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**Kent Bazemore: From Small-Town Kid to Big-Time Student-Athlete Game-Changer**

By: Jared Zwerling

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*Kent Bazemore was born into a population of only around 250, in Kelford, N.C. And entering his rookie season in 2012, after going undrafted, ESPN ranked him No. 499 out of 500 NBA players. But even with those extremely small odds, the southpaw has become a standout for the playoff-contending Hawks, in the first season of the longest contract in his career.*

*The 27-year-old has also expanded his ARMS Foundation to change the lives of similar disadvantaged kids through basketball, his interest in golf, and college and high school scholarships. Up next, Bazemore, who has two college degrees from Old Dominion, will be partnering with a school in the Atlanta area to develop a life skills curriculum for teenagers, with plans to establish his own prep academy in the next several years.*

*“What’s mainly been the reason why I’ve become a successful player in the NBA is going to college for five years and getting two degrees: human services and criminal justice,” he said. “Getting two degrees in college is something a lot of people that don’t play sports in college don’t do, and I’ve learned how to navigate certain areas of life. I’m passionate about academics, so why not teach kids how to be the best student-athletes they can?”*

*Recently chatting with the NBPA, Bazemore opened up about his unique basketball journey—including his notable bench-celebration days early in his career in Golden State—and outlined his innovative community initiatives. They even include national health and fitness programs that will debut this summer, which he’s been working on with his fiancée, Samantha, who’s a life coach and nutritionist. His conversation is presented below in a first-person perspective and edited for clarity and length.*

*This past Christmas, Kent Bazemore adopted a family and brought them presents during a fun outing at Topgolf in Atlanta. (Photo by Kat Goduco)*

Going from No. 499 to No. 82 in five years—that’s tremendous growth.

I know what it’s like to be at the bottom looking up. I understand the grind and I know what kind of work it takes to continue to climb. Now, what 499 represents to me is where it all started—the journey and where I can ultimately end up.

Going into my senior year of college in 2011, I broke a bone in my foot. That was like the darkest time ever, including not getting drafted in 2012. I played my entire senior year not being myself, not being the stringy athletic person I was. And I didn’t really get a grasp on what life’s really about. I was such an outgoing kid. I was having a good time, a college kid. Looking back, life has its way of humbling you. You really appreciate what’s around you, really appreciate what you have.

One thing that was said about me before the draft was, “We love him as a kid, but can he play? He’ll probably play in the D-League for a few years, bounce around and end up overseas.” And I wasn’t NBA ready. Not hearing my name called on draft night was the most humbling thing for me. I said to myself, *You’ve got to continue to work.* I always felt that I could see a light at the end of the tunnel. It



was faint, but I could see light. I had a ton of meetings with NBA teams, and I blew the doors open with my personality.

The turning point for me was getting a training camp invite in 2012 with the Warriors. I was, like, *You've got your foot in the door. What are you going to do?* And I just tried to become the best person I could be, turned into this Bazemore with my bench celebrations, continued to work hard, did a lot of stuff in the community—just really blossomed, and I've been riding that ever since.

*Bazemore was such a big hit in Golden State that the developers of NBA 2K14 did motion capture with him to include his bench celebrations in that year's video game. (Photo by Garrett W. Ellwood/NBAE via Getty Images)*

Starting in the D-League with Santa Cruz helped me battle every day. It's a dog-eat-dog game. Those guys play so hard on a nightly basis and we see guys get called up. A lot of people think the D-League is a demotion, but I loved it. When I went down playing 33, 35 minutes a night, you get to do what you love. It's fun, playing against guys that are fighting for the same thing that you are. They're trying to go at your neck. So you've got to bring your game, and I never lost a game in the D-League.

When I got called up by the Warriors, there were times where I had to get in the game to get a stop after sitting for 47-and-a-half minutes. But I was locked in on what was going on, actually in a sweat from my bench celebrations. There were some nights I was drenched like I played 35 minutes. I love the game and I had a front-row seat to the best league in the world. So there was no way I could contain all that by sitting down, pouting about not playing. The first thing I learned was you've got to pay your dues, you've got to put in the hours and when your time comes, just make sure you're ready.

It's unreal now to be the starting small forward for the Hawks in my fifth year. When you can walk through the midst of the storm—players getting traded all over the place, players out of the league, new players coming in—and you made it successfully, you have to rejoice it. You have to be so grateful that it happened because it's hard to make the stars aligned in the NBA.

*In the Hawks' recent 9-6 stretch, Bazemore has scored in double figures in 11 of those games, shooting 47.9 percent from the field and 42.4 percent from three-point range. (Photo by Noah Graham/NBAE via Getty Images)*

If I could create any award, I would create the 300-and-Under Award.

I grew up in a town with less than 300 people. So if you become an NBA player or a doctor one day, you should get the 300-and-Under. I just applaud kids and people that continue to break barriers. LeBron James has a Nike commercial that's pretty cool about a kid out of nowhere. A lot of people can relate to that; they like how he shocked the world. Like me coming out of Kelford, N.C., where is that? There are a lot of kids like that in those areas that have the ability to succeed, but they just don't know how to get there.

The amazing thing I've learned playing in the NBA when you meet people outside the NBA, like CEOs, everyone went through something, everyone had a challenge—whether it was drug abuse, whether it was serving in the military. But they were able to stay focused—even changing schools three, four, five times in their lifetime—and still make something out of themselves.

What helped me through my situation was focus, but it didn't always come easy. I didn't know how to study until my sophomore year of college. I would check Twitter or didn't put my phone away—not



really locking in. One of my best classes was European History that year. You had to basically read a chapter and summarize it in 6-8 sentences during the test. It was tough, and that's what made the class special. That helped me understand how to process information and really come up with an efficient, fact-based answer.

My academic advisor at Old Dominion, April Brecht, who's still a good friend, believed that I could actually get two degrees, and I did it. I give a lot of credit to my academics, more so than my athleticism, that's got me here. I've learned how to interact with people, hold my own in conversations and how to be approachable. I've learned all of these things through school and just wanting to learn.

During my rookie season, I started my ARMS Foundation to raise awareness about what I'm passionate about: to bring the community together, education and helping the underprivileged youth by leveling the playing field for them, so they can succeed in life. I called it ARMS because I wanted to do outreach and I had one of the longest wingspans in NBA history for my height (7'0" with me being 6'5"). Community outreach is something I was very passionate about growing up. Even in college, I would do appearances and meet kids. The human services degree got me into wanting to be a mentor.

*Bazemore at one of his Topgolf community events for kids last fall, which helped raise money for his ARMS Foundation. (Photo by Kat Goduco)*

Every year, I host basketball camps for kids in Kelford, Atlanta and Norfolk, where Old Dominion is located. And the camper awards are things like leader by example, hardest worker, best teammate and most improved—traits that carry over in your life. I also have a Bowling for Hoops event, Uno tournament and golf invitational, with the proceeds benefiting The Salvation Army Bellwood Boys and Girls Club in Atlanta; The First Tee of Atlanta (golf and life skills training); and The Up Center in Norfolk (foster care and adoption services for children). Thanks to the NBPA Foundation, I recently received a matching grant to increase my contributions to these organizations.

In addition, I have my 499 Scholarship Fund for high school and college students. Thinking about how Old Dominion was the only school that wanted to redshirt me out of high school, I look at kids that need a boost in life. So that's what the 499 program is all about—helping special kids or disadvantaged kids, so they can also help their families. Last year I gave two scholarships, and this year there will be up to 10.

Most recently, I become a spokesperson for the 4-H youth program in January. I went to a 4-H camp when I was in fifth grade. I went out there without my parents, the middle of nowhere in Mount Airy. And it was an eye-opener for me. At the beginning of each day, the people that had the cleanest cabin would get rewards. The camp had football, basketball, a swimming class. We learned how to make fires. I had never done most of this stuff in my life, and it really did a lot for me. It was an easier transition for me to interact with strangers.

*Bazemore at one of his camps last summer. (Photo courtesy of Kent Bazemore)*

Now, my fiancée, Samantha, and I are working with 4-H on a national health and fitness program, which we're planning to launch this summer in 10 major markets. Before then, I'm excited that I'll be receiving the 4-H Distinguished Alumni Medallion on March 21 in Washington, D.C. I'm also working with Samantha and the NBA on creating lunch boxes that will have tips on healthy eating and sleep routines, and an after-school clinic for kids and their parents to teach them how to make healthy meals that don't break the budget.



I've also been visiting schools in Atlanta, such as The Ron Clark Academy and Rivers Academy Private School, to learn what it will take to put together my own high school program with a life-oriented curriculum. The plan is to attach it to a middle or elementary school in the next year or two. I want to shrink that learning curve and prepare kids better for the next level with real-life courses, like how to make sure your bills are paid or how to get ready for work—just things that are going to help them in their everyday life.

Through my high school program, which April has been helping me with, I really want to do a lot for the teachers and parents, too. So the teachers would get a free master's funding in urban education at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, which is around two hours from Atlanta. And I think the biggest problem is when kids go to school, their parents aren't involved and they blame the teacher. So I'm looking to fix the parent-student relationship, having parents sit in and do homework with their kids right after school. I would give prizes based on their interaction.

Then there's Phase 2. I'm going to use the program as research for what I do in five to seven years: break ground on my own prep academy in Kelford for grades K-12. I also want to open two more in Atlanta and Norfolk. I've already got some stuff brewing with my board of directors: my agent, Austin Walton, an architect, a PR professional and representatives from Under Armour (my endorser), Toshiba and Turner Sports. Toshiba would supply the classroom technology and with Turner Sports, I want my academy to be as hands-on as possible with kids being broadcasters on campus and having other real-world professions.

*(Photo by Scott Cunningham/NBAE via Getty Images)*

I still want more.

When I walk away from the game, I want to leave saying that I gave it my all. I want to leave a legacy. And I created my foundation to ultimately be a mirrored image of my legacy. I want to receive the Seasonlong NBA Cares Community Assist Award.

On the court, there's my tier and there's like four more tiers: All-Star, superstar, elite, ultra elite. Kobe Bryant's my favorite player of all time. What I like about him is how much he wanted to win, and he had a great way of channeling it. He was never fazed by any moment, whether he hit a game-winner or his team was down six points with a minute to go. He had the same look on his face, he had the same fire in his eyes. That's what I want. I want to be one of the best players to play the game.

And I want to be an example for the next undrafted player. Around the NBA draft, I always put out a tweet, like, "Your journey is just getting started. It's not over for you." I just want to open the doors to a lot of other kids because my situation can shed light on them.

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