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Freshman Khaila Donaldson leads Howard in kills as they head into the MEAC



by [Tiamoyo Harris](#)

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After wrapping up its regular season last Friday in a 3-0 loss to New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT), the Howard University volleyball team secured the No. 2 seed in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference tournament, facing North Carolina A&T in the first round. NJIT may have ended the team's nine-game winning streak, but it didn't come close to tarnishing Howard's successful season as the Lady Bison concluded the regular season 11-1 in the MEAC and 18-10 overall.

As they head to the MEAC tournament, the Lady Bison are hoping to advance past the semifinals — where they lost to Hampton last season — and make a push for the championship. One valuable asset the Lady Bison have is a player who is fourth in the conference in kills, averaging 2.73 digs per set, .63 blocks per set, and has started in 26 of the 28 matches this season. Against George Mason in the season-opener, she threw down 21 kills.

Her name is Khaila Donaldson.

"Playing volleyball helped me get acclimated to life here at Howard," said Donaldson, a freshman Vernon Hills, Illinois, native. "I love being the backbone of the team. With outside [hitter,] you pass and you hit. You're that player that's expected to just keep the ball in play."

The first time she caught head coach Shaun Kupferberg's eye was during her junior year playing for her club team, Rolling Thunder. He has seen those same skills that brought her to Howard improve even more from her junior year in high school to the end of her first collegiate season.

"Her passing skills have gotten a lot better, and her hitting skills have gotten smarter," Kupferberg said. "She's learning when to be aggressive, and when to hit shots. She was a great fit for Howard. Academically, she's a good student."

Academics are why one of the team's key players is technically considered a walk-on. Donaldson is a recipient of the Capstone scholarship from the university. As a finance major, she hopes to work with a Fortune 500 company in the future and possibly try her hand in investment banking.

"It wasn't until we visited Howard. I had never seen that reaction in her," Khaila's father Kevin Donaldson said. "In the School of Business, she saw in Ms. [Karen] Nash someone who was committed to her. We visited Georgia Tech, Harvard, Notre Dame and some other schools, but no school was able to convey that commitment to Khaila. I knew [Howard] was the right school."

The freshman outside hitter has made headlines throughout the season having been selected to the second-team all-conference and named MEAC Rookie of the Week three times. However, it is not only her individual skills that make her popular amongst her teammates.

"She's a really good team player so she has really good chemistry with the team," sophomore middle blocker Janaya Hampton said. "She's not like one of those all-star players that doesn't mesh well."

Of all Donaldson's teammates, there's a special group she looks up to on the court.

"Our seniors have inspired me," Donaldson said. "They do a lot for the team and they've worked really hard to get to this point, so my gift to them for graduating is playing my best and playing my heart out."

In every single match this season, Donaldson has been on the court, and she's been one of the few players who can play all the way around. Even when she is substituting for one of her senior teammates, they don't mind taking tips from the freshman.

"During the senior night game, I went in for her back row and she helped me a lot on the court," senior defensive specialist Alexis Skinner said. "She's the

most mature freshman I've ever seen. I do think the team will be left in good hands."

The Lady Bison are focused on the MEAC tournament in Baltimore this weekend and Kupferberg will not change the lineup because of Khaila's freshman status.

"Our players earn their spots, and if she earned her spot at the end of the year, she's obviously played well throughout the year. It's going to the same games with the same teams," Kupferberg said. "She's one of those mainstays that's going to be in there for a while."

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