

Rutgers' Rising Stars

The Center of Attention

Kia Vaughn, the Scarlet Knights' blue-chip center, had a stellar sophomore season, culminating in her big role in the NCAA tournament. Watch out. She has bigger plans.



Count on Kia Vaughn to be first in line to cut down the net in Tampa when the Scarlet Knights women's basketball team wins the NCAA championship on April 8. "We know, deep down, that we could have won it all last year," says Vaughn, ripped and lean after a summer of international basketball. "That is all the motivation we need this year. Now, we are going to go get it."

Vaughn is the team's 6-4 center, the assassin in the paint, "the killer," as former assistant coach Jollette Law labeled her. No one is more important for the Knights' chances than Vaughn. In her sophomore season last year, she finally lived up to her potential, all the formidable talent that experts had foreseen when Rutgers beat Connecticut in the recruiting sweepstakes to land the blue-chip center from the Bronx.

In the NCAA tournament last spring, Vaughn pulled down 9 rebounds in the Knights' monster upset over number-one Duke. She hounded 6-6 star center Sylvia Fowles into irrelevance in the semi-final blowout over LSU. And, with her 20 points and 10 rebounds, Vaughn almost single-handedly gave the Knights a real chance of beating Tennessee in the final. That's a lot of success for one person, and Vaughn is doing her best to keep her head screwed on tight. She keeps herself humble by knowing there is still work to do. "Look how close we came, and now everyone's back," she says. "Then consider that all the freshmen who played key roles are now sophomores." She's right: the possibilities are scary.

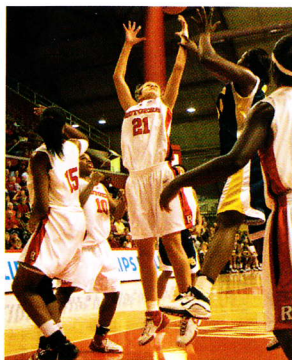
Vaughn and senior forward Essence Carson helped the USA basketball team win the FIBA U21 World Championship in Moscow

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Hoop Dreams

The women's basketball team is going to run the table this year. Here are eight reasons why the championship will be theirs.

It's not gonna be easy. Who said it would be? After all, the Lady Vols of the University of Tennessee, who beat the Scarlet Knights in the national championship game, have almost everyone back, namely one of the greatest women hoopsters on the planet, Candace Parker. But, a hungry and wise Rutgers team has its top players returning, too. Get ready to witness the Scarlet Knights' raising the trophy in Tampa, Florida, on the night of April 8, 2008, when the championship will be decided.



1. The Stringer Theory: C. Vivian Stringer, the first Division I coach to take three teams to the Final Four, plays her team like a fiddle. Last season, after the abysmal 2-4 start, she put her foot down, had former Knights give a marathon clinic on defense, and her team went on a tear.

2. Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise: Matee Ajavon, a 5-8 All-American scoring machine from Newark, started last season on the bench with a new titanium rod in her left shin. By the time the Big East Conference Tournament began, she had her game back. After scoring 27 points in the final to help the U.S. team win the Pan American games in Brazil this summer, the sky's the limit this year.

3. Are You Experienced?: "The best thing about freshmen is that they become sophomores," said the late Al McGuire, the legendary men's coach. Epiphanny Price and Brittany Ray—among the four key freshmen last season—return, but with a championship game to their names.

4. Killer Instinct Always: That's what K-I-A stands for and, after dropping 35 pounds for the 2006-07 season, Kia Vaughn lived up to it. By the time of the NCAA tourney, the junior 6-4 center was dominant. Remember her against Sylvia Fowles in the Knights' 59-35 victory over LSU in the Final Four? Or her 20 points and 10 rebounds in the final? What's not to like?

5. Prodigal Daughter Returns: Tasha Pointer RC'00, the Knights sassy point guard who led Rutgers to a Final Four in 2000, takes over for assistant Jolette Law, now the head coach at the University of Illinois. Law soothed sore egos when Stringer meted doses of "tough love." Having coached at Columbia and Xavier, Pointer should fill that role just fine.

6. World Domination: After a summer playing the world's best, how can you not improve? Senior forward Essence Carson and Vaughn helped the USA basketball team finish 8-0, winning gold in the FIBA U21 World Championship. Meanwhile, Ajavon helped the 12-member USA squad win the Pan American Games in Brazil.

7. Every Breath They Take: The Knights three-part conditioning test is essential for playing Stringer's zone press and man-to-man defense. Team strength and conditioning coach Mike Johansen prepares players for months before the September fitness test. Fail that and, well, take a deep breath, move to the back of the line, and start over.

8. The RAC-ket: In medieval times, the rack was a torture device that instilled fear (and pain). At Rutgers, the RAC—aka the Louis Brown Athletic Center—horrifies opponents: the Knights are 35-3 there over the last three seasons. The RAC amplifies sound to make the arena feel like it holds double its 8,000-seat capacity.

Vaughn

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during the summer. Meanwhile, Matee Ajavon starred on the elite USA team that won the Pan American Games in Brazil. "It was eye-opening to match up against foreign players who were extremely physical," she says. "Plus, I lost another four or five pounds."

Last season, after losing weight in the preseason, she improved her averages to 12.8 points and 9.3 rebounds a game—almost double her freshman year numbers. Her lightness of foot led to her blocking 92 shots last season—second best in Knights' history. But on Coach C. Vivian Stringer's teams, stats are just part of the story. "Coach has instilled in me a love for playing defense," says Vaughn. "Defense has made us closer. It all comes down to, who has your back? When Epiphanny [Prince] came here, she had the reputation of a scoring machine. But, damn, Coach even turned that girl on to defense."

Vaughn doesn't suspect—she knows—that Stringer won't let the team be satisfied with last year's successes. The team's out-of-conference schedule, which includes Tennessee, Duke, and LSU, is brutal, among the toughest in the country. "Last year's run proved to us that Coach's methods work. Half of the team were freshmen, so Coach was somewhat lenient. That won't be the case this year," Vaughn says, rolling her eyes.

With Stringer's dreaded fitness test approaching, Vaughn is improving her stamina and taking 500 shots a day. "Sticking that 15-footer requires mechanics and muscle memory," she says. "If I can make people come out and guard me, that will open the paint up for everyone else." The fame that will come from "killer" knocking down jumpers could be the key to meeting her idol, Beyoncé. Once Vaughn takes the Knights to the promised land.