



Getting to know Zo: ASU recruit eager to stay on the right path, excel in Tempe



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By C.J. Holmes (author/cj-holmes/) Mar 17, 2019

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It's a few minutes past 6 a.m. on a cold winter morning in Hillside, Illinois. Six-year-old Alonzo Verge Jr. springs out of bed, takes a quick shower and then begins to frantically throw on the clothes that his mother, Tricia Moncrief, laid out for him the night before.

Once dressed, Verge hastily descends the staircase of their third-floor apartment duplex and makes his way to the makeshift basketball court in the parking lot behind the building. Meanwhile, his mother is upstairs preparing breakfast and getting ready for the day. He had only 30 minutes or so to shoot around before his 7:15 school bus arrived, but for Verge, it was time well spent.

This was Verge's daily ritual as a child in the Chicago suburbs. Regardless of the weather, it was hard to keep the future Sun Devil off the court. Those cold mornings led ultimately to a scholarship offer to attend Arizona State as a junior college transfer this fall.

"I still work with one of my former neighbors and she tells me she remembers looking outside her kitchen window every morning and seeing Zo in the backyard playing basketball," Moncrief said. "No matter what, he always carried a ball. Everybody knew Zo and a basketball.

"He'd play nonstop all day if he could."



Verge started playing in basketball leagues at the age of five, but he was a gifted young athlete who excelled in football and baseball as well. It's fair to say that he inherited his natural talent from his parents. Verge's mother played basketball throughout high school and had a solid career at the juco level, while his father, Alonzo Verge Sr., was a star guard at Proviso West High who averaged 25 points per game his senior season back in 1988.

Verge Sr. played at Lincoln Junior College and Eastern New Mexico. He was a prodigious talent with realistic professional aspirations, but missteps in life and family issues ultimately derailed his basketball future.

"He holds a lot of basketball records here in Illinois at his former high school and he's well known around the basketball world," Moncrief said of Verge Sr. "He had a really good opportunity to make it to the NBA, but he took a different route in life and ended up not doing that."

Verge Sr. openly shared an account of one of his missteps with *The Athletic*.

“I went to prison,” said Verge Sr., now a construction worker in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. “I was hanging out on the west side of Chicago outside in front of the house and the area we were in was drug infested or whatever. Basically to make a long story short, there were some drugs around us and everybody said it wasn’t theirs, so everybody split (the punishment). I did two years.

“I always wanted Zo to learn from my mistakes. I made all the mistakes for us, for him and his sister.”

When he was 11 years old, Verge’s parents separated, and Verge Sr. moved to Louisiana, leaving Moncrief to raise Verge and his older sister, Tiara, by herself. In Verge Sr.’s absence, the bond between Moncrief and her son grew stronger.

“I wasn’t the easiest kid, so it was kind of tough for her because she had me and my sister,” Verge said. “My father was in and out of my life – he really wasn’t around like that. He left, so she had to step up. But she was just there – every practice, every game, if I’m playing outside on the court, anywhere. Open gym, she wants to come. She loves basketball herself, too, and she really wants to see me do good. She has a genuine love for the game.

“She’s just been there through everything. She was with me when I didn’t have anyone and everybody thought I wasn’t going to be able to do anything. She just stayed on me and told me not to give up and that’s what I did.”

Verge began to focus solely on basketball and earned quite the reputation as a floor general at the middle school level. As his game continued to evolve, he began to remind people of his father.

“I was always compared to him growing up,” Verge told the Chicago Sun-Times last year. “Are you gonna be better than your dad when you get older? Things like that. I tried not to pay too much attention to it.”



Moncrief moved the family from Hillside to a middle-class neighborhood in Villa Park as Verge made the transition from middle school to high school. That's when problems began. As a freshman at Willowbrook High, Verge found himself in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons.

"I moved to a predominantly white community and I wasn't used to that so I stuck out like a sore thumb," Verge said. "I played basketball, it wasn't hard to pick me out of a crowd. I had my little dreads and stuff like that, and I was kind of getting in trouble at school and everything I did I stuck out.

"I was just going through an adjustment time in high school, I think that's what it was, from middle school going straight to high school and an environment that I wasn't used to so it was kind of a rough transition."

As a star freshman athlete, Verge felt he was constantly under the microscope. He didn't understand how to handle the pressure. Instead of turning the attention into something constructive, Verge shied away from it.

Reflecting on his own high school days, Verge Sr. understands what his son went through.

"You could be walking home from school with a couple of people, and another couple of people could be walking by and your friend that you're walking with — let's call him James — could get into a fight," Verge Sr. said. "They're not

going to say James' name. They're going to say Alonzo Verge Jr. Everybody knows him, they don't know James.

“You have to watch who you hang with, you have to associate with a different crowd. They know Zo because of basketball — I told him that there were certain things he just couldn't do. I wish I had knew that when I was coming up. Actually I knew it, but I didn't listen. I made some bad decisions, I made some bad choices, but if I knew what I know now, I'd be in the NBA, of course.”

Moncrief was unwilling to share details of her son's conflicts, but the issues were serious enough to keep him off the basketball court as a freshman. The 6-foot-1 guard did play as a sophomore though, averaging 23 points, five rebounds, three assists and four steals as he led Willowbrook to a 21-8 record and its first conference title since 1972.

However, more trouble led to a postseason suspension later that year. Verge was heading down a path Moncrief was all too familiar with.

“He was in the streets,” Moncrief said. “He would go to school and play ball, but he lived a different lifestyle outside of that. I always told him that on the court you could see him as a leader, but off the court, he just followed behind the wrong crowd. He was doing things that street boys would do, he was like two different people.

“I knew what would hurt him the most was taking basketball away from him. I think his school didn't know how to handle a young man like him, but he did also put himself out there to be judged in that way. He could've handled himself in a different way and he wasn't raised to act the way he did. That's the path that I saw just knowing how his father was, and I saw Zo going down that path as well.”

Verge clearly needed a change of scenery. He transferred to his father's alma mater, Proviso West, at the beginning of the 2015-16 school year, but the Illinois High School Association ruled he wouldn't be eligible until February, so he headed to Arlington Country Day School in Jacksonville, Florida, for his junior year. There, Verge gained some perspective.

“I thought I was untouchable, then I ran into some guys who wanted the same thing I wanted and it was a good experience,” Verge said. “It was just basketball, basketball, basketball all day long.”

One of Verge's teammates at ACD is a player that Arizona State fans are familiar with: point guard Luguentz Dort, the 2019 Pac-12 Freshman of the Year.

“He was funny, he has a lot of energy, really energetic guy,” Dort said. “He was a good point guard. At first when I went to ACD, I didn’t know I liked to play point guard so I was really off ball, so he was actually the one who was telling everybody what to do and everything.”

More than 1,000 miles from home, Verge had to mature quickly. He had to take care of himself and overcome challenges without the immediate support of his mother. Verge began to realize how far he could take the game if he stayed out of trouble, and suddenly, his outlook on life changed.

When Verge returned to Illinois for his senior season, his mother immediately noticed the differences in his character.

“Just the friends he chose to hang around – that was the biggest thing,” Moncrief said. “Before Zo left, it was like he couldn’t sit still. He had to be doing something. He had to be outside. He had to be going somewhere. ... His decision making wasn’t so impulsive and it was more so him thinking through those decisions.”

Back on the scene, Verge transferred to Thornton High in Harvey, Illinois, to play for head coach Tai Streets. At 6 feet 3, Verge had an incredible senior season for the Wildcats, averaging 26 points, eight rebounds, seven assists and three steals per game. He re-established himself as one of the best players in the Chicago metro area.

Verge led Thornton to the Big Dipper Holiday Tournament title and an undefeated conference season. Verge’s success reached a climax when he was named the 2017 Chicago Sun-Times Player of the Year, which is the most prestigious high school basketball player award in Illinois. In addition, Verge was named First Team All-City and Illinois First Team All-State in Class 4.

A short list of previous winners: Derrick Rose, Jabari Parker, Jahlil Okafor, Kevin Garnett and Isiah Thomas.

Verge had entered elite company.

“I didn’t know how big it was because I was just hooping,” Verge said. “I’m not into all the basketball accolades – I just started watching NBA basketball since I’ve been in college. I never watched basketball, I just played, that’s all I did. But it felt good though. It felt great because I felt like everything I was working for finally paid off and it was finally recognized.”

At one point, Verge was being highly recruited by a half-dozen Big Ten programs. The Chicago Sun-Times reported in November 2017 that Verge had offers from Oregon, Illinois and Providence entering his senior season.

However, Verge's high school instability caused multiple programs to back off his recruitment. Academics made matters worse. Verge maintained at least a 2.5 GPA throughout high school, but his struggles to pass the ACT resulted in him having no offers at all by graduation.

"I think the biggest thing was just him moving around to so many different schools," Thornton assistant coach Richie Thompson said. "Some of his credits didn't transfer over from his other schools, so all of his information got mixed up. It can be hard to get ahold of all your transcripts in that situation and it's kind of hard for coaches to follow up. Throughout the year he tried to push extra classes to make it work, but with the amount of classes he could take it didn't work out."

Verge immediately became one of the most sought after juco prospects in the country. He had many suitors, and ultimately signed with Moberly Area Community College in Moberly, Missouri, to play for NJCAA Men's College Basketball Coaches Hall of Fame coach Pat Smith, a 2019 inductee, and Andre Bell and Rusty Elmore.

The Moberly coaches were honest and persistent throughout the entirety of Verge's recruiting process. Verge and his mother began to believe in their vision.

"Coach Bell, he was just on it every day," Verge said. "He came to my house multiple times and it sounded like they had a plan for me. They had a plan, they knew what was going on and it just got my attention. They genuinely wanted to see me do good. The classwork too, they had everything set up for me and I loved that."

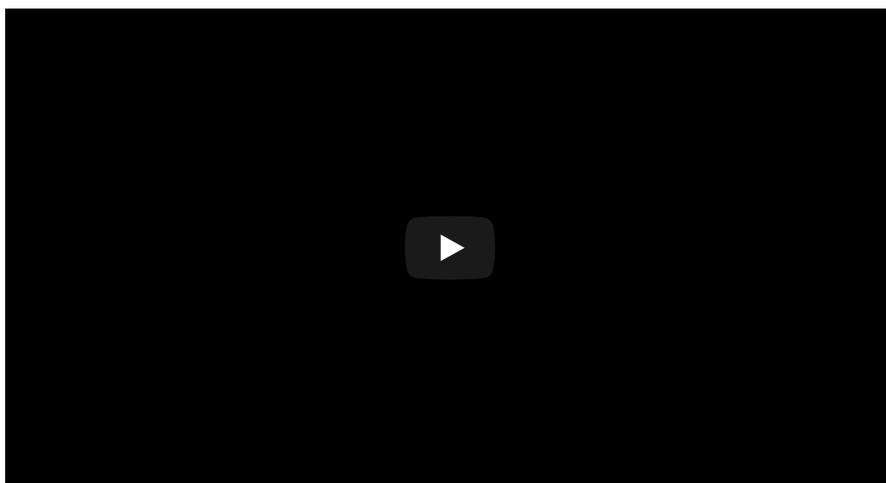
It took only one workout for Moberly's coaches to realize the talent Verge possessed.

"We brought our freshmen in a month early so we could work them out and get a head start academically," Elmore said. "I'll never forget the first workout – I don't think he missed and I'm talking he's shooting from 35, 40 feet in a workout and he literally never missed and he's been wowing me ever since."

Over his two years at Moberly, Verge has come into his own as a player, especially as a vocal leader.

“Practices are never boring with Alonzo,” Elmore said. “He’s always yapping and I think it’s great because it keeps our guys going. You always know when Zo arrives at practice because he’s the loudest one in the gym.”

Verge also built on his reputation as a lethal scorer. He’s averaging 31 points per game as a sophomore while shooting 49.4 percent from the floor, and scored a school record 55 points in a win over Kennedy King College on Nov. 9.



Elmore says he hasn’t seen anything like it.

“Zo is a scoring point guard, but I think what makes Zo special is that he makes guys around him better,” Elmore said. “We have two wings that are Division I players, granted they’re freshmen, but he has at times practically carried us on his back. I’ve got accustomed to him putting up huge numbers like its no big deal. It’s just another night for Zo.

“He can score in so many different ways – deep 3s, pull up 3s, he’s got every dribble move in the country. Zo is athletic, but it’s nothing that will wow you. He’s just so crafty with that ball and he just has 20 different ways to get by you. At 6-3, his shot hardly ever gets blocked. He’s probably the best finisher I’ve ever seen.”

Off the court, Verge has stayed out of trouble and met all of his marks in the classroom. At Moberly, Verge and his high school sweetheart, Teyana, also welcomed their first child into the world, Nami Sky, which allowed the then 19-year-old to mature even more.

Though Teyana and Nami are back home in Illinois while Verge is in school, he's involved in his daughter's life and FaceTimes them regularly.

"In my years of doing this, I've never seen a kid grow as much as he has in two years from when he got here until the kid he's turned into," Elmore said. "I mean, he's just grown up tremendously. On the basketball floor he's incredible, but just becoming the man he's become."

Verge had come a long way, but despite the progress, despite the numbers, Division I schools still questioned if his head was in the right place. UCF, St. Louis and West Virginia offered Verge scholarships as he re-opened his recruitment, but it was Bobby Hurley and assistant coach Rashad Burno who proved to have the most faith.

"Coach Burno spent a lot of time in Chicago after his playing career, obviously he played at DePaul," Hurley said. "There were some people that he knew that were familiar with Alonzo and we were looking to add another guard and he definitely fit that criteria. When I went to watch him, I loved the film, I watched plenty of film and video. But when I went and saw him, I was completely hooked on the stuff he can do."

Hurley added: "I just watched him practice with his teammates and how he interacted with them. His coach, Coach Smith, is a long-time juco coach — he kind of reminds me of my dad, he's just tough on his players during practice. Alonzo just handled everything great, being very coachable, having a great attitude, always talking with his teammates. Those were the intangible things that I was drawn to, and then his natural instincts are what you really notice. He's got the ball on a string when he's dribbling, he has such a great handle. He can shoot it, he can make his own shot and he can make guys better."

Verge took a visit to UCF, but didn't like the fit. When he visited ASU, he felt "right at home" and committed immediately.

"Arizona State, they came by and gave me the opportunity and I felt the same way about them that I felt about Moberly," Verge said. "I got that same feeling and I just went with my first instinct. Coach Burno was telling me how he wanted to see me do good and he had things planned and everything in order. They were the first big school to offer me and I figured, 'Why wait?'"

With her son finally finding a college basketball home, Moncrief gives Moberly's coaches plenty of credit.

"I will praise that school, I will praise those coaches, I will praise that community until I take my last breath because they've been instrumental in building Zo to where he is now," Moncrief said. "They embraced him, no judgment. Everything Coach Smith and Coach Bell promised me when he walked into my house, they ended up doing."

Verge will join a crowded backcourt at ASU next season that will feature Remy Martin, Rob Edwards, Shadow Mountain's Jaelen House and Dort, if he returns for his sophomore campaign in Tempe.

All are accomplished playmakers in their own right who need the ball in their hands to have success, but Burno believes that ASU's group of guards is versatile enough to make it work.

"Alonzo is different because he can do it at all three levels and he's a tremendous point guard, so any time you have an opportunity to score the ball we're going to find ways to put you on the floor," Burno said. "And then Coach Hurley has shown that he can play with three or four guards – he did it the first three years here. We'll make some adjustments from this year's team that'll be a little different, but Alonzo is going to open up the floor for everyone on the court because of his ability to score it from two, three and then obviously his ability to finish in the lane."

Verge wants to be a professional basketball player first and foremost, but he's also shown interest in communications and broadcasting. He'll have a golden opportunity to pursue that career path if he so chooses, given that ASU's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication is among the best in the nation.

This summer, Verge will once again find himself in a new place surrounded by different people, but this time he'll be equipped with all the tools he needs to thrive.

And now whenever he wants to shoot around at 7:15 in the morning, it won't be too cold.

(Top photo: Moberly Area Community College)

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