

Full Court Press

For their sport and for themselves, these three athletes know there's only one way to get respect—demand it.

As one of the top point guards in the nation, Tasha Pointer knows how to keep her opponents in their place—whether they're players or journalists: "While you're critiquing us, I'll be critiquing you," she warns me, displaying the same feistiness she's known for on the court. "Sometimes we smile when we don't feel like smiling, or talk when we don't feel like talking."

That kind of verbal confrontation—better known as trash talk in the basketball world—is enough to stop a conversation dead in its tracks. But I don't take it personally: Pointer is doing what she does every day on the basketball floor—setting the tone and telling her teammates where they need to be. From the time she and teammates Tomora Young and Shawnetta Stewart—the nucleus of the nationally ranked Scarlet Knights women's team—first picked up basketballs they have heard and delivered their share of trash talk on the urban playgrounds where they were raised: Pointer in Chicago, Young in Red Bank, and Stewart in Philadelphia.

As teenagers, they got it from boys who challenged their rights to step on the court. Now they hear more of it—this time as carefully crafted opinion delivered by male media pundits and patronizing naysayers—as they fight to make women's college basketball a sport that draws spectators—and respect.

Growing up, these three athletes never took to the notion that so many others had for them: that

RIGHT VS. MIGHT:
LAST SUMMER AT
MICHAEL JORDAN'S
NIKE BASKETBALL
CAMP, 5' 6" SCARLET
KNIGHT POINT GUARD
TASHA POINTER
CHALLENGED
THE NBA LEGEND
TO A GAME
OF ONE-ON-ONE.

Photograph by Bill Ballenberg

they were supposed to spend their free time playing Barbies. They may have cuddled their share of stuffed animals, but they always preferred cradling a basketball—even when it meant coping with the macho swaggering that is so much a part of street hoops. And when the boys delivered a hard foul, told them not to shoot, or excluded them from the action, they marched back the next day to prove they *did* belong.

But what goes around comes around: The boys who once shunned them now read about them in newspapers and see them on TV—the *girls* are the stars now, players on one of the most accomplished women's basketball teams in Rutgers history. If not for hoops, the three point out, none of them would be pursuing their educations at Rutgers.

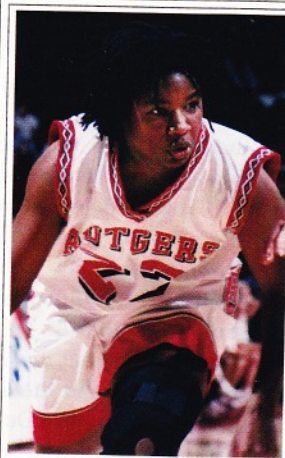
Young (RC'00), the lone senior starter, battled back from a knee injury to help her team to a 26-5 regular season record. She grew up, she says, "the baby" in a family that includes three older brothers. A sociology major, she has more than overcome the inconsistent play and periodic loss of her starting role that marked the early part of her career. Last year Young was named first-team All Big East and, along with Pointer, Co-player of the Year by the Metropolitan Writers Association. "I've always had an 'only-girl' syndrome because I was the only girl in my family and the only girl on the court," says Young, known to her teammates as "T." "The guys used to kick me off the court all the time."

A junior majoring in administration of justice, Stewart (RC'00) has been dubbed "Shy" by her teammates but is better known to Rutgers fans as "Baby Barkley," after one of her idols, the NBA's Charles Barkley. Despite growing up in an unathletic family, after getting her hands on a basketball she developed a deadly outside shot. At University City High School in Philadelphia, Stewart shattered the legendary Wilt Chamberlain's public-league scoring record with 2,501 career

points: "I'm the kind of person who liked to bang with the girls or the guys, I didn't care who it was," she says proudly. "I never looked for respect, I demanded it." But sometimes—like when she was left in tears because the

boys in the schoolyard wouldn't let her play—her demands fell on deaf ears.


Pointer (RC'01) grew up with four protective, basketball-playing brothers. "When I was little, my father and some of his very tall friends would take me to the Y, put me on their shoulders, and let me dunk the ball," recalls the 5' 6" Pointer. After school, basketball and her brothers were her ticket out of the house. One brother, Dyonne, eight years older and a star in the neighborhood, always insisted that his kid sister play. "But it was clear that my job was to either throw Dyonne an alley-oops pass or get him the ball. I rarely ever shot, and, as you can imagine,



TOMORA YOUNG

THE SENIOR STARTER RETURNED FROM EARLY-SEASON KNEE PROBLEMS TO HELP THE SCARLET KNIGHTS FINISH I6-I IN THE BIG EAST. OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, SHE PLANS TO RECHARGE HER BATTERIES AND REST HER KNEES BEFORE TAKING A SHOT AT TURNING PRO.

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 **BOX SCORE**

A Sampling as of March 12

Swimming and Diving

Senior Michael Jarocz broke three school diving records. At the Big East championships, the men's swimming team broke four school records and the women's team broke two.

NEW BRUNSWICK

Women's Gymnastics (10-9)

In an EAGL meet, team records were set on the bars, floor, and all-around performance. School records were broken by junior Rachel Ciarlante for floor exercises and junior Dana Koga for her work on the balance beam.

Men's Basketball (19-12)

The Knights capped the season with a win over Pittsburgh in the first round of the Big East tournament and a win over Hofstra in the first round of the NIT. Freshman Dahn-tay Jones made the Big East's All-Rookie team, and Geoff Billet completed his career as the team's ninth all-time leading scorer.

Women's Fencing

Roopa Rangi walked onto the team and exceeded expectations: The freshman ranked

24th nationally and placed fifth in the Pan American games for fencers under 20.

Men's Wrestling (9-4-1)

In the EIWA championships, sophomore Thomas Petko placed fourth in the heavyweight class and finished the year with a No. 20 ranking from Amateur Wrestling News.

Women's Volleyball (29-6)

Head coach Ralph Larsen shared NJAC Coach of the Year honors as the Scarlet Raiders won the conference championship and earned a bid to the ECAC tournament. Freshman Sylvia Bisker was named conference Player of the Year.

NEWARK

Women's Basketball (8-16)

Despite a disappointing season, two seniors capped their careers: Maureen McGovern finished as the Lady Raptors' fifth all-time leading scorer with 1,151 points, and Carmen Harvey won ECAC and Metro NY/NJ Division Player of the Week.

CAMDEN

much older guys were always trying to rip me.”
 The obstacles in their paths began to dissipate when they started to play organized basketball. Once faced with all-female competition, the thousands of hours competing against bigger and stronger boys in the schoolyard gave them a huge advantage. At the same time, women’s basketball was on the rise: Title IX legislation years earlier had helped even the playing field by prohibiting gender discrimination in athletics. High-profile women’s programs at Connecticut and Tennessee drew huge crowds and television and media exposure. Former college stars like Rutgers standout Sue Wicks (RC’88)—forced to play professionally overseas for years—returned to the United States to play in one of two new professional leagues.

But for every two steps ahead for women’s basketball there has been a step back. One professional league folded recently, and, in many parts of the country, women’s college basketball has failed to draw. Considering the Scarlet Knights’ Cinderella dash into the Sweet 16 round of the NCAA tournament in the 1997–98 season and this year’s ongoing battle with perennial powerhouse Connecticut for the Big East Conference championship, home attendance was disappointing.

The only sell-outs of the year were a midweek January nail-biter against Connecticut, which Rutgers lost by one point, and a loss to defending national champion Tennessee at Madison Square Garden. For most of the home schedule, the RAC was half to three-quarters empty. Even the Big East Conference tournament showdown with nationally ranked Notre Dame failed to fill the seats at the RAC. The trio—all of whom have professional aspirations—know that the jury is still out on whether the Rutgers program and women’s professional basketball can generate consistent revenues.

Still, they point out, this season brought increased television exposure and a slight increase in attendance over the previous year. Rutgers was also second in

attendance in the Big East and first among women’s teams in the New York metropolitan area. Stewart, who is hopeful that the number of fans coming to games will rise again next year, is prepared to do all she can to

make it happen. All three have periodically gone into

the stands to personally greet people and thank them for coming, a gesture that hasn’t gone unnoticed.

“I thought it was absolutely wonderful; it tells me that the players truly appreciate that we are here,” says Estelle Hillman, 75, who hasn’t missed a home game since the Wicks era. Says Beth DeMauro, communications director for the Douglass College Alumnae Association, who attends games with her 13-year-old daughter: “Becky is just starting to play organized basketball and was thrilled to meet the players. She already sees them as role models.”

Pointer doesn’t agree with the premise that better competition would boost fan interest. Sure, half a dozen of their in- and out-of-conference games were won by 20 points or more, but so what? “There’s a double standard,” Pointer argues. “If it’s the men’s team blowing out the opposition, fans are jumping out of their skin and the line to get tickets is a mile long. Look at a place like Duke, where they win by 30 almost every game. Do you see any less fan interest?” Young chimes in: “Duke fans are going to be there no matter who the opponent is, and that’s how fans should be.”

Pointer can’t help but feel gender bias when she sees the RAC packed for men’s games. “Everyone wants to go see the men because they think they’re going to see slam dunks, but they’re lucky if they see four dunks in the game. There’s a perception that men play above the rim, but that’s not normally the case.” She claims to hardly notice the empty seats anymore: “When I signed my letter of intent, I didn’t say, ‘I’m only playing if we get 8,000 in the gym.’ I’m happy if the fans do come out, but I play off my own emotions. The crowd doesn’t pump my heart; I pump my own.”

When Coach C. Vivian Stringer was hired, she predicted that Rutgers women’s basketball would one day become “The Jewel of the East.” The only way to fulfill that prophecy may be for Rutgers to reach an NCAA Tournament Final Four, a task that is not only a considerable achievement, but one that comes with enormous pressure. “It doesn’t matter what your regular season record is, you always have to do better in the tournament than last year,” says Stewart. “If you don’t, the media and the fans consider the season a big disappointment.” Before this year’s tournament began, Young didn’t even want to consider elimination: “This is my last year; I want to go all the way.”

Pointer, the 1998 Big East Rookie of the Year, could have picked her school as one of the most sought-after high school points guards in the country. But the communication major chose Rutgers because of Stringer. Before her career is over, she expects to make her coach’s “Jewel of the East” prophecy come true: “Anything less than a national championship, I have a problem with. I don’t care what anyone’s expectations of me are. I know what I expect of myself.” □

SHAWNETTA STEWART



AFTER REFINING HER GAME AS A 13-YEAR-OLD AT C. VIVIAN STRINGER’S BASKETBALL CAMP IN IOWA, “BABY BARKLEY”—A 1998–99 FIRST TEAM ALL BIG EAST SELECTION—WAS THE FIRST PLAYER TO COMMIT TO RUTGERS WHEN STRINGER BECAME COACH IN 1995.

Senior Scarlet Knights forward Rob Hodgson capped an outstanding career when he was named Big East Scholar-Athlete of the Year.

