

Arizona State's Zylan Cheatham and the significance of 20 (times two)
By Doug Haller, The Athletic (Feb. 3, 2019)

Zylan Cheatham had 15 rebounds through regulation of Thursday's clash with Arizona. Then the Arizona State senior forward took control. He grabbed the first five misses of the extra session, helping the Sun Devils post their first win over the Wildcats in coach Bobby Hurley's four seasons. Cheatham finished with a career-best 22 rebounds, the second time in eight days he's grabbed 20 or more.

In basketball, certain numbers demand attention. Scoring 30 points might get you a headline, but 40 could land you in the school record book. Ten assists are fine, but 15 are memorable. For rebounds this number is 20.

Twenty rebounds says something about a player. His drive. His toughness. His athletic ability. The 6-foot-8 Cheatham is the first ASU player to collect 20 rebounds in a game in more than 21 years. Entering Saturday, he was one of only 19 Division I players this season who had reached that number. One of only three who had done it twice.

As Cheatham dominated overtime, his high school coach stayed glued to the television in Laveen. This was the player Jeremy Soria had coached at Phoenix South Mountain, where Cheatham seemed to flirt with 20 every night as a senior. The player who played hard no matter the situation or opponent.

"The thing with Zylan, he just has a knack for the basketball," Soria said. "He was always just a ball hawk. Not a hog, but a hawk. He always had a way of getting to the ball, whether he was at the front of the press or just going to get a rebound. I saw that in him even as a sophomore, and that's not something you can teach. It's rare."

In the history of ASU basketball, nine players have grabbed 20-plus rebounds in a game. As ASU and Arizona battled, two (besides Cheatham) were in the building. Joe Caldwell sat in Section J of Wells Fargo Arena, not far from Arizona's bench. Across the court, Art Becker sat in Section U.

"Jumpin' Joe" is considered one of the great players in school history, maybe the greatest. He starred for the Sun Devils from 1961-64, averaging double figures in scoring and rebounding each season. He made the 1964 Olympic team and was the No. 2 pick in the NBA Draft, all of which makes this impressive:

When Caldwell watches Cheatham, he sees himself.

"I watch him run up and down the floor and see how he gets into the game, I have flashbacks to my earlier childhood and my playing days," Caldwell said. "I say, 'Wow, what a thing to see at age 77, somebody doing what you did when you were 19 or 21 years old.' It's just unbelievable for me to watch him, the comparisons are so close. He almost has the same kind of shot I had. I didn't shoot as high as he shoots it and I put the ball on the fingertips instead of the palm of the hand, but it's close. I just see the little things. He jumps, he runs, he plays defense. I said to myself: That's a carbon copy of me."

Mark Landsberger holds ASU's single-game record with 27 rebounds against San Diego State in 1976. The 6-5 Caldwell grabbed 21 twice, once in 1962 and again in 1964. Two guys he played with in Tempe — Becker and Tony Cerkenik — also had 20-rebound contests, which shows how much the game has changed. While today's benchmark for good shooting hovers around 50 percent, Becker said that mark in the 1960s was closer to 42-44.

"Rebounding has changed," said Becker, who averaged a double-double along with Caldwell during the 1963-64 season. "In the old days, when I played, there were more rebounds because usually the shot percentages were lower. But you don't see a lot of guys make a name for themselves as a rebounder or averaging a double-double like (Cheatham is) doing. He has the physical abilities that you can't really teach. He has long arms, he's quick, he can jump out of the gym — and he seems just fearless out there."

Entering Thursday's game against Washington State, Cheatham has grabbed 41.4 percent of ASU's rebounds over the past three contests. Some of that comes from God-given talent, some from simple hard work. Asked about his vertical, Jumpin' Joe laughs. He said he jumped 50 inches during his college days, but then-coach Ned Wulk said no one would believe such a number so they officially recorded it at 49-9.

Cheatham isn't at that level — pretty much no one is — but he's still an elite athlete. According to sports performance coach Daniel Marshall, Cheatham had a team-best three-step vertical of 41-2 at the beginning of the season. Among his teammates, he also ranks in the top three in squat and bench press, making him pound-for-pound ASU's strongest player.

As an undergraduate at the University of Arizona, Marshall participated in the jump competitions. As a grad student, he coached track at Oklahoma. With that background, Marshall feels confident in saying Cheatham could have been an elite long jumper if he had decided to pursue track. Or he could have excelled running the 400 meters.

In some ways, Cheatham reminds Marshall of an athlete he worked with during his time as an intern with the Chicago Bulls. In his prime, former NBA MVP Derrick Rose was as explosive as nearly anybody in basketball. Cheatham, Marshall said, approaches that level. And the best part: He doesn't take it for granted. He works.

"More than anybody right now, 'Z' gets extra work in the weight room," Marshall said. "There's plenty of off days where he'll send me a text saying, 'I'm trying to come in today. What time are you in?'"

It's paid off.

Don MacLean didn't get to watch Thursday's contest. He had to work the Los Angeles Clippers game that night against the Lakers. But as a Pac-12 Networks analyst and a former UCLA standout who played nine NBA seasons, MacLean knows the conference as well as anyone, and he understands the significance of 20.

"I've said this I don't know how many times over the years of covering the Pac-12, but we see this all the time," MacLean said. "A guy in his last year — whether he's had a great career or not — he sees the light at the end of the tunnel and he's like, 'You know what? I'm going to pick this thing up and play beyond what anyone thinks.' I've seen it for years, and I think that's what Cheatham might be doing."

Entering Saturday, Cheatham was the Pac-12's only player averaging a double-double (11.8 points and 10.9 rebounds). No ASU player has averaged double figures in rebounding since Landsberger averaged 14.4 during the 1976-77 season. Since 2000, only four (Awvee Storey, Ike Diogu, Jeff Pendergraph and Obinna Oleka) have averaged even nine. Could this be a springboard to the NBA?

Aside from his rebounding, Cheatham is a versatile defender and capable playmaker. The biggest question is his perimeter jump shot, but MacLean — who trains players for the draft — said that isn't necessarily a death blow. Cheatham already has jumped into the late second round on respected mock draft boards. [The Athletic's Sam Vecenie has him at No. 58.](#)

MacLean compares Cheatham to former Louisville standout Montrezl Harrell, someone who lacks shooting range but has established himself in other ways. In his fourth NBA season, Harrell has blossomed with the Clippers, averaging 15.8 points and 6.7 rebounds despite making just one 3-pointer in 52 games. Through 21 contests, Cheatham is 7 of 18 from the arc.

"If you're smart — and it sounds like Cheatham is — you can carve out a role for yourself in the NBA by being a specialist, and his specialty would be guarding multiple positions at a high level and rebounding," MacLean said. "You don't have to score all the time to become valuable. That's what Harrell did. He said, 'You know what, screw practicing my 3-point shot, I'm going to be plus-1 at rebounding, defending and playing with effort.' A lot of guys want to be scorers. They want the ball in their hands and they don't understand you can make a lot of money by just being a specialist."

No doubt, Zylan Cheatham is proving he can be one of those guys.