Nick Richards and Immanuel Quickley weren’t viewed as star players coming into the year. They were seen as guys that would assist the lead act of point guard Ashton Hagans, grad transfer Nate Sestina and top recruits Tyrese Maxey and Kahlil Whitney – remember him? – to the pinnacle Kentucky hasn’t reached since 2012.

Four months later, the Jamaican junior and sophomore from Maryland, have become the most important pieces to Kentucky’s quest.

Richards came to Lexington in 2017, playing a supporting role for a team that reached the Sweet Sixteen as a five seed, yet didn’t advance as deep as many felt it should. Then, he took an even further back seat as P.J. Washington emerged, turning into one of the best players in the SEC and an eventual NBA lottery pick.

But he remained patient, went harder in practice, and stayed in the gym longer as he worked to improve for this season. The results have been dramatic (all stats are per game):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minutes</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Rebounds</th>
<th>Block</th>
<th>FG%</th>
<th>FT%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018-19</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-20</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>64.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While Richards’ jump was evident early on, Quickley’s became so as the season waned on. He wasn’t bad during November and December, but there wasn’t anything particularly special about his play either. Once the calendar flipped to 2020 though, something changed.

He hung a then-career high 23 points against Missouri to open January, followed with 15 points on the road versus Georgia, and added 19 more in a victory over Alabama. In the process, he made 12-of-17 threes, including eight in a row over portions of all three games.

He would score in double digits in the next twelve games, helping Kentucky go 10-2 as the first game against Florida came on the horizon. The Gators came into Rupp and played well as they led 44-41 with just under 14 minutes to play. The game looked like it would be a nail biter to the very end.

Then, Quickley went off, making back-to-back-to-back threes to turn the deficit into a decent lead, one the Cats wouldn’t relinquish. He finished with another career-high (26) and was named the SEC Player of the Week.

“The growth that he’s shown not just in shooting the basketball and making plays, but just mentally being sure of who he is as a player... he came a long way,” assistant coach Kenny Payne said about Quickley in a press conference the day after the award was announced.

If you thought he was done there, you were mistaken. The next game – against Texas A&M in College Station – he became the first Kentucky player to score 30 points since Shai Gilgeous-Alexander in 2018, as he led Kentucky to a 69-60 win. He went a scorching 8-of-12 from behind-the-arc, and was the first UK player to make eight three’s in a game since Malik Monk.

Quickley also spent a lot more time in the gym, but he credits someone bigger than himself for his better play.

“Trusting in God, he’s been giving me a lot of confidence,” he said after the Alabama game.

“It’s all [God],” he later said after his performance against Florida.

While their paths to prominence in award discussions may have been slightly different, their end objective is the same: a national championship trophy.

“One of the goals when I came in was to win a national championship,” Richards said at media day, “And that’s one of my goals this season.”

“(The national championship’s) really what we’re trying to accomplish,” Quickley said after the first Florida game, “Just trying to continue to build for March and try to win this national championship.”

With them running Kentucky’s show, they just may do it.