

Quezada's Street Smarts Light Up D.C.

Tarik El-Bashir. The Washington Post. Washington, D.C.: Jan 23, 2004. pg. D.09

Manny Quezada's slick, no-look passes elicit gasps from spectators. His high-flying reverse layups lift fans from their seats. And his electrifying cross-over dribbles leave opponents swiping at the air.

Those flamboyant moves -- and a 27.4-point scoring average -- have made Quezada, a St. Albans senior who learned to play on the blacktop courts of his native New York, one of the most exciting players in the Washington area. The 6-foot-1 senior guard has scored 30 points or more four times this winter, including a pair of 40- point performances. He also is averaging 6.7 assists and 4.5 rebounds.

"People stereotype Manny as just a street-baller," Potomac School Coach Matt Carlin said. "But when you see him four or five times, you find out there's much more to his game. He's also a leader. He finishes around the basket. And he's clutch. He's just deadly."

The son of Dominican immigrants, Quezada grew up in Manhattan's Washington Heights neighborhood, where the temptations for young men often outnumber the avenues out. The asphalt courts near his home are cracked. The rims don't have nets. And the wait to get onto the court for a pickup game can last hours. None of that deterred Quezada and his friends from returning every afternoon.

"Everyone plays basketball in New York City," Quezada said. "It's like a religion up there. You learn a lot of individual moves because you have to be creative. You can do whatever moves you want. There are no coaches out there telling you what offense to run. It's much more loose. . . . Playing with older guys in the streets made me tougher, too."

Those pickup games were also where Quezada's do-whatever-it- takes attitude was forged.

"If you lost, you might not get another game," Quezada said. "So, obviously, the goal was not to lose."

Quezada's determination was never more apparent than in the championship game of the prestigious Gulf Shore Shootout in Naples, Fla., where St. Albans' hopes of claiming the title were fading fast. The Bulldogs were trailing by 17 points to one of Georgia's top teams, Wesleyan, in the fourth quarter of the final on Jan. 1.

Quezada responded by scoring 23 of his tournament-record 44 points in the quarter, including five three-pointers. The Bulldogs won, 77-75. "It was just incredible," St. Albans senior Henry Wellington said. "At times, it's just best for everybody to get out of his way. That was one of those times."

St. Albans Coach Bob Brown said: "We basically said, 'Manny, go do your thing.' The other team didn't know what hit them. . . . Some of the stuff he has you can't teach. When you have a player like Manny, you just let him do what he does."

After completing his freshman year at Norman Thomas High School in midtown Manhattan, Quezada was recruited to join a youth program called New Heights, which provides academic and athletic activities six days a week for more than 700 children in troubled New York neighborhoods. New Heights, which is affiliated with the Children's Aid Society and fields an elite-level AAU basketball team, the Warriors, was founded four years ago by former St. Albans basketball player Nick Blatchford, whose connections to St. Albans and Brown helped Quezada come to St. Albans three years ago.

"Manny desperately needed to play for a coach who could teach him to be disciplined and go to a school where he could be pushed to his potential in the classroom," Blatchford said. "Manny has always had a vision for himself, and that vision included getting into a top university."

Of the seven current seniors who played for the Warriors AAU team last year, all have signed or been offered scholarships to play basketball at Division I universities. Quezada has signed with Rutgers.

Although Quezada's game contrasts sharply with that of his St. Albans teammates, they have had little problem meshing this season. The Bulldogs (13-3) have won nine of their last 10 games, and have emerged as one of the contenders for the Interstate Athletic Conference title, which they last captured in 2000.

"When you get a player like Quezada, you just have to adjust," Bullis Coach Mike Hibbs said. "He can just do so many things. You don't want to restrict him or pigeonhole him by making him conform to a system. The adjustment has taken a couple of years, but that team is really playing together now."