



She's Got Game

Cappie Pondexter has her gaze firmly fixed on the Final Four. *By Bill Glavin*

Walking through the Rutgers Athletic Center in Piscataway, Cappie Pondexter (RC'05) points to the recently resanded wood floor with the new giant "R" logo and flashes her Magic Johnson-like smile. "When we get a decent crowd, we feed off their energy, and there is no better place to play in all of college basketball," says Pondexter, alluding to the intimacy of the RAC. "What we've got to learn to do this year is to play with that same passion on the road."

The Scarlet Knights women's basketball team, 10-6 on the road and 11-2 at home last season, ended its year with a 74-64 loss to the University of Georgia in Atlanta

in the second round of the NCAA tournament. "I still replay every minute of that game in my head," Pondexter said before the current season began. "If I had played better we would have won. It's definitely something I'm carrying into this season. I won't be satisfied until this team wins a national championship."

Pondexter's determination to play basketball after her collegiate career ends is clear from a WNBA logo and the words "The Future" tattooed on her right bicep. The 5'9", former National High School Player of the Year not only gave Scarlet Knight fans a taste of her game last season but also a preview of things to come. She helped engineer the most dramatic turnaround in Division I last season, improving Rutgers from 9-20 in 2001-2002 to

21-8 and a trip to the NCAA tournament. After averaging 18.3 points, 5.1 rebounds, and 4.9 assists per game, earning all-American honors, and becoming the first rookie in league history to earn first-team all-conference honors, she came into this season looking considerably leaner and meaner.

Pondexter, articulate and analytical about hoops, believes that defense last season was the key to the team's turnaround. Head coach Vivian Stringer's grueling full-court trap, a defensive strategy that demands manic intensity and a high degree of fitness, has turned Pondexter into a nutrition and exercise fanatic (see "Cappie at a Glance"). In 18 of its 21 victories in 2002-2003, Rutgers held its opponent to 60 or fewer points. Says Pondexter, "You may not have great offense, but you can achieve great things with defense, which is mostly about heart and desire."

Stringer says that she has come to love Pondexter like her own daughter. She calls the 2003 Big East Rookie of the Year her "most highly touted recruit in eight seasons at Rutgers." She adds, "every coach in America was lined up at her door."

Pondexter points to winning the state championship at John Marshall High School in Chicago in 1999

as one of the highlights of her life. She settled on Rutgers "because I felt I could really make a difference, not like at a school like Connecticut and Tennessee, where winning is assumed and you're just another cog in the wheel. When Coach Stringer came to recruit me, she talked about personal development, not just basketball. That was important to me."

Tasha Pointer, the charismatic point guard who helped lead the Scarlet Knights to a Final Four in the 1999-2000 season, was another reason Pondexter ended up on the Banks. "We lived in the same neighborhood and played on the same AAU team, even though Tasha is three years older than me," says Pondexter. "I couldn't help be impressed by how hard she worked."

Pondexter was devastated when she fell short of qualifying academically in her first year in 2002 and watched the team struggle. "Failing to qualify turned Cappie into someone determined to do well in

the classroom," says Stringer. Pondexter achieved a 2.8 average last year.

Behind Pondexter's infectious smile is a well balanced, extremely focused person, Stringer notes. "Players with the kind of talent Cappie possesses can self-destruct by trying to do too much, but she comes at the game in a very humble way," says the coach. "My biggest problem with Cappie is that she sometimes defers when we need her to take over. I don't believe there's a player in America who can stop her one-on-one."

Some of the top high school players in the country—reportedly joining the Knights next year—seem to agree with Stringer's assessment. Stringer credits Pondexter's personality and presence as major factors.

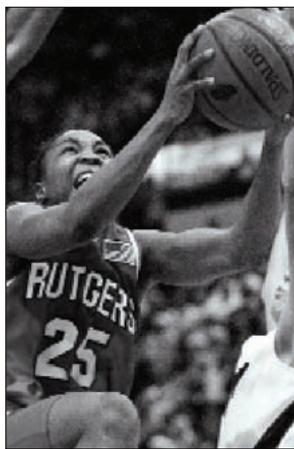
"Great players want to play with great players," says Stringer.

Pondexter credits her brother, Ronald Brown, with helping her develop her basketball skills. Brown, seven years older, would walk his kid sister home every day from school and then bring her with him to the park. "He watched me until my mom got home," says Pondexter, who idolized Michael Jordan. "When I could get into the game, I was playing against quicker, older boys," says Pondexter. "I had to learn to be aggressive and outthink them."

Also helping her game development is last summer's experience competing for USA Basketball on the international level. As cocaptain and starting point guard, she led the squad to a 7-1 record and a gold medal in the International Basketball Federation World Championship for Young Women. "There are professionals playing on that level, so the competition is very intense," says Pondexter, who hopes to play on the U.S. Olympic team and in the WNBA someday. "I hope to use my international experience to help Rutgers get to the Final Four, something that we're definitely capable of achieving."



PONDEXTER IS ESPECIALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO PLAYING LAST YEAR'S NATIONAL CHAMPION CONNECTICUT, WHERE SHE WILL MEASURE HERSELF AGAINST BACKCOURT RIVAL DIANA TAURASI, THE 2002-03 NATIONAL PLAYER OF THE YEAR.



• Two-time Illinois Miss Basketball in high school, the only player in history to win it twice. Career record of 118-4 at John Marshall High School in Chicago.

• A preseason candidate for the Wooden Women's Award and the Wade Trophy, both of which honor Division I's top female player.

• A member of the U.S. Junior National Team for the last four summers, including two under Geno Auriemma, head coach of the Scarlet Knights' biggest rival, the University of Connecticut.

• A junior with three years of athletic eligibility remaining.

• High score for 2002-2003 season: 31 points at Georgetown.

• Nutritional advice: No fast food or soda. Ground turkey, not beef. No carbohydrates. Lots of water. Don't eat after 8 p.m.

• Off-season fitness routine: Four days weight training. Running 1.5 miles in 10:45 three times a week. Sprints. Shooting, ball handling, footwork, and other fundamentals.

• Long-term goal: "I've always dreamed about playing professional basketball. That was my dream even before the WNBA existed."