

SCARLETS SPORTS

PREVIEWS AND RECAPS OF VARSITY, CLUB, AND INTRAMURAL ATHLETICS

The Fame Game

As part of her teaching duties at Cheyney State in the early 1970s, C. Vivian Stringer had to teach swimming. Terrorized by the water, she always made a point to corral her students in the shallow end of the pool. One day, a student started to drift toward the deep water. Mortified, Stringer grabbed the shepherd's crook and managed to rescue the student. Afterward, Stringer was furious with herself. Why hadn't she done more to conquer her fear of water? This could have been a disaster. Later that week, she slipped into the deserted aquatic center, climbed the ladder to the diving platform high over the deep end, and forced herself to jump. ▶▶▶

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN EMERSON

The Fame Game

It was a defining moment for Stringer, the life lesson of life lessons. Backing down from challenges and using fear as an excuse for inaction, she realized, was not an option. The lesson has been one of the touchstones of Stringer's personal and professional success, which was roundly recognized on September 11 when she became one of the few women to be enshrined in the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts, alongside NBA immortals Michael Jordan, David Robinson, John Stockton, and Jerry Sloan. She called the honor "breathtaking; I needed a week by myself to just reflect on what it meant," she said, wistfully referring to the frenetic pace that coaching a Division I sports team and her celebrity status demand.

Stringer's accomplishments during her 37 years of coaching women's basketball are extraordinary: the first woman to take three college programs to a Final Four game (most recently, coaching Rutgers to the 2007 national championship game against the University of Tennessee); 804 wins; three-time national coach of the year; 20 NCAA tournament appearances; and a highlight reel of improbable victories when her teams were decided underdogs. The faith and courage she has demonstrated off the court are perhaps even more inspiring: from raising a daughter stricken with spinal meningitis, to losing both her father and husband in their 40s, to battling breast cancer, to her demonstration of poise in defense of her players following the racist remarks of radio personality Don Imus in 2007.

Her strength comes from more than overcoming the obstacles that have been thrown in her path, insurmountable as they may seem to have been. There are her parents, who instilled the bedrock values of hard work and self-respect, and the responsibility she felt as the eldest of six brothers and sisters for her siblings and for her own children, assistant coaches, and players whom she personally recruited.

On the sideline, you can frequently catch Stringer scowling, the game face of a perfectionist; what you won't see are the random acts of kindness far from the hardwood floor that she bestows on her girls, who admire and love her. Yes, she is intense and uncompromising and demanding and has no tolerance for anything less than all-out effort. Her fever-pitch emotions translate as well into deeply caring for her brood of young women. Fun to be around when she reveals her silly side, she will do anything to get her players' attention, even if it means entering a meeting wearing a sheet and sandals and carrying a tablet, as if she were Moses coming down from a mountaintop.

Stringer's ascent from growing up in a small coal-mining town in western Pennsylvania, where she became one of the first black cheerleaders at German Township High, to her accomplishments as a collegiate head coach who has earned the loyalty of three generations of players and the respect of opposing coaches, is indeed remarkable. But her example of how to conduct oneself is just as impressive. "When I was at Rutgers," says Jolette Law, a former All-American point guard and assistant to Stringer, and now head coach of the University of Illinois, "they called me 'Little Viv.' I can't think of a higher compliment."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN EMERSON

A Man with a Plan

Tim Perneti, Rutgers' new athletic director, intends to use technology to disseminate sports among the university's far-flung fan base while coupling scholarship with athletic excellence.

"I began on Twitter [twitter.com/RUathletics] shortly after starting in April," says Tim Perneti RC'93, SCILS'95, Rutgers' new director of intercollegiate athletics in New Brunswick and, at age 38, the youngest athletic director in the Big East Conference. "It's great for connecting with fans and congratulating student-athletes for their accomplishments." Perneti, formerly a radio analyst for the Scarlet Knights football team, for which he played as tight end from 1989 to 1993, became vice president of programming for College Sports Television (CSTV) in 2003 and later rose to executive vice president in 2006. He played football as well at Ramapo High School under Rutgers football coach Greg Schiano. Perneti oversees 24 men's and women's intercollegiate teams.

Rutgers Magazine: You were the executive vice president of the CBS College Sports Network [formerly CSTV]. Why Rutgers now?

Tim Perneti: You chase your passion, not the job. The relationships that I developed while a student-athlete changed my life. I got a great education, started on the path to an advanced degree, and met my wife here. I'm in a position to create an even better environment for student-athletes.

RM: What was your perception of Rutgers while at CBS and as a radio analyst for Rutgers football?

TP: Rutgers was a complicated place in a complicated state, but has great potential and has only scratched the surface.

RM: What lessons from building a college sports network apply to being the athletic director?

TP: You form a vision, articulate that vision, and don't shy away from making tough decisions.