

Zylan Cheatham Excited About Season In his Hometown
By Doug Haller, The Athletic (October 13, 2018)

On the roof of the Pac-12 Network offices, Zylan Cheatham walks to a corner with Remy Martin and looks to make sure his maroon and gold uniform is in order. With the San Francisco high-rises looming behind him, the senior flashes the school's "pitchfork" as a conference representative takes photos.

Cheatham has not yet played a game for the Sun Devils, but already he has become a face of the program. Part of this is due to the Phoenix native's outgoing personality, which has made him a program leader. (Assistant coach Anthony Coleman says if Cheatham ever decided to go into coaching, he would make an outstanding recruiter simply because people are attracted to his vibe.)

But role also plays a significant part. It's not a stretch to say the 6-foot-8 Cheatham might be the biggest factor in Bobby Hurley's fourth season. With a 42.5-inch vertical jump, he is the team's top athlete, but more important, he is a willing and versatile defender, something the program desperately needs as it seeks improvement on that end.

"I embrace stuff like this," Cheatham said before the impromptu rooftop photo shoot. "Being that this is my fifth year, and this is my first time going to a media day, I'm just honored to be here."

It's taken time. Cheatham's career has been a series of starts and stops. A four-star prospect from Phoenix South Mountain High, Cheatham initially signed with San Diego State but had to redshirt his first season because of a broken left foot. Over the next two years he started 48 of 69 contests, averaging 8.4 points and 5.8 rebounds. He was an essential part of San Diego State's program, but Cheatham felt like there was more to his game, something he wasn't sure he could show with the Aztecs. He decided to transfer.

Cheatham considered Marquette, St. John's, Grand Canyon and South Dakota State, but ultimately chose ASU. Obviously, it was close to home, but just as important, he liked the freedom Hurley provided. Cheatham thought the ASU coaches saw him the way he saw himself. Not so much as a center or forward, but as a position-less player, someone capable of playing inside and out. It revived him.

"I wouldn't say I lost my passion," Cheatham said. "I would say I was in a mental state where I wasn't as confident as I should've been. I wasn't feeling like the Zylan Cheatham who was a four-star, top-75 player. Coming here, meeting this staff, working out with these guys and working on myself mentally and physically, and just getting that bravado back, that passion back, that fire back ... that's a big compliment to our staff. It's been a journey, but it's just getting started to be honest."

Steve Fisher starts with this: He loves Zylan Cheatham. He loves his energy. He loves his personality. He loves his drive and spunk. But even in retirement (Fisher stepped down at San Diego State just a few days after Cheatham announced his transfer), Cheatham's decision still bothers him.

"Zylan is the only guy I ever had that left and didn't leave for lack of playing time," said Fisher, who coached 18 years at San Diego State. "I didn't want him to leave, and I told him that."

At issue, according to Fisher, was that Cheatham didn't want to defend centers in the post. And like many big men these days, he wanted to play on the perimeter.

"He thought I was hamstringing him and making him an inside player, which wasn't the case," Fisher said. According to Fisher, the only restriction he put on players was simple: "Don't do anything in a game that I haven't seen you do in practice." In other words, play within yourself.

"You know, really good players, they play," Fisher said. "It doesn't matter where they play as long as they're playing and they find ways of being productive. If I was one thing, I was always known as a coach that allowed players to play with freedom and do what they can do."

At his best, Cheatham was an energizer for San Diego State. In 2016, he was MVP of the eight-team Diamond Head Classic in Hawaii, averaging 15.7 points and 9.3 rebounds, leading the Aztecs to the tournament title. Not long after the game, Fisher told Cheatham: "Let's make this the base rather than the highlight of your career." It didn't work out that way. Cheatham scored in double figures just four more times. His minutes dipped during the season's final stretch.

"Zylan was really, really good (in Hawaii)," Fisher said. "He played with great confidence and just played with no agenda. He just said, 'I'm going to play and do whatever I have to do,' and that's what he did. He's a very, very athletic player that has the ability to be a really, really good basketball player."

Fisher hopes to see as much this season, which might be Cheatham's last. To get a sixth season of eligibility, Cheatham and ASU will have to ask the NCAA for a medical waiver following this season, and such decisions are difficult to predict.

"Bobby Hurley has done a great job, and I'm sure Zylan will have opportunities," Fisher said. "The thing about him now, he has no other options. He can't say, 'Well, I don't like what I'm seeing now.' He's going to have to bite the bullet and do what he has to do to help them be successful, and with that will come freedom. I'm sure of that."

"Hopefully, he'll have the kind of year that we saw in pieces when he was here with us."

About 30 minutes before Cheatham posed for photos in San Francisco, Hurley told reporters that Cheatham is one of three ASU players (along with Martin and freshman guard Luguentz Dort) who should aim for Pac-12 Defensive Player of the Year. Cheatham has all the ingredients, Hurley said. He's strong. He's wiry. He can guard all five positions.

Perhaps best of all: "He loves defense."

Much of this stems from Cheatham's athletic ability. Asked to describe it, Coleman chuckled. "He's in the 1 percent — we'll just leave it at that." Cheatham is not only explosive vertically, the assistant coach said, but horizontally. That will help with rotations, shot contesting, rebounding, shutting off passing lanes, deflections, steals, nearly everything.

"He's also probably the best communicator we have," Hurley said.

On offense, Cheatham relied on energy at San Diego State. Although he shot 52.3 percent during his two seasons, he made just 5 of 29 from 3-point range. While he sat out, Cheatham spent last season working on his jumper. In practice, Hurley played him on the perimeter so he could get comfortable away from the basket.

Cheatham also became a leader, which is rare for a newcomer. But at 22 (he'll turn 23 in November), he's ASU's second-oldest player, trailing only junior forward Mickey Mitchell. Plus, he experienced nearly everything the sport offers. In three years at San Diego State, the Aztecs played in the NCAA Tournament, advanced to the NIT semifinals and missed the postseason altogether.

Cheatham is ready to put that knowledge to use, pushing the Sun Devils to a higher level.

"To me, it's a homecoming," he said. "To be able to finish my career in the city I grew up in, the city I grew to love, it's a dream come true. Pressure? I wouldn't say that. We put in the work. I'll live with whatever result that comes with it."