

Barnes took out his iPad and had an edit ready of Kevin Durant's best three games at Texas — 37 points at Oklahoma State, 32 at Kansas and 37 in the 2007 Big 12 championship against the [Jayhawks](#). Barnes narrated each play.

Look at how fast KD gets the ball up to the rim. Look at how long he is but how low he plays. Look at how he sees the game before it happens. Look at how he drives into gaps and won't let his defender get his hand on the ball.

Knecht sat in silence, drinking in every word. He is still in awe that the guy who coached his favorite player is now his coach, and he's reached a level where Barnes has the same confidence in him that he had in Durant.

The whole world quickly saw that Durant — the second-ranked player in his high school class — was a generational talent. Knecht has been the All-American no one saw coming. He was a late bloomer — 5-foot-4 as a high school freshman with no Division I offers his senior year — and he arrived at Tennessee after four years in college basketball anonymity, playing at Northeastern Junior College and then Northern Colorado.

"I'm not in any way shape or form comparing him to KD, but he can learn from what he does," Barnes tells *The Athletic*. "And the one thing he does have in common with KD is he can't get enough of the gym."

Barnes showed Knecht the Durant tape because he can see Knecht is about to get similar treatment. One day earlier, at Georgia, Barnes went to a "give Knecht the ball and everybody get out of the way offense" in an 11-point comeback win where Knecht scored 10 of his 36 points in the final six minutes. Over the last three games, Knecht has scored 103 points, matching the best three-game stretch Durant had in his one year at Texas. Durant was best on the biggest stages and particularly thrived in road games, averaging 28.7 points in those contests. Knecht is doing the same, averaging 31.3 points so far on the road and saving his best performances for the marquee games.

"The dude loves a crowd," assistant coach Rod Clark says, noting that Knecht dropped 28 points in his debut at [Michigan State](#) in a charity exhibition, which if it counted, would *lower* his road average. "In these road games, there's been a crowd everywhere we've been. When they're going on a run and it feels like we need a bucket, it seems like every single time he gets it."



The Durant video played for 25 minutes on Sunday, and when it ended, Knecht got up and told Collins to stay right there; he was going to change and they were going on the court. Then for 20 minutes, they worked on all the teaching points Barnes had tried to get across.

“He’s playing ridiculous right now,” Collins says, “and Coach critiqued him and he took it all and learned from it. What makes him unique is he doesn’t ever want to stop learning.”

Two nights after the Durant session, Knecht used the lessons — fewer dribbles in the gaps and getting to the elbows — and torched [Florida](#) for 39 points.

“He is what he is,” Barnes says, “because he works.”

Knecht quickly latched onto Collins as his workout partner because the graduate assistant gives new meaning to “a guy who lives at the gym.” Collins *actually* lives at the gym, sleeping on a couch inside a dressing room at Thompson-Boling Arena this year to save money. It’s convenient for Knecht’s routine. He shows up every night between 9 and 10 p.m. for a workout, and then he and Collins watch film together. The late-night workouts started as soon as he got to college.

“When people say gym rat, that’s what he is,” Northeastern Junior College coach Eddie Trenkle says. “He loves being in the gym. I think he loves the smell of it. I think he loves the sound of it. I could totally see him someday when he builds a house, it’ll probably be the shape of a gym.”

Knecht fell in love with basketball and the work at an early age. He started watching college basketball with his dad when he was 6. Corey Knecht played at Mayville State, an NAIA school in North Dakota, and he passed his love of the game down. Knecht grew up playing point guard, and he and his dad studied Chris Paul, Steve Nash, Kyrie Irving and Steph Curry. They spent every Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at the gym training. Knecht would return on weekdays to put the work into practice.

His dad, who is 6-3, had been a late bloomer and hoped the same would be true of his son. Corey once downloaded an app to try to estimate Knecht's eventual height. They weren't thrilled when it spit out 6-1. The growth plates didn't seem to be lining up with his dreams; Knecht grew only two inches between his freshman and sophomore year — up to 5-6 — but then the growth spurt came. And kept going. To 6-foot as a junior, 6-3 as a senior.

Knecht averaged 21 points his senior season at Prairie View High School in Henderson, Colo., and he was the runner-up for player of the year in his conference, but the college attention was light. He got a couple of Division II and junior college offers from local programs.

Trenkle felt he might have landed a gem when Knecht showed up closer to 6-6. "He could move," Trenkle says. "It wasn't like he was clumsy or awkward with these growth spurts. He was a fluid athlete. He could bounce out of the gym. He could just do some things that other guys couldn't."

Knecht started the year coming off the bench, and after a sloppy loss in early January, Trenkle told his assistant he was going to try to play Knecht more. Even though his team's defense might suffer, he felt like he needed more offense against Western Nebraska, a team that featured Teddy "Buckets" Allen, who was in between stints at Wichita State and Nebraska. Knecht rewarded him with 29 points, leading [Northeastern](#) to a win.

"Then his career just took off," Trenkle says. "He would do things on the floor you just don't see a tall, lanky guy do, and he made it look so easy."

The next offseason, Trenkle told Knecht that he needed a go-to move when his 3-pointers weren't falling and encouraged him to work on his 15-foot pull-up. Knecht averaged 23.9 points the next season, and Trenkle estimates he shot 70 to 80 percent on those midrange jumpers. He landed on the NJCAA All-America first team.

"He wanted to work on those things that he wasn't great at," Trenkle said. "And for some kids, that's not their priority. For him, it's always been a priority. He spent hours and hours and hours in this gym. If there was a move he couldn't do or something he wasn't good at, he was working on it

all the time. That's the thing I've always felt separated him from every other kid I've coached that's been really good."

Knecht had interest that spring from Louisville, Georgia and Colorado, but he wasn't able to take visits because of COVID-19. [Northern Colorado](#) showed the most interest, and its coaches were all former junior college guys.

"They understood where my mindset would be," Knecht says. "I didn't know what was going on in the world, and I wanted to stay close to home."

Knecht battled injury problems his junior year, but he blew up last season, leading the Big Sky in scoring at 20.2 points per game. Northern Colorado struggled, finishing 12-20, but it played one of its best games in an 88-54 win against [Weber State](#) on Feb. 6, and Clark just happened to be watching because he'd coached Weber State star [Dillon Jones](#) at Sunrise Christian Academy.

So when Clark saw Knecht's name pop up in the transfer portal last spring, his antenna went up.

Clark was initially hesitant to pursue Knecht when he saw the others interested: North Carolina. Kentucky. Kansas. Indiana. Oregon.

But Clark was holding two unexpected aces in his pocket: Knecht loves Durant, and when he'd declared for the NBA Draft last spring, scouts told him he needed to improve defensively and prove he could play at the high-major level.

Clark and Knecht also connected because Clark had played junior college ball too. Tennessee had the best defense in college basketball last season, and Clark told Knecht that if he played for the Vols, he was either going to get better defensively and help himself long term, or he'd stink and they would have to find ways to hide him.

"I don't want to be hid," Knecht told him. "I want to get better."

In Knecht, the Tennessee coaches saw the solution to their issue a year ago, when they ranked 64th in adjusted offensive efficiency. The Vols lost in the Sweet 16 to Florida Atlantic, managing just 55 points. "We were trying to win games in the 50s," Clark says. "You can't win a national championship like that. We needed an alpha scorer."

Knecht got the message this summer when he was trying to blend in and play selflessly. Tennessee veterans [Josiah-Jordan James](#) and [Santiago Vescovi](#) told him to stop passing; they needed him to score.

"If we wanted you to make the extra pass," they told him, "we'd be cool being at the same place we were last year. Go be you."

This summer Knecht put on 15 pounds and improved his explosiveness. That was on display immediately in the Oct. 29 exhibition at Michigan State, when he had a transition dunk that went viral.



The added burst has also helped Knecht on the defensive end. Defensive metrics aren't always the most reliable, but they at least can tell part of a story. A year ago at Northern Colorado, Knecht allowed 0.959 points per possession when his man finished a play, per Synergy. Playing against better players this season, he's giving up just 0.655 points per possession, ranking him in the top 10 percent of defenders nationally.

His biggest leap defensively has been on the mental side. He asks questions constantly and is always seeking feedback. That is how he has always been. His father still calls him after every game and critiques his performance. Knecht also stays in contact with his junior college coaches. Trenkle says he's never coached a player who would call more regularly after he left, and he always wants feedback and never shies away from criticism. Knecht stayed so connected with his former coaches that he'd know Northeastern's travel schedule and used to FaceTime them at 2 a.m. when he knew they would just be getting back from a road trip. Knecht, naturally, was still at the gym getting shots.

"When you get lucky enough to coach a kid like this, it's one of those things that you never forget," Trenkle says.

Knecht says those coaches are like family to him, and he loved his time at both Northeastern and Northern Colorado.

"If I could take it back, I wouldn't change anything," he said. "I dreamed about being on a top-10 team in the nation — being on one of those teams and contributing — and those experiences helped me get where I wanted to be."



Tennessee coaches and teammates urge Dalton Knecht to do what he does best: shoot the ball. (Randy Sartin / USA Today)

Last week, Knecht met with Clark. He was dealing with frustration for the first time this season. He sprained his ankle on Nov. 29 against [North Carolina](#), and Clark says Knecht probably should have sat out some games. His numbers dipped in December, and it was clear to Tennessee's coaches he wasn't as explosive. He started to feel more like himself once he got back from Christmas break, but he wasn't shooting the ball to his standard, in both games and practices, and it got in his head.

Clark has served as his sounding board this year. Early in the year when Knecht started getting a lot of attention — agents calling and [NBA](#) scouts taking notice — he'd asked for Clark to meet him before shootaround for the [Wofford](#) game. They sat together on the bench, and Clark told him to look around. He'd fallen in love with college basketball watching it on TV, and he was about to be in those televised games in packed arenas. Every year he'd watched the Maui Invitational, and he was about to play in it. Knecht's parents had told Clark they didn't want to talk to any agents until after the season. They wanted just to enjoy this season. And Clark told him just to block all that out and do what he'd always done.

"Get lost in the work," Clark said. "Soak this in. Enjoy it. Because this is gonna be the best time in your life."

Knecht needed a reminder last week, so Clark asked, "Where'd you come from?"

“Colorado”

National

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- Bundesliga
- Champions League
- Championship
- College Football
- Copa America
- Copa del Rey
- Culture
- Europa League
- European Championship
- FA Cup
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