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KUs Chase Buford and Texas Alexis Wangmene share special bond

By J. BRADY McCOLLOUGH
The Kansas City Star

AUSTIN, Texas | Longhorns freshman Alexis Wangmene misses his brother most when he's in his dorm room playing Xbox 360.

Three years ago, when Wangmene moved to the United States from Cameroon to live with the family of San Antonio Spurs general manager and former KU assistant R.C. Buford, he spoke little to no English. Video games were one of the only ways Wangmene could connect with Buford's 16-year-old son, Chase.

Their battles in EA Sports' FIFA soccer game became legendary. Chase, now a freshman walk-on at Kansas, would be the U.S. team. Wangmene (pronounced Juan-MEN-ee), naturally, would play with Cameroon.

"That was something that didn't take a lot of verbal communication," Chase says, "but still a lot of interaction. That did kind of bring us close, the friendly competition."

Buford and Wangmene got a chance to hang out on Sunday in Austin, the night before their teams will battle for footing in the Big 12 standings on ESPN's "Big Monday." You can bet the trash-talking began over Xbox.

"Every weekend when I'm in my room, trying to play Xbox," Wangmene says, "I wish I could play with Chase."

The whole Buford family will be at the Frank Erwin Center tonight. They'll be hard to miss for the television cameras. Beth Buford, the mom, and C.C., the little sis, will be wearing half-KU, half-UT jerseys. On the back, one says, "Wang-ord." The other, "Buf-mene."

"I've been looking forward to this date for a long time," Beth Buford says.

Chase Buford and Wangmene grew up on opposite sides of the globe, both without a brother. They lived well into their teens without ever knowing what it would be like, and both always wished they had one. Chase certainly never thought his brother would be a 6-foot-8 African. But in the summer of 2004, R.C. and Beth started thinking about bringing over a child from the NBA's Basketball Without Borders outreach program.

They went to Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2004 and first met Alexis (pronounced with a silent S). R.C. had three qualifications for which boy he would bring home. First, he had to be Chase's age. Second, he had to be tall — you know, someone who Chase could practice against. And lastly, he had to be from a country with a reputation for giving out visas without a lot of red tape. Alexis had all of those things, and then there was his personality.

"He had this huge smile on his face," Beth says. "He seemed to be so positive."

On Christmas Eve of 2004, Wangmene arrived in the states for good. He spoke only French, and none of the Bufords spoke the language. An English tutor would come to the house every Saturday and play translator so that the Bufords could get to know more about their new family member.

Eventually, details about Wangmene's life in Cameroon would trickle out. Like how most kids there played soccer, handball or volleyball before basketball. Or how his maternal grandfather was the chief of his Toupouri tribe and that Alexis was next in line to be the tribe's leader.

Funny, but Wangmene just wanted to play basketball and get an education.

"It was kind of a free life," Wangmene says. "As many wives as you can have, all the free land, you can decide whatever you want to decide. But that's not really what I want. I'd rather pursue my dream."

Wangmene says that Chase went out of his way to make him feel at home, even though they couldn't understand each other at first.

"Chase was always with his friends, but he still found the time to come and ask me if I was OK, if I needed anything," Wangmene says. "He was really trying to make me feel as comfortable as possible."

Before long, Wangmene started picking up on Chase's tastes. Things like, believe it or not, country music. But Alexis wasn't the only one that was learning new things.

"I've learned a lot from Lexi," Chase says. "He opened my eyes to a whole different world. It's funny because we're really similar even though we grew up in very different extremes."

Now, after having a brother for three years, there's one thing Chase and Alexis can agree on: It never gets old being called "bro."

"We both saw it as a brother we never had," Chase says. "It's been real neat. Not many people get that chance."

No. 4 Kansas at No. 12 Texas

- **WHEN/WHERE:** 8 tonight in Austin, Texas
- **TV/RADIO:** ESPN; KCSP (610 AM).

To reach J. Brady McCollough, e-mail jmccollough@kcstar.com

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