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COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Morrell not Shaka'd by VCU march

Michael Morrell is feeling smart these days.

Virginia Commonwealth is playing at an Elite level thanks to Morrell's former co-worker and mentor of sorts, Shaka Smart. Morrell, a 1,000-point scorer at Elizabethton and Milligan College who just finished his first season as an assistant at Charleston Southern, worked at Clemson one season with Smart before Smart left for Florida.

The Rams beat Florida State Friday night to reach the Elite Eight, where they'll face Kansas today. VCU beat Kevin O'Neill's Southern Cal Trojans 59-46, then waltzed past Georgetown and Purdue with a pair of 18-point victories before breaking Seminoles coach Leonard Hamilton's heart.

Morrell had finished his first season under George Pitts at King College when Smart interviewed him in 2007. Smart called Pitts to tell him Morrell was getting his recommendation for the Clemson job, and Morrell liked the fact that Smart liked the fact that Pitts didn't like the fact he was going to have to hunt a new assistant. Well, Pitts was less than warm and fuzzy.

"Shaka said George just said something like 'Yeah, Michael said he was gonna interview down there,'" Morrell said.

Pitts is typically to the point.

"Shaka said 'I liked that guy. He didn't sound too happy but said you'd do a good job,'" Morrell said. "Of course, Oliver (Purnell) made the decision, but I actually interviewed with Shaka when I got the GA job at Clemson. And when Shaka went to Florida after my first year he really gave his blessing to Oliver to move me up ... and I was 24 at the time."

Morrell all but guaranteed greatness for Smart while making conversation after an interview in 2007. Now, "I told you so" rolls off Morrell's tongue through a chuckle.

The 33-year-old Smart was a four-year starter and three-year captain at Kenyon College (Ohio), where he graduated magna cum laude with a degree in history.

"Shaka's a Division III guy who's fought tooth and nail for everything he's got," Morrell said. "The guy works his tail off. ... And he's a deep dude."

Morrell was all but giddy when the Rams scored the game-winner with seven seconds left against Florida State, and wasn't surprised the Rams drew up an inbounds layup from under their basket.

"He is as well-rounded of a coach as you could find — worker, recruiter, tactician and game situations," Morrell said. "He is very good. Working for him you could always tell he was prepared to become a head coach — the way he addressed the players and recruits. I learned a tremendous amount from him."

Former King College player J.T. Blair, a graduate assistant at Charleston Southern, was with Morrell watching him sweat it out.

"I was going nuts," Morrell said. "I have to pull for Shaka. ... We were together there for a year at Clemson before he left to go to Florida. He is the only reason I got the job there. Obviously Coach

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