



Sophie Cunningham  
Mayor



MIZZOU WINTER 2019

# THE MAYOR. AND THE CITY MANAGER

STORY BY  
MARK GODICH

IIIIII

ILLUSTRATION BY  
BLAKE DINSDALE

As they lean into their senior seasons, Mizzou basketball stars **Sophie Cunningham** and **Kevin Puryear** reflect on their careers, their friendship and memories made off the court.





**They were high school seniors, both chasing state championships. Both were bound for the University of Missouri. She was on her way to her fourth consecutive title. He was on the verge of collecting his first. It was March 2015, and as they passed one another between games just off the floor at Mizzou Arena, they would make eye contact, even exchange a shy word or two.**

"They would always play after us," he says. "I'd walk by Sophie, and she'd go, 'Good game.'"

"I'm like, 'Good game, Kev,'" she repeats in a whisper, reliving the scene from almost four years ago.

Laughter ensues. There is a lot of laughter on this fall morning in the bowels of Mizzou Arena as Sophie Cunningham and Kevin Puryear reminisce. There is plenty of introspection, too. They were high school stars who have become great friends, kids who pledged to the home-state (and hometown, in Sophie's case) school when they could have signed virtually anywhere and wouldn't have been blamed if they had. Now they are college seniors, unquestioned leaders of basketball programs they have helped put back on the map, champions on campus and in the community. They are, in a word, special.

"Two kids who check every box," says Brad Loos, an assistant athletic director at the university who recruited and then coached Kevin for two seasons.

For both, the decision to attend Missouri was an easy one. Sophie's parents, Jim, BS Ed '82, and Paula, BJ '89, were both Mizzou athletes (as were an aunt and uncle and grandfather) and live six minutes from campus. She committed as an eighth-grader, before she had even dribbled a basketball for Rock Bridge High School, and counts UConn among the programs she turned down.

"Once I started winning championships, I was like, 'Dang, I can get used to winning championships on this floor,'" Sophie says. "We kept winning. My senior year, I was like, 'Next year this is going to be my home. I want the same feeling on this court.'"

Although Kevin's mother, Vicki, encouraged him to look around, he knew all along where he belonged. Even as his star rose at Blue Springs South

High School, he idolized Laurence Bowers and Marcus Denmon. He envisioned bringing his winning ways to Columbia, continuing to build a legacy, if you will. It was also important to stay close to home so his parents and two sisters could attend games.

"My experience here is assurance I made the right decision," Kevin says. "When I met Sophie early in my senior year, I told her, 'You know, Mizzou is going to be a really cool place.' I already had some friends, like [Tigers tight end] Kendall Blanton. He and I grew up together. I love the state of Missouri. I think Missouri is pretty freaking cool, especially Kansas City and St. Louis."

"And Columbia," Sophie interjects.

"Of course," Kevin says. "I love Columbia."



The 45-minute conversation is lively and would take many twists and turns. Good friends that they are, each is asked to describe the other's game. But because they are both well-known for their grit on the basketball court, there's a caveat: Tough and toughness are off limits. Kevin jumps right in.

"Mean," he says, undoubtedly aware of the reaction his response will elicit.

"Whatever, Kev," Sophie says with a laugh and a tap on his right arm.

"No," he adds, "she's extremely skilled. There aren't many words you can say about Sophie's game. You just have to watch it for yourself. The legacy she's built here, the best women's player we've ever had. That's super impressive. I say mean, though. Mean in a good way."

Sophie is quick with her characterization.

"You've overcome a lot in your career," she says. "Your perseverance is amazing. You're just fierce out there. You've got that edge to you, a little bit of cockiness going. You're a blue-collar worker. Nothing has been handed to you. You're also a great leader. The people on his team look up to him. He's the one who gets the crowd going. We're both similar in that way: We're crowd-pleasers, we're energizers, we're just that motor, that dog out on the court."

"I like that," Kevin says, with a nod and a grin.

Would he like a mulligan?

"Mean," he replies with a chuckle. "And energetic."

As much as anyone, Sophie appreciates what Kevin has been through. After winning 97 games during his high school career, he arrived on campus with much fanfare. Without so much as a pause, he remembers his first opponent (Wofford) and how many points he scored (a team-high 20).





But aside from a buzzer-beating three-pointer and a career-high 30 points in an overtime victory over Auburn in the first round of the 2017 SEC Tournament, the highlights were few and far between. Mizzou would win a combined 18 games in Kevin's first two seasons, home games usually contested in an arena so empty "you could hear yourself talk," he says. "I remember when Sophie and the women's basketball team were the only ones in the student section."

He considered transferring. "It was shell-shocking to me to lose this much after I had won so much," Kevin says. "And it didn't seem like it was going to get any better. I thought my sophomore year was going to be better, but we still had trials and tribulations. I'm amazed to be here, I'll be honest. I'm also blessed to be here because this was the school I always wanted to go to. With everything my class has been through, it was rough. But I think it made us better people and better players and really changed my perspective on life. I'm glad it happened. It's just part of my story."

For Sophie, the challenge as a freshman was all personal. The Tigers were coming off of a 19-14 season — their third consecutive winning campaign — and an appearance in the Women's NIT. There was comfort in having her older sister, Lindsey, as a teammate. Yet on her first day of fall

camp, Sophie was ready to walk away.

"In high school, you think you're working so hard," she says. "The first day of conditioning, I told them I was going to quit. I said, 'I'm not made for this.'"

Seriously? The same woman who would score a program-record 42 points in a game as a freshman, the woman who has already been a two-time all-SEC first-team selection, the woman who will leave Mizzou as the greatest player in program history?

"Yes, I was on that trail over there, and I was about to quit," she says. (Kevin finds humor in the revelation.) "I just had to remember what I was trying to get done here. Our coaches demand excellence in the classroom, the community and definitely on the basketball court. I've grown so much."

**"In high school, you think you're working so hard. The first day of conditioning, I told them I was going to quit. I said, 'I'm not made for this.'"**

— SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM

The discussion turns to food. College kids have to eat, after all, and Columbia is by no means short on options. So, Shakespeare's or Booches?

"I'm going Booches," Sophie says.

"Yeah, Booches," Kevin agrees.

Flat Branch or Shiloh?

"Flat Branch, for sure," Kevin says without hesitation.





**“The games are fun, but going on the road with your teammates, your brothers, you can’t beat it. We find something to laugh about every two seconds. It’s really entertaining.”**

— KEVIN PURYEAR

Sophie ponders the question for a good 10 seconds before responding. “Dang, I don’t know,” she says. “Honestly, I might go to both that night.” More laughter.

As for their favorite establishments, the Cunningham clan, which has numbered in the neighborhood of 45 at home games and has been known to take over visiting arenas, often convenes at a quaint Italian haunt on the south side of town. “If we can’t decide where we’re going, we’ll say, ‘Everybody meet at Angelo’s at 7,’” Sophie says.

Kevin has a go-to breakfast spot. When the Tigers aren’t practicing on, say, a Sunday morning, he likes to round up teammates for a trip to Cracker Barrel for “the best breakfast money can buy.” His eyes light up as he reels off his favorite fare. “The pancake breakfast, with two over-easy eggs and some turkey sausage.”

Weigh the two programs together, and has Missouri basketball ever been in a better place? Playing in the most competitive conference in the country, the women are coming off their third consecutive NCAA Tournament appearance. The pieces are in place for another tournament run, but the Tigers aren’t standing pat. After watching her team get run ragged by Florida Gulf Coast in a first-round upset last March, Coach Robin Pingeton is implementing a position-less style of play. With a slew of perimeter weapons, the Tigers will play faster. Sophie will continue to pop three-pointers, but at times she might move inside next to 5-foot-11 junior Amber Smith. Senior point

guard Lauren Aldridge returns, along with juniors Jordan Chavis and Jordan Roundtree. Among the new faces on the roster are Haley Troup, a red-shirt freshman transfer from South Carolina, and Grace Berg, a freshman from Iowa who was the 37th-rated recruit in the country last season.

Sophie never seems to be at a loss for words, but she is succinct when asked about her ambitions for her last hurrah: “SEC championship. I take one day at a time, but I want that Sweet 16, Elite Eight.”

Last season, the women played before big crowds — a home game against Tennessee drew a program-record 11,092 fans — and Kevin at long last ran out of the tunnel to packed houses. “My freshman year, my mom used to pray all the time that Mizzou Arena would get filled,” he says. “She would always say, ‘I have a really good feeling about this year.’ Now when I come out on the court, it amazes me every time. I don’t take anything for granted. I remember.”

No Tiger hit a bigger shot in 2018 than Kevin, whose three-pointer against Mississippi State gave Missouri an overtime victory after the team had squandered a 12-point lead in the final 97 seconds of regulation. The utter joy on Kevin’s face after he hit the shot and the reaction from the players on the bench was a sight to see. Basketball was fun again. Given up for dead after a back injury sidelined freshman star Michael Porter Jr. two minutes into the season opener, the Tigers were one of the biggest surprises in the SEC if not the country, finishing 20-13 and earning their first NCAA Tournament bid since 2013 under first-year coach Cuonzo Martin. They are hungry for more, but now they are coping with another significant injury — the season-ending loss of sophomore big man Jontay Porter to a torn ACL and MCL during an Oct. 21 scrimmage. Kevin and sophomore Jeremiah Tilmon will be asked to pick up the slack inside. “Of course, we want to one-up the year before, achieve something we haven’t accomplished,” Kevin says. “We’re playing college basketball to compete for a national championship.”

They are both sport management majors who, after careers in professional basketball, envision a future in broadcasting. (Note to SEC Network execs: Sophie and Kev on the same anchor desk would be something.) But first they intend to soak up every moment of their senior years. It will be bittersweet, naturally, and it prompts the question: What are they most excited about?

“The games are fun, but going on the road with your teammates, your brothers, you can’t beat it,”



Kevin says. "We find something to laugh about every two seconds. It's really entertaining."

"Being done with school," says Sophie. There's a sense of relief in her voice as she turns to Kevin and says, "I'm surprised you didn't say that. But I'm not looking ahead. I'm trying to take and embrace one day at a time. I try to take it all in because there's something different about your senior year. I'm looking forward to the basketball, of course, but just the relationships you build here and not taking those for granted. Be the best teammate, the best daughter, the best personality in the community I can be every day."

When stressed, she has typically turned to Lindsey, who was a graduate student manager last season and is now an assistant director with the Tiger Scholarship Fund. "It's going to be a little different without her on the bench," Sophie says. "I don't know if you watch the games, but I do get a little feisty. Sassy. She was always the one to calm me down and tell me to focus up. We'll see who that is this year. God bless 'em. Pray for 'em."

Kevin turns to assistant coach Chris Hollender. "He's my dad away from home," Kevin says. "He can always tell when my disposition or body language is changing. Every time something is up, he knows. I can't hide it from him. During the game he's always in my ear: Good, good. And when he wants to yell at me, he does that, too."

---

They could talk for hours, but Sophie has to get to class. There's time for one last inquiry: What's one thing people would be surprised to learn about each of you? Known around town as the Mayor, a mention that elicits a groan and a roll of the eyes, Sophie, like any good politician, is happy to have the final word. (That would make Kevin the City Manager, though before he can share his nickname she is quick to point out that he goes by Teddy Bear or Fat Boy. "Whatever," he says.)

"I'll go with both of us on this one," Sophie says. "Kevin and I are both fierce competitors. We're feisty, we're hard-nosed, we don't take stuff from anybody. But when we're off the court, we're two of the goofiest, light-hearted, down-to-earth people. We really are. Aren't we?"

Another nod from Kevin. Another grin.

"We're kids pretty much," Sophie says. "But we probably should grow up soon. We are seniors."

The comment generates one last laugh, and with that, they are on their way. **M**

*About the author: Mark Godich, a 1979 graduate of the Missouri School of Journalism, is a senior editor at The Athletic and a former senior editor at Sports Illustrated.*

# REDEEM TEAM

A quarter-century ago, the Tigers emerged as one of the Big Eight's best teams ever, an outcome no one would have predicted after an early-season rout.



What did Nolan Richardson know? In the dedication game at Bud Walton Arena, the Arkansas coach had just watched his Razorbacks inflict a 120-68 beatdown on the Missouri Tigers.

"We won't play that good again," Richardson said when it was over. "Missouri was not a very good basketball team tonight, but I think they will be."

Said Missouri Coach Norm Stewart: "I told Nolan they're really good. I couldn't tell tonight how good they are because we're not very good right now."

It was an ominous start to the 1993-94 season. The number of points surrendered and the 52-point margin of defeat were both dubious program records. Although the Tigers entered the game as a 12-point underdog, it's not as if they were without talent. They were picked to finish third in the Big Eight behind Oklahoma State and Kansas. Missouri then struggled to beat Jackson State, SMU and Coppin State at home, prevailing in those three games by a combined 10 points, but the Tigers kept winning. And winning. The season turned with a 108-107 triple-overtime victory over Illinois in the annual clash in St. Louis. In fact, after being humiliated in Fayetteville, Mizzou would win 22 of its next 23 games, the only stumble coming in a four-point loss at Notre Dame in mid-January.

Most impressively, the Tigers ran the table in the Big Eight, finishing 14-0 and becoming just the third team in conference history to go undefeated. They were a blend of experience and youth. Melvin Booker was named the Big Eight Player of the Year, while Kelly Thames was honored as the conference's top freshman. The team also got a lift at midseason with the addition of Paul O'Liney, a walk-on transfer from Pensacola [Florida] Junior College who, legend has it, had watched the debacle against Arkansas on TV and decided the Tigers could really use his help.

Even after losing in the semifinals of the Big Eight tournament, Mizzou earned the first and only No. 1 seed in program history. The Tigers were shipped to the West Regional, but after victories over Navy, Wisconsin and Syracuse, they fell to second-seeded Arizona. A victory would have sent Missouri to its first Final Four and a semifinal meeting with ... Arkansas.

Stewart was right about the Razorbacks, who would win it all. Missouri, meanwhile, finished 28-4 and ranked fifth in the country. Turns out Richardson was right about the Tigers, too.