

HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS' BASKETBALL NOTEBOOK

Adopted from a Congo orphanage, Muji Vader has warmed up to her new Concord home, Minuteman girls' basketball team

By **Trevor Hass** Globe Correspondent, Updated February 14, 2024, 7:20 p.m.



Muji Vader (14) first played organized basketball in a rec league in Bedford at age 12. As a sophomore at Minuteman Regional, she is averaging a team-high 17.6 points per game for a 14-4 team. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

As one of the oldest girls at an orphanage in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, **Muji Vader** played a critical role in completing daily chores.

Most mornings, she fetched water from a well, made breakfast, washed dishes and clothes, and kept an eye on the younger kids, including her brother **Joey**.

Vader studied hard at school, and maximized every task, but one part of her day consistently stood out among the rest. When the older boys played a fast-paced game comparable to “soccer with a twist,” Vader was the only girl regularly invited, because she was the only one who could keep up.

As she arrived in America for the first time in 2016, and came home to the Vader family in Concord, her athletic prowess continued to serve her well. She had never heard of basketball until that point, but when her best friend suggested she try it in fifth grade, she felt an immense sense of bliss.

Now, she’s a star sophomore for Minuteman, averaging 17.6 points per game for a 14-4 team poised to make a run in Division 5.

As she takes her game to the next level, the 16-year-old Vader leans on the principles that guided her in the DRC: providing extra effort, nurturing others, and letting her inquisitiveness shine through.

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Bre Vader, Muji Vader's mother





Minuteman High's Muji Vader, who has warmed up to the task of playing basketball after being adopted from a Congo orphanage, has been her team's leading scorer as a sophomore, averaging 17.6 points per game for her 14-4 team. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

“Since she was a little girl, I’ve told her she is fire,” said her mother, **Bre Vader**. “She can choose to warm people or burn people. In basketball, she uses that fire to burn up the court. In life, she really brings a lot of warmth to the people around her.”

Vader first arrived at the orphanage because her birth-father wanted her and Joey to have a better chance in life than their older siblings. The Vaders send basketball and school updates and check in on birthdays, but she hasn’t seen him in years. She doesn’t remember much about her birth-mother, who wasn’t there when they gave her up for adoption.

She was 7 years old when she first met the Vaders. Muji and Joey were legally their children at that point, but the Vaders initially weren’t able to bring them home due to an

adoption crisis in DR Congo that stemmed from the elections. They remained at the orphanage for another two years.

The situation understandably overwhelmed Vader, as she and a few other children got passports and grappled with the uncertainty of their future.

“I didn’t know what was going on,” Vader said. “I was kind of scared. They started taking a lot of pictures of me and my brother.”

Eventually, the Vaders elected to move to the DRC to expedite the process and start their life as a family. They stayed there three weeks before getting the green light, and after a lengthy process, they moved back home together when Vader was 8.

As she developed a rapport with her new parents and siblings, Vader became more and more comfortable and welcomed her new surroundings.

She arrived in March, witnessed snow for the first time, and adjusted to luxuries such as clean water and refrigerators. Vader learned English at age 9 and continued to channel the curiosity that served her well in the classroom.

“Her teacher had a meeting with us and said she had never seen a kid learn as fast as Muji,” Bre Vader said. “She was so self-motivated and self-advocating.”

That mind-set translated to track, then eventually to the basketball court, where Vader learned how to use her speed, length, and intelligence to her advantage. She played knock-out and pickup during recess in elementary school, then discovered organized basketball for the first time at age 12 through a Bedford-based rec team.

When COVID hit, she sharpened her skills with regular practice sessions at the park. One day, in the summer of 2022, a dad and two other girls came over and complimented Vader on her shooting form. They invited her to practice with them. Afterward, the dad, **Mark Williams**, a Fitchburg State associate head coach and Boston Lady Warriors AAU coach, offered Vader a spot on the Warriors.

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‘I feel really lucky. I have a lot of coaches around me who really want to see me succeed. That’s what’s kept me going.’

Muji Vader



Minuteman's Muji Vader perfected her shot with regular practice sessions at the park, where she was discovered by Fitchburg State assistant basketball coach Mark Williams, who invited Vader to join his daughters on their AAU team, the Boston Lady Warriors. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

“It’s incredible, the amount of growth, and the amount of help that I’ve gotten from so many people,” Vader said. “I feel really lucky. I have a lot of coaches around me who really want to see me succeed. That’s what’s kept me going.”

Vader’s love grew even more when she attended her first Celtics game last year. She averaged 15.6 points as a freshman on a senior-laden team and has expanded her role on

a much younger squad this winter. Vader, an explosive 5-foot-8 guard, prides herself on her motivational skills and court awareness.

Minuteman coach **Niki Devereaux**, who called Vader the hardest-working athlete she's had, said she often has to remind her to put the ball in the locker room instead of dribbling it in the hallway.

Vader, who carries almost a 3.8 GPA, hopes to play in college and coach once she graduates. She's incredibly grateful for how far she's come and eager to take her journey even further.

"She's an unbelievable athlete," Devereaux said. "You could tell right away from her work ethic that she wasn't going to take no for an answer. Her journey is incredible and inspiring."



Minuteman coach Nicole Devereaux (left) calls Muji Vader (right) the hardest-working player she has had. “You could tell right away from her work ethic that she wasn’t going to take no for an answer. Her journey is incredible and inspiring.” MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Courtside chatter

- Five teams around the state remain unbeaten, including Neighborhood House Charter in Dorchester.

The 18-0 Legends face atypical hurdles. They don’t have a home gym, so they rent out space in Boston’s Kroc Center for games and bounce around different practice spots, including the Dorchester YMCA and Curtis Hall Community Center in Jamaica Plain.

Eighth-year head coach **Charlene Fernandes** has taken her alma mater to new heights after they started stringing together winning seasons three years ago.

“It feels amazing, actually,” Fernandes said. “Everything seems so unreal, honestly.”

The 13-player program is led by senior **Alicia Browder** (19 points per game) and sophomore **Karin Richardson** (17 points). Fernandes has been coaching basketball for 10 years, but has been proud to stay with the small charter school as it grows.

“My honest answer [for staying] is my girls,” she said. “I want to see them off to college and see them graduate. I love the relationship I have with them on and off the court, so it keeps me coming back.”

▪ Second-ranked Cathedral (13-5) exhibited growth in Monday’s statement 60-58 victory at then-second-ranked Bishop Feehan. Standout guard **Hijjah Allen-Paisley** returned from an ankle injury to play in a limited role, but it was the rest of the Panthers who stepped up when it counted.

Cathedral dropped three straight in mid-January to its Catholic Central League rivals, including a 20-point defeat against the Shamrocks, but hasn’t lost since in its bid to repeat as Division 4 champions. Facing teams that excel in the half-court, like Feehan, Bishop Fenwick, and St. Mary’s, has helped the fast-paced Panthers learn how to adapt when the game slows down.

“You play teams like that consistently, you have no choice but to realize your weaknesses and just try to get better,” said coach **Clinton Lassiter**.

Junior **Malani Smith** has ascended to the starting lineup to join stars **Allen-Paisley**, **Jasmine Day-Cox**, and **Keyona Raines**. Another breakout player: sophomore **Tamia Darling**, who transferred from New Mission. Darling needed to adjust to Cathedral’s blazing tempo, but she’s a natural quick learner.

“I think her growth is happening at a very, very good time for us,” Lassiter said. “She went through a stretch yesterday where she just couldn’t be stopped.”

Games to watch

Saturday, Comcast Tournament at Woburn — The field for this eight-team showcase might be its best ever, with six top-10 teams (Foxborough, Bishop Feehan, Bishop Fenwick, Medfield, Woburn, and Central Catholic), plus undefeated Central Mass. giant Wachusett and defensive stalwart Bridgewater-Raynham. Championship games are on Monday.

Saturday, Spartan Classic at St. Mary's (Lynn) — Another perennially loaded tournament, this year's Classic includes ranked squads in St. Mary's, Billerica, Pentucket, Oliver Ames, and Dartmouth, plus close contenders in Andover, Whitman-Hanson, Acton-Boxborough, and Bedford. The four-day, 16-team tournament holds championship games Monday and Tuesday.

Sunday, Riley Winter Classic at Westwood — No. 10 Walpole, Needham, Falmouth, and Westwood make up this four-team tournament with a championship game Monday.

Monday, Norwell Invitational at Norwell — No. 17 Norwell and No. 13 Wellesley are both ranked in this four-team bracket (championship on Wednesday) which also includes Hanover and Newton North.

Monday, Women's Roundball Tournament at Mansfield — The No. 14 Hornets host Braintree, Natick, and Westford in a four-team bracket.

Correspondent Ethan Fuller contributed to this story.

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