

How Do You Get to March Madness?

Another successful season for the Scarlet Knights women's basketball team was no surprise—at least for the guys recruited to practice against them all season long. *By Bill Glovin*

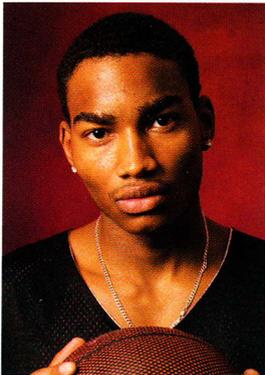
Ken Smith's old high school basketball teammates laughed when he told them that he was invited to practice with "girls," i.e., the Scarlet Knights women's basketball team. "I didn't know what to expect, but I found out fast how tremendously skilled they were," he says. "If they played my guys, I'd be getting the last laugh."

Michelle Edwards, director of basketball

operations for the women Scarlet Knights, assembles talented male "practice players" each fall to scrimmage against the nationally ranked women's team—a common practice nationwide among big-time women's programs. "The men are crucial," says Edwards. "We once invited the top male intramural team to play against us, and we couldn't match their size and strength. For improving your game, nothing compares

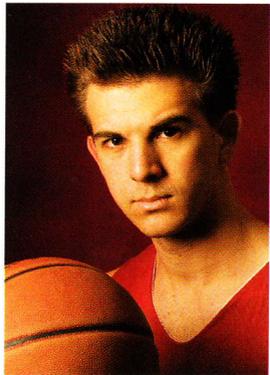
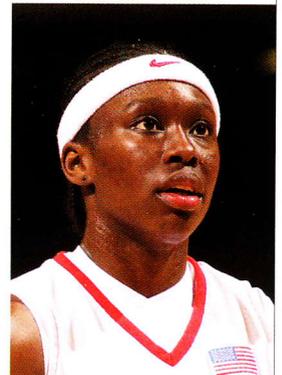
with going against superior competition."

Three male student-athletes who practiced against three stars on the women's team say that playing against the women helped their own games improve from their high school days. But the competition helped Matee Ajavon RC'08, Essence Carson RC'08, and senior Kia Vaughn improve their games, too, in the Scarlet Knights' pursuit of a championship.



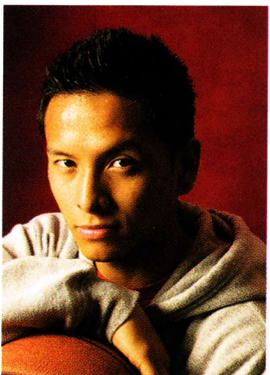
Ken Smith, a 6-2 sophomore majoring in civil engineering, helped Hamilton High School win a state championship during his senior year. Recruited by two Division III programs, he realized basketball wouldn't carry him as far as a Rutgers engineering degree would. Edwards spotted him playing pickup basketball at the Werblin Recreation Center and matched him against the 6-0 **Essence Carson**, who was drafted in April by the WNBA's New York Liberty as the seventh pick.

"Essence is so fundamentally sound," he says. "She never forces things and makes the extra pass. If I close her out on the perimeter, she blows by me. Defense is a mindset, and her attitude is: 'I'm intense and no one gets by me.' Her wingspan and athleticism help make her a great defender. What you don't see at games or on TV is that she's a great leader on the court, always helping teammates with their spacing and confidence, and encouraging them to work hard."



Andrew Chytrek, a 6-2 sophomore who hasn't declared a major, averaged 16 points a game in his senior year at High Tech High School in North Bergen. Chelsea Newton, the 2006-07 director of player development, invited him to practice against 6-4 center **Kia Vaughn**.

"Kia is very difficult for me in the post," he says. "None of the guys can handle her really, so we take turns. I've rarely seen anyone play so consistently hard. Her intensity is inspiring. When she messes up, she makes up for it by playing harder, and it can get pretty rough. She is very strong and intimidating. She's always communicating on the court and is now more of a leader. She's a pretty good shooter from the foul line and in. If she learned to stick the three, she'd be unstoppable."



Sonam Lama, a 5-9 sophomore majoring in prebusiness, wants to make the Scarlet Knights men's team this fall as a walk-on. When he failed to do so last fall, assistant coach Darren Savino recommended that he practice with the women's team. It was a blessing: Lama, a former point guard at Saint Peter's Prep in Jersey City, played against the 5-8 All-American **Matee Ajavon**, and his game soared.

Lama calls Ajavon, who was drafted by the WNBA's Houston Comets as the fifth overall pick, "a great shooter from 15 feet. Deny her the outside shot, and she explodes to the basket. On defense, her quick feet make her very tough to get around. She rarely shows emotion. I stole the ball from her once, and she looked real angry. When she started laughing and said 'good job,' I realized she was putting me on. Few men I've played against are better."

