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# Tom Knott: Mason staying close to his foundation

[Tom Knott \(Contact\)](#)

The NBA career of Roger Mason Jr. is a testament to grit and sacrifice and perseverance, all the good stuff, the intangibles, that personnel gurus routinely miss going into the draft each June.

Mason is looking to impart some of that stick-to-it stuff to the elementary students of the E.L. Haynes Public Charter School on Georgia Avenue in Northwest Washington. More about that later.

But first how Mason beat an omission that was not necessarily the fault of the NBA evaluators.

How do you measure what's inside someone? How do you know how a person will respond the first time he is hit with adversity? How do you know how he will adapt to the NBA lifestyle? You don't know. You can't know.

Mason was not a celebrated collegian coming out of Virginia after his junior season. He was a player with a utility, with the capacity to hit shots so long as his feet were set. All the rest was an unknown.

He was a second-round draft pick of the Bulls in 2002, which was the start of an odyssey that would take him to Toronto, Greece and Israel before he landed with the Wizards, his hometown team, at the start of the 2006-07 season.

His modest financial numbers fit the salary cap needs of the Wizards, and he could shoot

some, and he was a high-character guy who would keep his mouth shut while picking up bits and pieces of minutes. That is what coaches like with their end-of-the-bench players. They like low-maintenance players who will accept their roles as the DNPs accumulate.

Mason's career took a fortuitous turn after Gilbert Arenas went on the shelf. Mason showed he was more than a spot-up shooter, that he had the capacity to put up the sort of numbers that could carry an injury-ravaged team on occasion.

That was the Mason of two seasons ago, helping a beat-up Wizards team make their fourth consecutive playoff appearance. Yet that is where it ended with Mason and the Wizards.

He signed with the Spurs last summer after the Wizards assumed Arenas would be back and DeShawn Stevenson would be able to log ironman minutes at the off-guard. That assumption did not work out so well; Arenas missed all but two games of the season. Stevenson, nursing a bad back, became a shell of who he was. Brendan Haywood succumbed to the injury curse as well.

Mason? He became a trusted player on a team that is considered a civic treasure in San Antonio. He hit a bunch of shots, four that decided the game, and became an essential part of the Spurs because of the injury woes of Manu Ginobili.

That is Mason: quiet, steady, dependable. He is the guy behind the guy but ever capable.

His roots remain planted here, of course. You do not cut your basketball teeth at Sidwell Friends and Good Counsel and forget your travails if you're Mason.

You start a foundation, you connect with the community and you partner with the Haynes Charter School to provide a measure of inspiration to those students with big dreams.

His sponsorship commences Thursday night, when 50 students will attend a "Movie Night with Mase" after competing in an essay contest that highlighted the merit of hard work.

Mason read the essays, too, and was moved by the ones that referenced him. He wants that role.

"That means more to me than anything," he said Tuesday. "That's the cool part. That's the type of thing that is special to me."

This is not a one-time event, a photo opportunity designed to be a public relations event that celebrates an athlete. This is a commitment on Mason's part.

"I didn't want this to be a typical 'show up one time' and that would be the end of it," he said. "I wanted this to be a partnership."

Mason plans to maintain a relationship with the students during the NBA season through a shared blog on the Haynes Web site, video calls, Twitter and Facebook updates and personal visits.

And he hopes the relationship benefits the students in a persuasive way.

"My whole thing always has been about working hard," he said. "You use the same principles in everything, whether you're a basketball player or a doctor. It takes work and dedication."

It takes what Mason's NBA career has come to define.

His new best friends at Haynes surely will be taking notes.

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