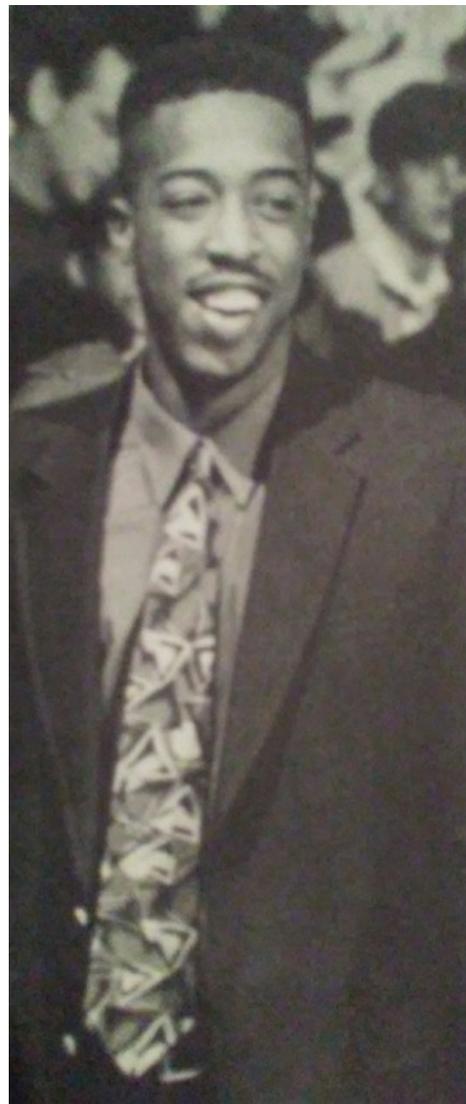
"I liked him, and that was a big thing with me," Brennan says now. "So I took a shot on him."

By the time Roberson enrolled, he had risen to almost 6-7, but he was still a painfully skinny 17-year-old. For the entirety of his freshman year he battled in practice with 6-11, 270-pound Joe Calavita, a fifth-year senior and the team's leading scorer. Ice packs became permanent fixtures on Roberson's knees and elbows.

"He was a bag of bones, always getting banged up and pushed around," says White, also 17 years old at the time. "But right from the beginning, he never had any fear of anybody."

Almost immediately, Roberson joined White in the starting lineup, along with sophomores Rahim Huland El and Matt Johnson, a nucleus that would lead the Catamounts for the better part of three seasons. It's a reminder of how specific this story is to its era. Vermont did not have a single transfer or change to the coaching staff in Roberson's four years.

They took the lumps and stayed together, quite literally. Six of the players lived together, including Roberson and White, and the rest were over hanging out or going out all the time. Brennan's coaching style involved an unbelievable amount of trust by today's standards, including road trips where he might hand out meal money, give the team a time to report and leave them be. As a result, the team grew into adults to-



Kevin Roberson greeted fans with a disarming smile.

gether off the court more than they could ever do on it.

The team went 6-21 the first season, then 13-17 the second, including a run to the North Atlantic Conference championship game on ESPN. By then, Roberson was a bonafide star: 14.3 points, 8.9 rebounds and an astounding 3.8 blocks per game.

Teammates credit Roberson's emergence to an almost superhuman rate of improvement. He seemed to get more coordinated, more athletic and more skilled between each practice, complementing his natural timing and rare second-jump ability. No one knew better than Craig Gaffin, a backup center who went against him every day. Gaffin remembers outscoring and out-rebounding Roberson when the two squared off in high school. So he showed up to his first college open gym a year and a half later with confidence.

"I remember going into Vermont feeling really good about getting serious playing time, to going, 'Well, I know what my next three years is going to look like backing this guy up,'" Gaffin says. "He was dunking all over the place. Every shot I put up, he was punching into the bleachers. It was like, 'What the heck happened?'"

Suddenly, the Patrick Gymnasium bleachers didn't look so empty. In 1990-91, Vermont posted its first winning season in 10 years. Roberson led the conference in rebounds (11.1) and blocks (3.7), and probably would've been player of the year had that honor not gone to teammate Matt Johnson.

"Kevin just gave us a lot of hope," Brennan says. "It was like, 'Look at this guy. There's no rule that says we have to be bad.'"

Roberson emerged as a celebrity around campus and the local community. He was soft-spoken yet approachable, and incredibly generous with his time. Teammates say he could hardly go anywhere in public without being surrounded by fans, all of whom he greeted with a disarming smile and an abundance of patience. After encounters, well wishers felt less like a fan and more like a friend.

Not that he could've hidden, anyway, being tall and dark-skinned in Burlington at that time. The Buffalo News reported he was one of just 60 African-Americans on a campus of nearly 10,000. Roberson embraced the role of ambassador, winning people over with his gentle manner one by one. He was a beloved figure, and Gaffin seems to recall more than a few food and drink tabs that seemed to mysteriously disappear at local establishments.

By his senior season, he'd added an outside jump shot to his dominant post presence, upping his scoring output to 17.6 points along with 11.0 rebounds and 5.0 blocks per game. That defensive mark would have been the nation's best in any season that didn't include Shaquille O'Neal. On three separate occasions, Roberson posted a triple-double with points, rebounds and blocked shots.

He was named NAC player of the year ahead of eventual top 10 NBA draft pick Vin Baker, punctuated by Vermont's 13-point win over Baker's Hartford on Senior Night in front of a sellout crowd. Roberson's mother, Lois, and sister, Michele, made the journey from Buffalo to Burlington on that night to witness Kevin's jersey being hoisted into the rafters.

Roberson finished his career as the school's all-time leading shot-blocker, rebounder and second leading scorer. At that point, he had the third most blocks in NCAA history, behind O'Neal and Alonzo Mourning.

Undrafted, Roberson joined the Charlotte Hornets' preseason camp. After surviving rounds of cuts all the way into preseason gameplay, a roster spot seemed in reach as the very same superstar Mourning held out for a new contract. Just before the season started, Mourning signed and Roberson was cut.

Brennan still remembers receiving a phone call from Hornets general manager Dave Twardzik.

"Don't let him go overseas," Brennan recalls him saying. "You need to bring him back and get him stronger. He needs to be somewhere he can work out and play against people."

Hopeful that a year of training would prepare him for the NBA, Roberson joined Brennan's staff as a volunteer assistant. Roberson completed his five-year degree in electrical engineering, the university's most challenging major, and his mother would tell the Buffalo News that he'd received a job offer from IBM. But his focus remained on basketball, lifting weights and training. White always said Roberson was "a strength coach and a nutrition plan away" from a Dennis Rodman-esque NBA career.



Kevin Roberson's number was retired on Senior Day at Vermont.

After the season, Brennan remembers going out for a birthday dinner with Roberson. The coach couldn't help but notice new knots of muscle stretching his former player's shirt, echoing Twardzik's command. *Bring him back with you and get him stronger.* Brennan was ecstatic. He bid farewell at the end of the night, not knowing it would be for the last time.

Less than a week later, Brennan received a phone call from Lois Roberson informing him that her two children were dead. On May 8, 1993, just after noon on the day before Mother's Day, a car driven by Roberson's sister Michele was struck head on at nearly 50 mph by a vehicle attempting to turn left. Police determined the operator was intoxicated. By mid-afternoon, all three were pronounced dead, with an additional passenger in the other car being treated in intensive care. Kevin was 22 years old. Michele was 25, married with two young children.

"My grief is overwhelming, my agony is almost unbearable," Lois Roberson wrote in a letter that was read at the memorial service. "But I know the good Lord above is a good God, and my faith in the Lord is strong, and although I cannot comprehend why he took you both away, I know that I will understand it by and by."

Brennan says he went to the gym and started sobbing. He'd received the same message in 1984 when

he was coaching at Yale, learning that his father had been killed in a car accident. Somehow, unfathomably, a car accident would take his mother as well in 2004. Through it, he learned a lesson. *You can't tell the people you love that you love them enough.*

All of Roberson's teammates gathered in Burlington a few days later and took a bus to Buffalo for Kevin's funeral, attended by over 1,500 people. The players and coaches had been on plenty of long, silent rides back from unsuccessful road games across the Northeast, but on this eight-hour trip home they cracked open cases of beer and turned the journey into an impromptu "Irish wake," sharing stories and laughing and crying together. Later that week, the university held another memorial service in Patrick Gymnasium, this time with more than 2,000 attendees. Brennan marveled at the outpouring of support from the polar-opposite racial demographics of the two services, calling Roberson "the color of love."

In the years following, Roberson's legacy only grew. The university waived its 10-year waiting period and inducted him into its hall of fame in 1993. There's been a Kevin Roberson Memorial Scholarship, a Kevin Roberson 5K Memorial Run and a Kevin Roberson Memorial Tournament for high schoolers in Buffalo. The America East Conference, successor to the NAC, dubbed its highest year end prize the Kevin Roberson Player of the Year Award.

Future Catamount T.J. Sorrentine would win the award in 2002, and his teammate Tayler Copenrath would win it in 2003, 2004 and 2005. The pair led Brennan to the promised land in 2003: the school's first NCAA Tournament. After a repeat appearance in 2004 and a shocking upset over Syracuse in the first round in 2005, Brennan says Vermont basketball players were regarded "like the Beatles" on campus and within the community.

The program developed into a standard-bearer for mid-major excellence from there, but the legacy of the school's past heroes is felt more strongly than just about any other program. Today's Catamounts play on Tom Brennan Court, for example, and the 71-year-old patriarch sits courtside for every game as the program's "crazy uncle." Kenny White sat next to Matt Johnson at the 2005 Syracuse game and says he keeps in contact with all of his teammates regularly, bonded by collective experience and tragedy.

The same boosters sit in the same seats in the same gym decades later, which White lovingly refers to as "the wax museum." Even the school's current athletic director, Jeff Schulman, played hockey at UVM in the late 1980s. He got to know Roberson when Schulman was a senior and he was a freshman. He even went to high school with Roberson's sister Michele in Buffalo.

As long as these people remain, the memory of Roberson will never fade.

"Even to this day when you mention Kevin Roberson, people get a smile on their face and remember one of the most impactful student athletes that's ever come through our campus," Schulman says from his office, overlooking the construction site for the school's new basketball arena, a symbol of what the program has become. "And when I think about the people that made this (facility) a reality, I think a lot about Coach Brennan and players like Kevin Roberson. When we move into that new facility, those people will certainly be in our hearts and minds."