



PRO BASKETBALL

Kevin Love's Signature Pass Is Inspired by the Past

By SCOTT CACCIOLA DEC. 27, 2015

CLEVELAND — Whenever Kevin Love grabs a defensive rebound, he goes through a series of calculations. First, he spins to look toward the opposite basket. Are any of his teammates with the Cleveland Cavaliers ahead of the defense? If LeBron James has his hand up, for example, that is an instant cue for Love to make one of his favorite plays: the long outlet pass.

“If I see LeBron with any sort of advantage,” Love said, “I’m going to throw it.”

Absent an undefended James, Love continues with his mental checklist. Starting from the far end of the court, he searches for the next available teammate — essentially a process of elimination. He likes to get the ball to Kyrie Irving near midcourt so that Irving can use his dribbling skills to create offense against disorganized defenders.

Above all, Irving and the team’s other guards know they should resist the urge to come back to the ball, at least when Love, a 6-foot-10 power forward, has it in his possession. He prefers to lead them with his two-handed chest passes, a rare and sometimes overlooked advantage for a team that wants easy baskets in transition.

“I’ve never seen an outlet passer like Kevin Love, except when I was kid watching Wes Unseld play,” Cavaliers Coach David Blatt said.

It is no coincidence. The roots of Love’s ability to throw the ball 75 feet down the court, with precision and velocity, can be traced to his father, Stan Love, and

specifically to the two seasons that Stan Love spent playing alongside Unseld with the Baltimore Bullets in the early 1970s. Unseld, a 6-foot-7 center, was an exceptional outlet passer, and his teammates — Stan Love among them — benefited from his largess.

The same has been true of the Cavaliers, who, despite losing two straight, are 19-9 entering their game Monday night against the Phoenix Suns. The mere threat of Kevin Love connecting with teammates on court-length passes is an ever-present danger for opponents.

“Obviously, you have to know the score and the speed of the game,” Love said. “But other than that, it’s just a feel.”

Before he could even shoot the ball with good form, Love learned as a child how to throw a solid outlet pass, he said. It was inside knowledge passed down from his father, who would tape targets on walls so that Kevin could throw chest pass after chest pass. He also did exercises designed to strengthen his hands and wrists, the effects of which have lingered.

“Strong, strong hands,” said Rob McClanaghan, Love’s trainer. “I think that’s a major key here. He was doing fingertip push-ups with his dad going back to his youth days.”

McClanaghan cited another important factor: Love’s standing as one of the top rebounders in the league.

“If you can’t get a rebound, there’s no outlet pass,” McClanaghan said. “It’s all tied together.”

Love, who is averaging 17.1 points, 10.7 rebounds and 2.5 assists for the Cavaliers this season, said he actually grew up shooting with two hands, as if he were throwing a chest pass. It was not until he was 10 or 11, he said, when he spent an entire summer practicing proper shooting mechanics, that he ditched his improvised form. But the chest pass remained his foundation.

Love, who detailed his approach in an interview last season, also said he had good role models growing up in the Portland area — former Trail Blazers like Bill

Walton and Arvydas Sabonis, big men who were adept passers. And, of course, Love heard all about Unseld from his father, who would dig up game films of his former teammate.

“It was amazing,” Love said. “He’d get a rebound and just throw these long, high bombs.”

Unseld recalled developing his skills as a young player at Seneca High School in Louisville, Ky. As a freshman, he played for a coach who had his team partake in pinpoint passing drills. That often meant hitting spots on a wall from distances as far away as halfcourt.

The next season, with the varsity, Unseld recognized right away that the team was led by two high-octane players named Mike Redd and Dave Cosby. Unseld expected his shot attempts to be limited. So if he was going to contribute, he had to find a niche.

“I had to do something,” Unseld said in a telephone interview. “I realized that if I could rebound the ball and get it to them, we would be quite successful.”

Unseld began to take pride in his knack for throwing deep outlet passes, hitting Redd and Cosby in stride for uncontested layups. Unseld also found that there were ancillary benefits.

“I used to tell them that I enjoyed doing it because I didn’t have to run down the court,” he said. “I could save my energy.”

Like Unseld, Love favors throwing outlet passes with two hands. A one-handed baseball pass can go off target in a hurry. In addition, Love said, it requires a long windup, which can give opponents an extra half-beat to recover and defend downcourt. But by throwing the ball with two hands, from his chest, Love reduces the likelihood that they will intercept the pass.

“If you were to take anybody, really, and ask them how far they can pass it with a flick of the wrists, a lot of people couldn’t even get it to halfcourt,” said Joe Harris, a reserve guard with the Cavaliers. “It’s remarkably difficult.”

Unseld does not consider outlet passing a lost art, he said, because he has never been convinced that enough players ever practiced the skill for it be considered an art in the first place. There are notable exceptions, of course. No player, Unseld said, was a more effective outlet passer than Bill Russell. But it is not for everyone.

“I used to watch a lot of players — and I played with some — who would never throw an outlet pass,” Unseld said. “They could if they wanted to — they had as much ability and strength and knowledge that I had. But the difference is, when you throw that outlet pass, you’re not going to get the ball back. So they would rebound the ball and they would hold it, give it to a guard to dribble it up, and then post up and get the ball back so they could score. It just depends on how you look at the game.”

In Love, Unseld sees a kindred spirit, even if he dismissed the suggestion that he had something to do with it.

“I can’t sit here and pat myself on the back,” Unseld said. “That young man has done the work himself.”

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