

With stout preparation, freshman sees success

Santa Ana's brilliant high school career prepared him for quick success at Elon

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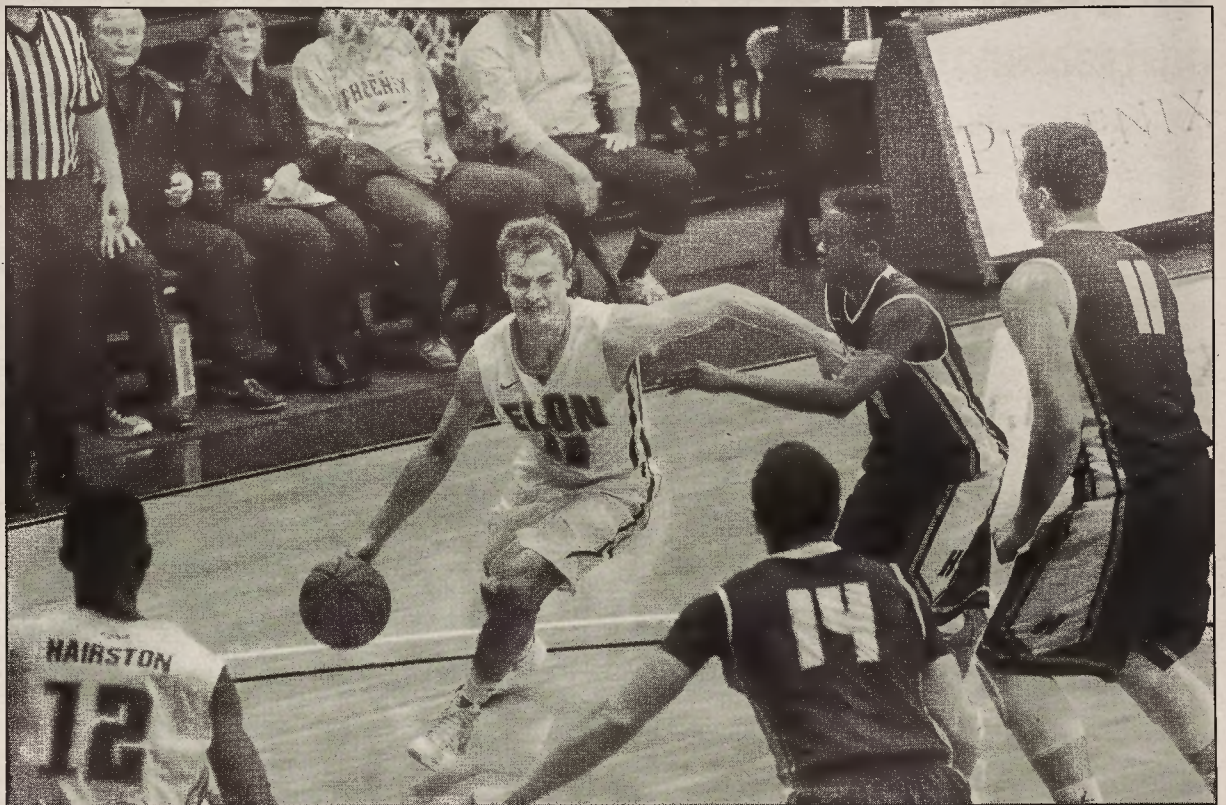
Elon University men's basketball coach Matt Matheny finished his interviews after the team's Jan. 9 loss to Hofstra University just more than 20 minutes after the game ended.

Matheny walked out of the interview room and was greeted by one of his team managers catching shots and passing to an Elon player, still wearing his game shorts and undershirt.

Freshman guard Steven Santa Ana was back shooting, focusing particularly on the corner in front of the Elon bench. Santa Ana missed two shots late in the game against Hofstra from that corner, both of which would have pulled Elon tied to or ahead of the Pride. Taking those late-game, high-pressure shots brought a smile to Matheny's face — even if he missed them.

"You love it," Matheny said. "When he took the shots in the corner, I was thrilled — not at all surprised, because he's confident — because I know he's taken that shot hundreds of thousands of times. We know how hard he works, and when a guy works that hard, you give him a lot of freedom."

Santa Ana only scored four points against Hofstra, down from his back-to-back career-high nights against Drexel University (18 points Jan. 2) and James Madison University (19 points Jan. 7), both wins. The shots after the game come out of a deep-rooted competitive nature that drives Santa Ana.



Elon freshman guard Steven Santa Ana drives to the hoop against Hofstra University Jan. 9. Santa Ana scored a career-high 19 points Jan. 7 at James Madison University.

JACK HARTMANN | Staff Photographer



Steven Santa Ana

"I don't know if the shots come out of a love of basketball or the hate to lose," Santa Ana said. "I don't like to lose at all. I want to do everything I can to make sure me and my team don't lose. That means getting up extra shots to compete at the highest level."

Spotted early by a familiar face

Santa Ana played for Ardrey Kell High School in Charlotte, but his talent was evident before he even got to high school.

Ardrey Kell coach Mike Craft said he first heard about Santa Ana from a familiar figure.

"Coach [Bob] McKillop at Davidson [College], a la Coach Matheny who was on staff at Davidson when Steven was in seventh grade," Craft said. "Coach McKillop texted me after a camp

and said, 'Steven Santa Ana is going to be a nice player for you at Ardrey Kell.' And he was only in seventh grade."

Craft then saw Santa Ana himself in eighth grade and immediately recognized his ability, bringing him onto the varsity squad as soon as he got to the school. Santa Ana became a starter midway through the season, with one game in particular standing out to Craft.

"He scored the last nine points in a game, and he hit a 3-pointer with two seconds left to win the game in a Christmas tournament at Bojangles Coliseum," Craft said. "We had been down six points and he scored three the old-fashioned way, hit a three, and somehow we got the ball back, and he hit a three in the corner to win the game. Kinda knew then that he was special."

Blossoming into a high school star

Santa Ana missed one game throughout his four years at Ardrey Kell, even though Craft said he tried to play in that one game as well. After riding the ups and downs of being a freshman on varsity, Santa Ana shined his sophomore year, averaging 18.4 points and 6.5 rebounds per game. He was named Player of the Year in the 4A Southwestern Conference in 2013.

Craft recognized multiple traits in Santa Ana that made him stand out from the beginning.

"Physically, he had a lot of growing to do, but skill-wise, playing hard, and his sixth sense about basketball — his basketball IQ is through the roof — and his competitiveness is something I don't think I've ever seen in a kid, and I've been coaching 26 years," Craft said.

Santa Ana continued to play well his junior year, averaging 17.5 points per game and placing second in Player of the Year voting. He was

named to the All-District and All-Conference teams.

Last game leaves lingering pain

The three years of quality play led to the best season in school history in his senior year, as Ardrey Kell went 28-2 on the way to a state championship game appearance. In Santa Ana's four years at the school heading into the final game, the Knights had won 84 games.

Against Garnet Magnet at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Dean Smith Center, Santa Ana played the game of his life, scoring 33 points in the second half en route to a 44-point performance, breaking the record for most points in a state title game.

"Everything that he got was in the flow in the game and within our system," Craft said. "I didn't realize that he had 44 — I knew he had a bunch, but I didn't know it was 44."

Santa Ana shot 13-26 from the field (5-13 from deep) and 13-15 from the free throw line, but don't remind him about his strong individual performance.

All he cares about is the result of the game, which was a 70-64 loss for the Knights.

"The team lost," Santa Ana said. "At the end of the day, I don't have a ring and it's an 'L' in the books, so ... that's it."

Deciding on Elon

Despite the sour ending, Santa Ana's was named All-State, All-District, All-Conference and 4A Southwestern Conference Player of the Year. Craft doesn't hold back when talking about his departed star.

"Best player we've ever had," Craft said. "He's a Knight. He's a Knight forever."

Santa Ana committed to Elon in September 2014, before his senior

season. For the coach who recognized Santa Ana's talent all the way back in seventh grade, the process of getting Santa Ana to Elon was enjoyable.

"It was fun to recruit Steven and to watch him in his high school career," Matheny said. "His team was expected to be very good — and they played in a lot of big games — and to watch him play in those big games and perform well or to perform adequately and willingly was enjoyable. I knew he would bring that type of confidence and aggressive mentality to Elon."

Matheny was in attendance at the state championship game and saw the culmination of the recruiting process unfold in the final high school game.

"It was great to be there when he has a game like that on such a big stage," Matheny said. "We had already signed him and we knew he was coming here, so we had confidence in his talent. But as we got to know him, we found out that he fits here. He's an Elon man. He's a good person first."

Santa Ana got to play his first collegiate game for Elon in his hometown, playing 12 minutes for Elon at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

"I had a lot of people in there," Santa Ana said. "I had a little extra nerves — first college game, not knowing what to expect on top of playing back in the hometown."

Santa Ana didn't score in the game, one of only two such games this season. He's averaging 9.1 points per game through 19 games, and the total has steadily risen during conference play. This comes as no surprise at all to those who see him most often, like Matheny.

"He works — the more you work, the harder you work, the more confidence you get," Matheny said. "He's in the gym all the time, even after games. He works hard, and as a result, he's very confident."



ALEX SIMON | Sports Editor

Santa Ana prepares to shoot 20 minutes after Elon's 80-76 loss to Hofstra Jan. 9.