

Risper Reaches Out in the Community



JOHN RUSSELL

Jennifer Risper (second from right) poses with Vanderbilt grad Martha Earthman Hudson (left), Vanderbilt grad Calvin W. Fite (second from left) and former Belmont Chancellor Herbert C. Gabhard.

Their eyes light up when Jennifer Risper walks into the room. It's not because she plays basketball at Vanderbilt or that they've seen her playing on TV, it's because she is there to visit them.

Each day can seem much like the day that preceded it at an assisted-living home, which is what makes Risper's visits to The Blakeford at Green Hills that much more special for the residents.

Since January, Risper, a senior on the women's basketball team, has spent a few hours most every Monday and Wednesday, depending on the team's schedule, brightening the lives of the residents.

When Risper started volunteering her hours, she knew she was doing something for a good cause, but she didn't realize how large of an impact she had.

"They love it," Risper said. "I didn't know that they would appreciate it that much. I knew they would like it, but they love it."

One person Risper has built a special relationship with is Martha Earthman Hudson, a Vanderbilt graduate. Since Risper began visiting, Hudson has welcomed her with open arms and usually invites Risper to eat lunch with her.

"Jennifer is so sweet for coming over and visiting," Hudson said. "It just makes our day to see her."

Before volunteering at The Blakeford, Risper had never spent time at a retirement home. A devout Christian, the idea to visit a retirement center came to Risper while she was reading her Bible.

"I came across a verse in James that said you need to spend your time with widows and orphans," Risper said. "I don't even know how I found that verse, but I did, and I was like, 'wow, that is something I need to do.'"

Risper admits that she was a little bit hesitant and nervous at first when she arrived for the first time and met Blakeford Activities Coordinator Amy Bendle, but those nerves quickly turned to joy.

"I was nervous for a second, but once I walked in that first room and started a conversation, I was fine," said Risper, who was named SEC Defensive Player of the Year in 2009.

Bendle has witnessed firsthand how much of an impact Risper has had on everyone at the center.

"We just really enjoy having her come by, and it really brightens their day," Bendle said. "It is just great having someone who cares so much."

A native of Moreno Valley, Calif., Risper is unsure of what her plans will be after she graduates in May. She hopes to give basketball a shot for a few more years, but no matter where she ends up, she plans to continue volunteering because she knows she is making a difference in people's lives.

"I think (I am making a difference in their lives)," Risper said. "I

especially realize it when I'll visit with residents and their kids will come or somebody who always visits them will say, 'Oh my gosh, you made their day, you have no idea how hard today was for them.' Moments like that make me know I'm doing the right thing."

For as much of an impact as Risper is having on others, they are having just as much of an impact on her.

"It is not just me going out there and making their days, they are making mine, too." ■

Holiday Inn
Nashville Brentwood

Holiday Inn Nashville Brentwood located with 10 a short drive East Downtown Nashville. When your travels bring you to the Nashville area, be sure to choose the Holiday Inn Nashville Brentwood to your stay.

700 Old Hickory Boulevard, Brentwood, TN 37027
615.373.9900 Fax 615.373.3017 www.holidayinn.com/inn-brentwood

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



NCAA Women: Bilt To Win

Tuesday, March 24, 2009

By Randy Harrison

The legacy of Vanderbilt basketball 2009 is still being written, but it will include a chapter on how Jennifer Risper went into the land of the giants and bagged one big-game trophy after another.

The 5-foot-9 senior, pressed into post duty because of injuries, came up as big as ever Monday night — a fearless, relentless, career-high 27-point performance that led the fourth-seeded Commodores over Kansas State 74-61 at the Pit in NCAA Women's Tournament second-round play.

"Jennifer has just embraced this new role and been amazing with it," said Commodores forward Christina Wirth, who chipped in 24 points and had seven rebounds.

Vanderbilt (26-8) advances to its 14th appearance in the Sweet 16, this one a potential rematch of last year with top-seeded Maryland if the Terrapins protect their house and beat Mountain West Conference champion Utah tonight in College Park, Md.

Following Risper's example in perfect step, Vandy negated Kansas State's height advantage with its quickness, consistently winning the battle for loose balls to create a 33-24 rebounding edge.

And though both teams hit 27 buckets including five 3-pointers, Vandy created a niche at the free-throw line — 15-of-20 compared to 2-of-4 for Kansas State. It was the fallout of Kansas State's willingness to shoot jumpers while Vanderbilt was hellbent on going to the hoop.

None more so than Risper, whose drives, pump fakes and drop steps single-handedly fouled out KSU's Marlies Gipson.

"Her heart is so big even though she's undersized, and I understand how that goes," said Marlies Gipson, a 6-footer. "Her will to play the game is great."

Gipson otherwise had a solid 16 points and six rebounds. Ashley Sweat scored 17 to lead the Wildcats (25-8). All-America candidate point guard Shalee Lehning had a relatively quiet 10 points and four assists — nine off the 13 she had in the opening-round win over Drexel.

Risper's previous career high in scoring was 20. She was named SEC Defensive Player of the Year, but that was primarily flaunting her perimeter skills. Then when 6-foot sophomore forward Hannah Tuomi went down late in the season with a stress fracture in her left ankle, someone had to step up. Risper showed a glimpse of those strengths with three shutdown defensive performances in the SEC Tournament, won by Vandy.

Commodores coach Melanie Balcomb said the key to Risper's changed role has been her buying in to her advantages, not fixating on her disadvantages.

"I am 5-9, and I have a lot more guard skills than post skills," said Risper. "So I just tried to take advantage of the things I'm good at, which is driving and getting to the hole. I've worked out a lot with my trainer down there so I can be stronger and finish a lot of shots."

Wirth had 16 points and Risper 15 in the first half, but their Commodore teammates were shooting 2-of-13 at that point and weren't involved so much offensively. That changed dramatically in the second half, when Vanderbilt's transition turned up and the rest of the four-guard lineup, particularly Lauren Lueders (five points, four assists) got it going.

"They were very effective off the dribble and beat us in one-on-one matchups," said Wildcats coach Deb Patterson. "But you have to spread the defense against them because of their shooting skills, particularly Wirth. They ended up shooting an unbelievable percentage of layups."

Vandy also is 4-0 in NCAA Tournament play at the Pit, covering its appearances here in the last two postseasons. Albuquerque is also a first-round host next season, which is a point that Balcomb caught.

"See you guys next year," she said as she left the dais at the postgame news conference.

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



Commodores All 4 a Classic Win

Tuesday, March 24, 2009

By Rick Wright

History strongly suggests the Sweet Sixteen is as far as the fourth-seeded Vanderbilt Commodores will go. But maybe they can make some history of their own.

In either case, the Commodores' energetic, hard-earned victory over Kansas State Monday night is what fourth seed-vs.-fifth seed games have come to represent: the best competition the NCAA Tournament has to offer.

Vandy beat the Wildcats at the Pit, 74-61, in a battle between the fourth- and fifth-seeded teams in the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament's Raleigh Regional.

A four-five game is a classic tournament matchup — the gateway to the Sweet Sixteen, usually between well-matched teams. The past 10 years, a four has faced a five in the women's tournament 30 of a 40 possible times. The fourth seeds won 17 of those, the fifth seeds 13.

Monday, Vanderbilt made the women's selection committee look like sages. Swarming the bigger Wildcats with their four-guard lineup, the Commodores took away K-State's lifeblood: point guard Shalee Lehning. The All-Big 12 senior, harassed by a flotilla of aggressive, ultra-quick Vandy guards, was never able to deliver the pinpoint passes she displayed in the Wildcats' easy first-round victory over Drexel. Lehning finished with 10 points but with as many turnovers as assists: four each.

The key, said Vanderbilt coach Melanie Balcomb, was the ability of quicker Commodores guards Jessica Mooney and Merideth Marsh to guard Lehning without help. Unable to draw and kick or drive and dish as usual, the K-State star was ineffective.

"What we wanted to do," Balcomb said, "was keep her in front and play her with one person — force her to shoot the basketball instead of pass the basketball. So we tried to play below the ball screens on her and stay with everybody else."

While the Commodores were able to control Lehning, the Wildcats were unable to stop the smooth jumpshots of Vanderbilt forward Christina Wirth or bottle the lightning of Commodores guard Jennifer Risper.

Yet, the 13-point final margin doesn't tell the story of what a classic four-five game this promised to be — and was, for a while.

The Wildcats led at the break, 38-37, yet the pace and flow of the contest seemed to favor the Commodores.

"At the end of the first half, we started making a run," Wirth said. "We were talking about how we were getting into our tempo, and the way we were doing that was rebounding and pushing (the ball downcourt). That's when the game started to change a little bit."

Only one player taller than 5-11, Wirth, played for Vanderbilt. Kansas State started Marlies Gipson, 6 feet, and Ashley Sweat and Danielle Zanotti, both 6-2.

Sweat and Gipson scored a combined 33 points. Yet, the smaller Commodores beat the bigger Wildcats 14-6 on the offensive boards, 7-1 in the decisive second half.

"Their offensive rebounds and extra possessions were huge," Kansas State coach Deb Patterson said.

Huge, perhaps, said Balcomb, but no surprise.

"That's something we've worked really hard at," she said. "... We tip (the ball) and get it out to the free throw line, and get that second and third effort."

A Sweet Sixteen berth, without question, is its own reward. But, beyond a trip to Raleigh, N.C., what awaits the Commodores?

Well, it's not a what but a who: in all likelihood, the top-seeded Maryland Terrapins. During the past decade four-five survivors are 5-25 in the women's round of 16.

There's a chance of course, that ninth-seeded Utah, coming off a 60-30 rout of Villanova on Sunday, could rid the tourney of the Terps tonight. Tonight's Maryland-Utah game, however, will take place on the Terrapins' home court in College Park, Md.

Four vs. one, though, can wait. Monday, in an almost-a-classic four-vs.-five game, Vandy was simply too much.

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



Vandy, K-State Worth Watching

Monday, March 23, 2009

By Rick Wright

One's a forward; the other's a point guard. One's an ignition switch; the other's a destination.

Yet, despite their obvious dissimilarities, the matchup - or maybe that should be non-matchup - between Kansas State's Shalee Lehning and Vanderbilt's Christina Wirth will be more than worth watching.

Defensively, which team will do a better job on whom?

Fourth-seeded Vanderbilt (25-8) and fifth-seeded K-State (25-7) meet tonight in a second-round Women's NCAA Tournament game at the Pit.

Lehning, the Wildcats' All-Big 12 point guard, and Wirth, the Commodores' All-Southeastern Conference forward, have been the offensive driving forces for their teams, and the major defensive challenge for their opponents, all season.

Wirth is Vanderbilt's leading scorer at 16.1 points per game. On Saturday night, she torched Western Carolina for 23 points in the Commodores' 73-44 first-round victory.

Lehning is Kansas State's, and the Big 12's, leader in assists at 7.8 per game. Saturday, she had 13 assists in the Wildcats' 68-44 victory over Drexel.

Vanderbilt and Kansas State are by no means one-woman teams. The Wildcats are strong and versatile up front with Ashley Sweat and Marlies Gipson; Vandy is lightning-quick in the backcourt with Jennifer Risper and Jessica Mooney. The potential for exciting head-to-head matchups, whether it's Sweat or Gipson on Wirth or Risper or Mooney on Lehning, is equally great.

Still, tonight, job one for the Commodores will be to get the ball out of Lehning's hands; the primary task for the Wildcats will try to keep the ball out of Wirth's.

They are, said Vanderbilt coach Melanie Balcomb, distinct challenges.

"Yes, we want (Wirth) to touch the ball as much as possible; she plays inside and out," Balcomb said. "But somebody has to get her the ball. Lehning has the ball in her hands all the time; she controls everything.

"Christina's not going to touch the ball nearly as much as Lehning, just because of her position. You want to keep the ball out of Lehning's hands as much as possible because she's going to create so much for everybody else. ... Christina's on the finishing end, and Lehning's on the distributing end."

Still, look for the battle (or non-battle) between Wirth and Lehning to have a crucial impact on tonight's outcome.

"Everything goes through (Lehning)," Balcomb said, and she's big in everything they do."



Said Deb Patterson, the Kansas State coach, of Wirth: "You're going to have to constantly bring attention to where's she's at on the floor. ... If you fail at all in knowing where she is and where she's going, she's going to beat you."

TEMPO'S THE TOPIC: Look, as well, for a contest of wills between Vandy, a team that likes to push the pace, and K-State, which prefers a half-court game.

Or maybe not, said Patterson, who believes her team can adapt to tempo.

Vanderbilt has averaged 72 points per game this season, Kansas State 63.5. But the difference between their offensive philosophies seems greater than that. The Commodores run whenever the opportunity presents itself; typically, Lehning walks the ball across the mid-court line for the 'Cats.

Whoever imposes their style, Vanderbilt's Risper said, will have a huge advantage.

"It's really important to play our game and our tempo," she said. ... "They want to slow it down, and for us, we want to pick it up on defense and try to speed it up a little bit. That's something that's definitely a key, is to make it our game and our tempo, and that's what we're going to try and do."

Patterson, though, believes Lehning's presence at the point gives the Wildcats flexibility.

"I feel like we're capable of adapting," she said, "and I'm not sure that we have to play any certain way in this matchup. ... I think those will be decisions that we make as the game goes on, because when you have a great point guard, you always have the ability to push the pace.

"It will be interesting in that respect, to see just how we determine we need to play to be competitive."

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



NCAA Women: The Accidental Tourists

Monday, March 23, 2009

By Randy Harrison

A band of tall ladies in gray athletic suits very conspicuously became “Wedding Crashers” Saturday night at an Albuquerque hotel.

The Montoya-Healy wedding reception was going full blast about the time the Vanderbilt Commodores women’s basketball team returned triumphantly to its headquarters after defeating Western Carolina at the Pit. Soon, the postgame meal came out right next to the party. Then at the bride’s behest, the Commodores joined the bash.

“I guess she just wanted some people who could dance and liven up the party,” said senior guard Jennifer Risper. “So some of our teammates went in and turned it all around. The bride and the groom were just so excited. Now we have two more fans, which is awesome.”

Anecdotally, it’s one way to make fans in a part of the country that doesn’t naturally have them. On the other hand, both Vandy and Kansas State, the two combatants on tonight’s NCAA Women’s Tournament second-round showdown at the Pit, have been here since Thursday.

That means five days of a chance for the visiting teams to see Albuquerque - not just the other way around.

Commodores coach Melanie Balcomb and Kansas State’s Deb Patterson both used the word “balance” in describing their attitude toward life outside the gym and the locker room during this extended road trip - even as both teams arrived with as much expectation as gratitude, and while facing the biggest game of the season tonight.

“It’s one of the things I love about Vanderbilt,” said Balcomb, who stayed in to watch video while her players showed moves on a floor other than Bob King Court.

“They’re students first, then they’re athletes, and then thirdly they have a social life. It’s very important for me to have players who want a great college experience. I felt really good when I heard about (Saturday night), because I knew they were doing something together and enjoying it. Then they’ll want to keep winning and keep playing and keep traveling.”

Vanderbilt’s situation is unusual, since the Commodores also came to Albuquerque last year and stayed downtown, thus getting a chance to walk and see the sights like Old Town.

“Since we’ve been here before, we’re not doing as much touristy stuff,” said senior Christina Wirth.

Otherwise, if you’re an eatery, a bowling alley, mall or theater, you can’t go wrong with these kids. Wirth, however, is renowned for going along with the team to the theater - the bonding exercise of it all - and then staying outside in the lobby to study.

“She’s the (Southeastern Conference) Scholar-Athlete,” said Risper.

“I just don’t like scary movies,” said Wirth.

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



Commodores Turn Pit Into Vandyland

Sunday, March 22, 2009

By Randy Harrison

Perhaps this is why these two schools had never played before.

Western Carolina is, after all, fairly close to Nashville-based Vanderbilt geographically. But the Lady Catamounts have a long, long way to go before they are ready for some more of this.

Behind All-Southeastern Conference forward Christina Wirth's 23 points, the fourth-seeded Commodores (25-8) impressively had their way in a 73-44 rout to tip off Saturday night's NCAA women's tournament play at the Pit.

A 6-foot-1 senior, Wirth's versatility was far too much for the Lady Catamounts (21-12) to handle. From the perimeter, she put the ball on the floor against slower defenders and shot 3-pointers (3-of-5) over smaller ones.

Wirth did both at a critical second-half moment when No. 13 seed Western Carolina had briefly seized momentum, scoring seven straight points and convincing Vandy coach Melanie Balcomb to call time out. Wirth hit four consecutive shots for 10 points in three minutes. That highlighted a 12-2 spurt that put her team up 53-31.

"I'm a shooter, and for one of them, (Jennifer Risper) set me up great, and another one was another great screen on a called play," said Wirth. "It was just reads and knowing what they were giving us. I got some pretty good looks."

Wirth also primarily defended Western's leading scorer, 6-4 Brooke Johnson, who scored eight points on 3-for-11 shooting and wasn't a factor.

Johnson still managed to lead Western Carolina, along with guard Nicole Powell in scoring. But after Powell hit her team's fourth 3-pointer with 6:40 left in the first half to draw within 18-16, she didn't score again. Vandy also didn't give up another trey.

"I think that made a big difference, being able to shut down the way they were scoring," said Balcomb. "In the second half, the only way they really scored was taking us off the dribble, and we didn't feel like that was their strength."

The Lady Catamounts shot 28 percent and played uncomfortably with Vandy's pressure on defense and quicker, crisper pace on offense.

"That's not how we normally shoot," said Powell. "Maybe we had leg issues, I'm not sure. But when we're not shooting well, we've got to take care of the defense. And we didn't do that tonight."

This was Western Carolina's second NCAA Tournament appearance, and it didn't fare much better this time than the last, which was a 94-43 loss to top-seeded Tennessee in 2005.

"Vanderbilt is a very intelligent and very scrappy team," said Lady Catamounts coach Kellie Harper. "I felt like they were able to take advantage of every mistake we made. ... I really wish we could have shot the ball a little better. I wish we'd had a better showing."

Both teams were shooting badly to begin the game, a combined 0-for-11 before Wirth broke the scoreless tie with a layup at 16:40. Powell's first 3 at 14:15 gave the Lady Catamounts a 5-4 lead, but Vandy scored the next seven points and was off and running.

A 5-9 guard, Risper scored 11 points and played a gritty defense in the post. So much so that somebody asked if she'd taken a blow to the face that forced her to come out one time.

Turns out it was just a bloody nose created, not from an errant elbow, but arid high desert air.

Laughing with a tinge of embarrassment, Risper confided, "I've been blowing my nose a lot." But her team refused to blow this one.

vanderbilt nurse

Hoops Dreams

By Leslie Hast

At age 11, Christina Wirth vowed to earn a college basketball scholarship and then worked tirelessly until the recruitment letters started pouring in.

Now, as she plays her senior season with the Vanderbilt Women's Basketball Team, Wirth has her sights set on another goal: becoming a nurse practitioner.

"A lot of people think that athletes just come to college just to play sports," she said, "but a lot of us are working really hard to pursue a career, and not just some easy major. It's important that people know that you can do both. It doesn't have to be one or the other."

Wirth, who grew up in Mesa, Ariz., came to the School of Nursing via the health and human services track in Human and Organizational Development, and although her first-year nursing courses required a bit of rearranging to accommodate her basketball schedule, her adviser, Terry Witherington, M.S.N., C.P.N.P., was more than willing to do that.

"She is an exceptional candidate, and we didn't want to lose her. We worked hard to make this work," Witherington said. "She appeared to know what she wanted to do and was willing to take the steps to do it. She didn't choose the easy way out. She wanted to get in the field as quickly as possible."

During the spring semester, first-year nursing students usually rotate through different clinical units every five weeks, and Wirth's frequent travel to away games would have been a detriment. Instead, she is focusing on the didactic portion and will resume her clinical rotations when basketball season is over.

"This isn't something that I'm doing because I have to. I'm excited about it," Wirth said, but she admits that balancing athletics with a challenging academic program can be exhausting at times.

For example, when the team played an away game at Alabama, they returned to campus at 1:30 a.m. Because the team was scheduled to lift weights while she was in class, Wirth lifted before class at 7:30 a.m., and then attended class from 8 to 4. Then she had practice from 4 to 7 and spent the evening studying.

It's that work ethic that has made Christina one of the leaders of the women's basketball team. Last year, she the 30th member of Vanderbilt's 1,000-point club, and she currently ranks among SEC leaders in scoring. Wirth was a unanimous first-team All-SEC selection by league coaches, and was named the conference's Scholar-Athlete of the Year.

"Christina is a very skilled, hard-working basketball player," said Head Coach Melanie Balcomb. "Her three-point shot is her biggest strength, but what sets her apart from other players is her versatility. Her unselfishness, commitment to the team, and being a leader by example stands out the most."

There is no doubt that athleticism runs deep in the Wirth gene pool, and the family of eight could easily field a team for most sports. Dad Alan played nine seasons of professional baseball, including a major league season with the Oakland A's, but says his wife Diane is probably the more athletic of the pair. She stays active lifting weights and exercising and also enjoys watching all the children participating in their activities. Wirth's older sister Alana played basketball at Barry University, Christina followed in her footsteps playing college basketball at Vanderbilt, and their younger sister Theresa will likely play in college as well. Her younger brother Joe played soccer in high school, and her 10-year-old twin sisters LeeAnne and Jennifer play basketball on a team their dad coaches.

"I remember my dad would come home from work, and we would all pile in the car and go up to the park for a neighborhood game of baseball," Wirth said. "We just always did things like that and loved being outside and playing, so that's just something all of us learned to value."

There is even a family connection with Wirth's number 34. Alana wore the number in high school, and she passed it on to

Christina. At Christina's graduation, the number was retired, but not for long. The jersey was brought out of retirement for Theresa.

And for the twins? "We joked that they would be numbers 3 and 4."

Wirth started playing basketball at age 5, which she says "isn't even basketball really, it's just running around chasing the ball." Alan Wirth said her drive and determination were evident right away.

"She was willing to do all the hard work. She would ask me to rebound while she did the 100 or 200 shots the coach asked her to do, then she would do another hundred," he recalled. "I'm proud of not just basketball but the way she lives her life. She doesn't take shortcuts."

Wirth excelled at swimming and tried many different sports in her childhood, but it was the teamwork of basketball that won her over.

"I think that team sports in a way are more challenging because you have to find a way to work together. It can be really frustrating, but when you figure it out, it's a great feeling," Christina said. "It's exciting to get into a huddle during a dead ball and just look at each other and have a total sense of confidence. That sense of teamwork is really fun to have, and it's not really a feeling that you can replicate in any other situation in life, at least that I've found. I hope I will with nursing."

Though her 6-foot-one-inch height is great for basketball, it could present a challenge in nursing, especially because Wirth plans to specialize in pediatrics.

In a recent class, Wirth's professor stressed the importance of getting down on a child's level and not being intimidating. "Just my height alone in the general population makes me kind of intimidating to people, so especially if I was working with kids, there will be challenges," Wirth said.

Wirth said there are many lessons from the basketball court she can carry over into nursing.

"Probably the biggest thing I can take from my time playing sports is teamwork. With anything in life where you're working with people, you just have to know how to get the best out of them and how to earn respect and give respect," she said.

"You have to learn how to push yourself when you don't want to anymore. Those are the teams that become great. And I think that's definitely something that can translate into nursing and putting the patient first."

As Wirth's best friend, roommate and fellow teammate, Jennifer Risper knows Christina in a way that most don't, and she said it's Wirth's caring nature that will make her a star at nursing.

"When she's a nurse practitioner, patients will see how caring she is. She's really caring to everyone, and it doesn't matter where you're from or what you look like. Patients will feel comfortable around her," she said.

Risper has also noticed Wirth's newfound excitement with nursing.

"She comes home and tells me about everything she has learned, and she's like a little kid she's so excited," she said. "She constantly wants to grow and get better, and I know she will apply that to nursing."

Although Wirth hopes this season isn't the end of organized basketball for her, and talks of playing internationally or in the WNBA, she also doesn't pin all her hopes on athletics.

With her senior season wrapping up, Wirth's motivation and determination shine through as she talks about her goals for the NCAA tournament: "It's important now to be setting ourselves up for a good seed. Then all you have to do to be a national champion is win six games. It doesn't even matter what you did the rest of the season, you just have to win six games."

But Wirth insists she won't be nervous.

"When you've played basketball for this long, it's second nature," she said. "When I'm walking onto the floor before the jump ball goes up, I'm a little nervous, but as soon as that ball goes up, I'm like, 'OK, I've done this before.' I'm going to miss that feeling."

Rhoads' effectiveness almost a part of her DNA

Friday, March 20, 2009

By David Boclair

Jence Rhoads does not want to waste an opportunity. Thus the Vanderbilt point guard does not waste a lot of energy with unnecessary flair.

"Jence's not fancy," junior guard Merideth Marsh said. "There's a lot of point guards out there who do all these fancy moves between their legs, but Jence's just consistent and solid."

Through the end of the regular season and conference tournaments, Rhoads is ranked third nationally in assist-to-turnover ratio at 2:53:1, which is just a fraction behind the leader, Illinois State's Kristi Crone (2:57:1).

As a team, the Commodores are eighth out of 328 Division I teams in turnover margin, with nearly six fewer per game than their opponents. They are 13th in assist-to-turnover ratio, 26th in assists per game and 29th in fewest turnovers per game – all of which place them among the top 10 percent.

Their opponent in the first round of the NCAA tournament, Western Carolina, is 263rd in turnover margin and commits an average of five turnovers more per game than it has assists.

"One of my goals is always to make efficient passes and not turn the ball over and to be able to have a good assist-to-turnover ratio," Rhoads, a sophomore said. "... It helps us a lot, both offensively and defensively if we can take care of it and be more efficient on offense, have less possessions and score on the least amount of possessions you can.

"I think that's definitely part of our game plan, to take care of the ball."

It's also effectively a part of her DNA.

The oldest of three daughters of two former college basketball players (her father at Wake Forest and her mother at Slippery Rock) who both currently coach, an appreciation for fundamentals was drilled into Rhoads at a young age.

"I've been doing ball-handling drills and things since I was in elementary school," she said. "I've always done it."

She opened this season with nine assists and no turnovers in victory over Texas A&M-Corpus Christi. Eight times overall, including the first two games of the SEC tournament, she did not commit a turnover and eight other times she committed just one.

In 66 career games (46 starts) she has 238 assists and 118 turnovers. Already this season she has 10 more assists but 20 fewer turnovers than as a freshman.

Not coincidentally, all but two of Vanderbilt's 24 victories have come in games when it's had fewer turnovers than the opposition.

"There were some games in the preseason and even in the postseason where we were having problems turning the ball over," Marsh said. "If you look at almost any game and you look at the stats afterward, a lot of times the team that has the most turnovers is the team that lost."

What the stats don't reflect is any points for style. Thus, Rhoads never tries for any.

"Jence's real steady, but we have experience and we have players who are very good fundamentally and handle the pressure well," coach Melanie Balcomb said. "We've worked a lot at ball handling and passing, not just shooting. I think we've gotten better as the season has gone on on our fundamentals."

"Jence's just a sophomore, but as a point guard, experience-wise, she's played in a lot of basketball games – big games."

Wirth honored: Vanderbilt senior Christina Wirth was named an Associated Press All-SEC first-team selection. Wirth also was a first-team honoree as well as the conference's Scholar-Athlete in the coaches' voting.

She was also named on of the region's seven finalists for Women's Basketball Coaches Association All-America team, which will be announced March 25. She is VU's leading scorer at 15.8 points per game, is second on the team in rebounds (179), 3-point baskets (70) and steals (52).

Vanderbilt women will head back to Albuquerque

Tuesday, March 17, 2009

By Mike Organ

Maybe the NCAA Tournament selection committee was listening when senior Jennifer Risper said she didn't want the Vanderbilt women's team to stay close to home.

Risper didn't mean to put off any Commodores fans who would've preferred a site closer to home.

But her wish was answered Monday when Vanderbilt was sent back to Albuquerque, N.M., to play Western Carolina.

The Commodores (24-8) received a No. 4 seed and will play the No. 13 Catamounts (21-11) on Saturday.

Some fans were hoping Vanderbilt would begin the tournament in Chattanooga or Bowling Green, Ky.

"I said I didn't want us to play in Chattanooga, and I hope that people didn't take that the wrong way," Risper said. "I meant that because the NCAA Tournament experience is always fun to look forward to because you get to travel. Obviously I want our fans to be there, as many people as can be. So that's the downer about it."

It will be the second consecutive year that the Commodores open the tournament at the University of New Mexico arena, also known as The Pit. They beat Montana 75-47 there in last year's first round and West Virginia 64-46 in the second.

Considering the Commodores' success, Coach Melanie Balcomb is happy to be taking her team back.

"My first thought was, 'We had a good experience there, a positive experience,'" Balcomb said. "We're 2-0 in Albuquerque, we are going to be familiar with the altitude and the court and have good feelings about it. Now, if we had done poorly last year I might feel differently."

With so many good teams coming from the South, it's impossible for the selection committee to keep all of the top teams close to home, Balcomb said.

"We constantly get sent (far away) so I kind of expected it just because we haven't played locally," Balcomb said. "We played in Chattanooga one time since I've been here. We've been sent out West a lot. There are just so many good teams in this region, and with the criteria of not facing another team from your conference and not having that many sites down here, they have to send somebody out."

Western Carolina is coached by Kellie Jolly Harper, a former White County High School and Tennessee Lady Vols star. The Catamounts earned an NCAA Tournament berth by beating College of Charleston 101-87 in triple overtime of the Southern Conference Tournament championship.

The Commodores will be tempted to look past Western Carolina and ahead to No. 1 seeded Maryland, the team that knocked them out of the NCAA Tournament last year in the Sweet 16. Vanderbilt and Maryland will meet again in the Sweet 16 if both win in the first and second rounds.

"Maryland left a bitter taste in our mouths last year," Christina Wirth said. "I think they're a good matchup for us this year. Last year we were a different team, and they were a different team. They graduated their best two post players."

VU's Risper steps up in a big way

Monday, March 16, 2009

By David Boclair

Coach Melanie Balcomb joked all the way through the SEC women's basketball tournament that Jennifer Risper is currently the shortest post player in the country.

Risper, a 5-foot-9 senior, has made sure, however, that Vanderbilt must be taken seriously when it takes part in the NCAA Tournament, which opens this weekend.

Her ability to fill in for injured center Hannah Tuomi was critical to the fact that the Commodores won the conference tournament title and proved that they can compete with the best teams in the country. They captured the title game with their second victory in three weeks over Auburn, a team that lost just one other game all season.

"I definitely embraced it," Risper, a natural guard, said. "Hannah brings so much. I love playing for her. She brings hard work and effort every night, and does things that don't show up in the box score."

Risper did not have a lot of time to settle into her new role, but she averaged 11.3 points and 8.3 rebounds in VU's three victories in the conference tournament.

Tuomi sustained a stress fracture in her ankle, which caused her to miss the final regular-season game, a loss to Tennessee. Five days later, Risper was at the back of the Commodores' defense and near the basket on offense when they started the SEC tournament with a victory over Georgia.

"We would have loved to have Hannah, but to win it without her ... I think part of it was we wanted to win it for her," sophomore point guard Jence Rhoads said. "It was just a good win for us to carry it on into the big tournament."

For a team ranked in the Top 25 all season and 15th in the final AP Top 25, the ability to win without Tuomi also was critical to the seeding process for the NCAA event. Tuomi's status remains uncertain, but the Commodores' ability to adapt is clear.

"We are obviously smaller," Risper said. "We are a little more quick, I guess, and we always have someone who can handle the ball on the floor. I think we definitely create an awkward mismatch for opponents."

"I think it's showing that we're going to fight, no matter what our size is. It's definitely not about our size. It's about the fight we have and our heart."

Risper said Tuomi consistently offered input and advice about how to match up with some other teams' post players, which could be more difficult in the national tournament against opponents VU does not know as well. That and her speed advantage over taller players, she said, were critical to her success in the conference tourney. Whatever the reason, her performance was not overlooked. While playing out of position, she still earned a spot on the all-tournament team and some additional respect from those who know her best.

"I'm always impressed with Jen," Rhoads said. "She's amazing to me, a great teammate and she just steps into any role the coaches have given her."

Even a big one.

Vanderbilt continues dominance

SEC WOMEN'S TOURNAMENT

VANDERBILT 61, AUBURN 54

BY ROB KEYS

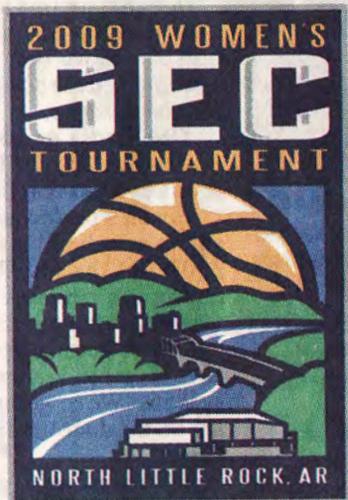
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Maybe Vanderbilt just has Auburn's number.

The 22nd-ranked Commodores got a 20-point game — and a game-clinching steal — from senior forward Christina Wirth while beating the sixth-ranked Tigers for the 15th consecutive time.

This one, a 61-54 victory before a crowd of 3,261 on Sunday night at Alltel Arena, gave Vanderbilt its sixth SEC Women's Tournament championship.

Vanderbilt (24-8) was one of just two teams — along with Georgia — to beat Auburn (29-3) during the regular season, when the Tigers earned top seeding at this event. Auburn avenged its loss to Georgia later in the regular season, but had no such luck against a Vanderbilt team that



used stifling defense and timely three-point shooting to win its third SEC Tournament title in Coach Melanie Balcomb's seven seasons.

"We know that you can't play them straight up," Balcomb said of the Tigers. "They've got great players and you've got to really

do some different things to get them out of their flow on offense.

"They're the fastest team up and down the court in transition that I've ever coached against, and we tried to limit those transition buckets."

Auburn was stuck in low gear practically from start to finish, and DeWanna Bonner — the SEC's Player of the Year — was outshone by Wirth as a result. While Wirth added eight rebounds to go with her offensive output and clutch defensive play, Bonner finished with just nine points on 4-of-11 shooting.

"I thought she played very inspired basketball today," Auburn Coach Nell Fortner said of Wirth, who was named the tournament's most valuable player. "I thought she was better today than I've seen her on film or when we played them in Nashville."

Vanderbilt also got 12 points and 9 rebounds from Jennifer

Risper, 12 points from reserve guard Tia Gibbs and 11 from Meredith Marsh.

Point guard Whitney Boddie, meanwhile, was the only Tiger to get untracked, scoring 14 points to go with 8 rebounds and 8 assists. Auburn shot just 40.4 percent (23 of 57) from the field and was 0 for 7 on three-pointers.

"I wish I knew," Fortner said when asked what makes playing Vanderbilt so tough. "I think it's the defense they play. They do a lot of things that keep you out of a good offensive rhythm."

The Commodores employed a triangle-and-two, putting defenders on Bonner and shooting guard Alli Smalley, for much of the game and mixed in a couple of other schemes as well.

"I'm really proud of the execution of a game plan that's not easy to do," Balcomb said, "and having kids that believe in it and execute it as well as they did today was just awesome to watch."

See **VANDERBILT**, Page 4C



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RUSSELL POWELL

Vanderbilt's Christina Wirth (right) hugs teammate Jence Rhoads after the Commodores beat Auburn 61-54 to win the SEC Women's Tournament on Sunday at Alltel Arena in North Little Rock.

Vanderbilt

• Continued from Page 1C

Vanderbilt actually got off to a rocky start, missing its first eight shots, but closed the first half with a 14-5 run to take a 31-21 halftime lead. The Commodores stretched their lead to 12 points midway through the second half before Auburn mounted its best run of the game, an 11-2 spurt, to get within 49-46 on Bonner's three-point play with 5:17 to play.

Marsh countered with a high-arching three-pointer on the Commodores' next possession, however, for a 55-50 Vanderbilt lead.

"It was like a dagger," Fortner said.

Auburn, bidding for its first SEC Tournament title since 1997, was within 58-54 when Risper hit 1 of 2 free throws for a five-point cushion with 30.8 seconds to go. Wirth chased down the miss, but turned over the ball to give Auburn one last chance.

Wirth got back downcourt in time to steal a pass from Smalley intended for Bonner, however,

VANDERBILT M FG FT O-R PF A PTS

Wirth	40	8-19	1-2	1-8	1	1	20
Risper	38	4-9	4-6	4-9	2	3	12
Mooney	13	2-5	0-0	0-1	0	1	4
Rhoads	34	1-4	0-0	1-3	4	5	2
Marsh	40	3-9	2-2	1-5	2	4	11
Coleman	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	1-1	0	0
Gibbs	33	4-8	0-0	1-1	2	3	12
TEAM							2-3

TOTALS 200 22-54 7-10 11-31 11 17 61
PCT 40.7 FT 70.0 3PT 10-28, 35.7 (Gibbs 4-8, Marsh 3-9, Wirth 3-11). BL — 0 TD — 13 (Wirth 7) ST — 7 (Rhoads 2, Risper 2)

AUBURN M FG FT O-R PF A PTS

Jackson	22	3-5	2-2	2-5	1	0	8
Bonner	40	4-11	1-1	1-7	1	0	9
Smalley	36	2-9	0-0	1-2	2	1	4
S. Hobbs	36	4-10	1-2	5-8	2	3	9
Boddie	37	6-15	2-2	3-8	2	8	14
R. Hobbs	9	1-2	0-0	1-1	1	1	2
Hillard	16	3-4	2-2	0-3	1	1	8
Carrier	4	0-1	0-0	0-0	2	2	0
TEAM							1-1

TOTALS 200 23-57 9-9 14-35 12 16 54
PCT 40.4 FT 88.9 3PT 0-7, 0.0 (Smalley 0-4, Bonner 0-3) ST — 3 BLK — 2

Halftime — Vanderbilt 31, Auburn 21

Technical fouls None

Officials — Dee Kantner, Bryan Enterline, Lawson Newton

Attendance: 3,261

then made two free throws with 17.4 seconds left to seal it.

"I had turned it over, so I was the last one down the floor," Wirth said with a laugh. "I saw it coming the whole way down the floor. I had a little advantage there."

As a result, Vanderbilt maintained its long-running advantage over Auburn.

Vanderbilt knocks out Lady Tigers

Sunday, March 8, 2009

By Scott Hotard, Baton-Rouge Advocate

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — When the Southeastern Conference women's basketball tournament began, the buzzword was parity. Anybody could win this four-day event, for once. Every team should be feared.

Ten games have been played with one to go. The tournament's top two seeds — No. 1 Auburn and No. 2 Vanderbilt, this time — have reached the title game, just as in three of the previous four years.

LSU was the last hope for the "underdogs," entering Saturday night's semifinal against higher seeded Vanderbilt. But the Commodores made sure the strength stayed at the top, rallying from a three-point halftime deficit to reach today's finale with a 61-47 win.

The Lady Tigers, the No. 3 seed, left a season-high six-game winning streak on the Alltel Arena floor. They also left their hopes of reaching the SEC tournament championship round for the fifth straight year.

Turnovers, more than anything, made the difference. LSU committed 20, about six above its season average.

"This was not LSU today," Lady Tigers coach Van Chancellor said.

Even the return of point guard Latear Eason couldn't save the Lady Tigers. A day after her teammates watched the sophomore carted from the court with a neck injury, Eason started and played 23 minutes.

LSU (18-10) started strong, forcing Vandy into a pair of shot-clock violations and seven turnovers in the opening 10 minutes. But the Commodores regrouped, turning the tables with their press defense.

Up 28-23 a minute into the second half, LSU's lead was gone by the 15:44 mark. It was the first time in the team's last seven games that it trailed after half-time.

"I thought the press was the difference," Vandy coach Melanie Balcomb said. "It forced them into turnovers and got us into transition and got us some better looks."

Vandy (23-8) moves on to its fourth title game in eight years. And for the first time this weekend, the 22nd-ranked Commodores will play in their away jerseys.

Such teams haven't had much luck thus far. The only lower seeds to win in the first three days: No. 9 Ole Miss, which beat No. 8 Arkansas in the opening round; and No. 5 Tennessee, which knocked off No. 4 Florida in the quarterfinals.

Not the free-for-all most expected.

"It's weird," Balcomb said, "because I expected the same thing. I know when we've made the final in the past, it seems like we were always the higher seed."

Playing without leading rebounder Hannah Tuomi, out for the tournament with an ankle injury, 6-foot-1 senior Christina Wirth provided Vandy's only 6-foot starter. But it didn't hurt the Commodores, who managed 34 rebounds to LSU's 32 and had 28 points in the paint to LSU's 22.

Wirth scored 18 points, including three 3-pointers. Jence Rhoads and Jennifer Risper scored 15 and 11, respectively.

But defense won the day.

Applying a box-and-one attack much of the night, Vandy held All-SEC guard Allison Hightower to six points, the first time in 16 games she has finished in single digits.

Consider Hightower scored 22 points in the teams' only regular-season meeting, a 75-67 victory for Vandy in Nashville, Tenn. Consider she scored 23 in Friday's 63-58 defeat of State, pouring in 19 points in the second half to reach her career high.

"Sometimes we tried to get her open," LSU forward Courtney Jones said, "but it was hard. You're going to have games like that."

Hightower hadn't had many. Neither had LSU.

Vanderbilt women bounce Georgia from SEC Tournament

Saturday, March 7, 2009

By Chris Givens, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — The empty locker room suggested to Vanderbilt Coach Melanie Balcomb that her team was ready to go.

Balcomb's spirited Commodores played at a high level for the entire game and never trailed in a 69-61 victory over Georgia on Friday in the second round of the SEC Women's Tournament at Alltel Arena.

No. 22 Vanderbilt earned a first-round bye in the tournament and wanted to make up for missed time. The Commodores (22-8, 10-4 SEC) ran out of the locker room while Balcomb was still giving her pregame pep talk.

"I feel really good about our effort and the way we came out ready to play," Balcomb said. "They cut me off while I was still talking before the game and went running out the locker room door. I didn't have to motivate them at all."

Christina Wirth led Vanderbilt with 23 points. The points were needed to overcome a career game from Georgia's Angel Robinson, who had 29 points and 16 rebounds.

Vanderbilt led by 10 points at halftime, but the Bulldogs (18-13, 7-7) cut the lead to one on two occasions in the second half, including once with 1:27 left. But each time Vanderbilt responded.

"We had to get back to the mentality of attacking," Wirth said. "They came back on us when we got passive. We turned it back on and that was key to come back with an answer every time they got close."

Vanderbilt set a tournament record with only three turnovers. The Commodores also had 18 assists and got off 26 3-pointers, making nine.

"We didn't defend the two things that Vandy does well to win," Georgia Coach Andy Landers said. "We didn't defend the three, and they got the close shots off the dribble."

"We didn't do what we needed to do 80 percent of the time. Twenty percent of the time we mentally collapsed and had no sense of urgency."

Divided over divisions

East, West split over best way to add 2 games

BY ROB KEYS

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

When the SEC's women's basketball coaches voted two years ago to play 16 conference games instead of the current 14-game setup, Arkansas' Tom Colten assumed that meant the league would split into divisions.

You know, like men's basketball. Or football, baseball, softball, soccer, volleyball, and men's and women's tennis.

"We were even told we'd likely go to divisions," Colten said.

Not so fast.

In a move apparently spurred by coaches from what would be the SEC East, a new vote was taken to specifically determine whether the league would be broken into divisions. According to multiple sources, the results — in separate votes by coaches, senior women's administrators and athletic directors — ended in 6-6 deadlocks, with all of the would-be East schools voting against the move and the would-be West schools voting for it.

There are multiple arguments on both sides, but Colten boiled down the would-be West's views in terms of rivalry-building, the ability to compete for a divisional championship, and most important, fairness.

Under the current system, each team is assigned a permanent travel partner, which it plays twice a season. Each school then plays home-and-

home series with one team from the East side of the league and one team from the West side — rotating those teams every two years — and plays every other league member once a season for a total of 14 games.

Adding two more games without splitting the league into divisions would simply add one more rotating opponent from each side of the league, an idea Colten is against.

"I think it's really hard for any kind of rotating schedule to have any sense of fairness," Colten said. "I don't really think the luck of the draw should have anything to do with your ability to win a conference championship.

"I think the fair way to do it is to play in divisions, play for a divisional championship, and know that you've played everybody in your division twice and that at least the race to win your division championship is based on a sense of fairness.

"Then you play from there, go to the SEC Tournament and let the top teams rise to the top."

Vanderbilt Coach Melanie Balcomb is on the other side of the debate.

"I think it's a really strong conference schedule already, and I think it's going to be even tougher with adding two more games," Balcomb said. "It's been rotating for years, and it works, so I feel like if it's not broken, why are we fixing it?"

There is an underlying belief among some on the West side, however, that those in the East believe their half is the traditionally stronger side. There's also the fact all would-be East schools would have to play Tennessee twice a season.

This season, though, the numbers suggest a more balanced league. Six schools finished with better records against East teams, five finished with better records against West teams, and Vanderbilt finished 5-2 against teams from both sides.

While there could be another vote at the league's spring meetings in Destin, Fla., one source said the most likely scenario given another tie vote would be to stick with the rotating system. That's too bad, according to Carol Ross, a current television analyst who coached at Florida and Ole Miss.

Ross said her opinion has changed since she made the jump from "coach to fan and media member," but added she already had begun leaning away from the rotating system during her time at Ole Miss. That change stemmed mostly from the belief she was denying her players an opportunity to play for a championship — even a divisional one.

"If you're going to go," Ross said of changing the conference schedule, "go all the way."

Marsh lighting it up from 3-point range

Friday, March 6, 2009

By David Boclair

Time and space were precious commodities for Merideth Marsh throughout the Southeastern Conference regular season.

“SEC teams are all athletic and all very quick,” the Vanderbilt junior guard said. “If you’re coming off a screen you have to be ready to shoot within in a half a second or you’re not going to get the shot off.

“...I feel like they’re up in my shorts all the time, just worried about me coming off screens and stuff like that.”

Her ability to handle those challenges was invaluable to the 22nd-ranked Commodores, who open play in the conference tournament against Georgia on Friday (2:30 p.m., Alltel Arena, North Little Rock, Ark.).

Vanderbilt was third in the SEC in 3-point percentage for the season (35.9 percent) but actually shot better than that against conference competition. In fact, the Commodores were the only team to shoot 40 percent during SEC play, and their 92 3-pointers in their 14 conference games were second only to Florida.

Similarly, Marsh was one of four players in the conference who shot better than 40 percent on 3-pointers overall, but she made a league-best 48.8 percent in the 14 conference games.

The Louisville, Ky., native made at least three 3-pointers in eight of the final nine regular-season contests. She tied a school record when she made eight against Florida on Feb. 12, and connected on a game-tying 3-pointer in the closing seconds at Ole Miss on Feb. 22.

During non-conference play she made three or more just four times in 15 games and never more than five in a single contest.

“I am shooting the ball pretty well right now,” she said recently. “That’s something I’ve been trying to work on. The (non-conference) season wasn’t as good for me this year, but I know these games are definitely important.”

Marsh hit 41 of 84 3-pointers in conference play. Ole Miss’ Alexis Rack, with 42, was the only SEC player who made more, but Rack connected on just 30 percent of her 140 attempts.

Marsh’s teammate, Christina Wirth, found the mark with 30 of 83 in league play (36.1 percent), which makes VU the only team with two players who made 30 or more during SEC play.

“To open up the inside we have to knock some of those 3s down,” coach Melanie Balcomb said. “I do feel like we’re shooting it better because we’re executing better. As the season goes on, I always say your defense comes before your offense, and our offense is getting better and our execution is better so we’re getting better looks for our shooters.”

Marsh’s 70 3-pointers this season gives her 157 for her career. That puts her on pace eventually to become the fourth VU player to get to 200.

Of course, her recent pace raises the possibility that much higher.

“I feel like coach (Balcomb) has a lot of confidence in my shot right now,” Marsh said. “I have confidence in my shot that I’m going to knock it down and my teammates are getting me the ball. So I’m just going to shoot it and knock it down.

“I’m just being in the right spot at the right time, knocking down shots.”



Deserving Credit

Wednesday, March 4, 2009

By Scott Roussell

BasketballScoop asked an SEC head coach this week about Melanie Balcomb's Commodores. His reply, "They lost a couple of key players early in conference play and you thought they might have a tough time. Nope." For the first time in Balcomb's seven seasons at Vandy, the Commodores have finished the regular season ranked second overall in the SEC. At 21-8 overall, 10-4 in conference, the 'Dores are looking to make a run to St. Louis.

Balcomb has long been known as an offensive guru (her teams consistently are in the Top 10 in the game in Field Goal Percentage, #7 this season); but she credits her staff's work on the other end of the court with a lot of their success this season. Vicky Picott and Lisa Cermignano "run that side of the court and they do it well". Picott also works with the Post players and is said to be "one of the best Post coaches in the game" by a highly regarded SEC assistant. Balcomb says "Lisa brings a passion for defense in addition to the great job she does with our Guards". Her players, and their opponents agree. Balcomb's teams always seem to be able to reload with talented young players. "Since joining the staff two years ago, Kim Rosamond has worked tirelessly at recruiting." BasketballScoop notes that the Commodores most recent class was rated in the Top 10 in the country by multiple recruiting websites.

BasketballScoop recently caught up with the staff, who were quick to credit Balcomb's style of empowering them and enabling them to do their jobs. "Melanie delegates well and we all know our responsibilities. We have a great staff." The staff also pointed to the constant support they get from their DBO, Justin VanOrman. "We're lucky to have a person with the experience that Justin has. You just know you can rely on him."

An SEC assistant whose team lost to Vandy earlier this season had this to say about the team, "They're small this year; but they play hard and they are well coached." BasketballScoop agrees, Balcomb and her staff Deserve Credit for a great season.

Sports Illustrated

Southern Light

Monday, Feb. 23, 2009

By Kelli Anderson

OPPORTUNITIES TO win the Southeastern Conference's women's regular-season title don't come around often for teams not named Tennessee or LSU. So after preseason favorite Vanderbilt lost its second league game, at Mississippi State on Feb. 5, Commodores seniors Jen Risper and Christina Wirth laid down the law. They kicked the team out of its palatial locker room and banished it to Memorial Gym's cramped visitors' quarters. After Vandy won its fourth straight game last Thursday, beating then No. 3 Auburn 73--70 to draw even, briefly, with the Tigers (26--2, 11--2 in the SEC through Sunday) in first place, the seniors relented and let the players return to their comfy couches, flat-screen TVs and video-game consoles.

"It was a wake-up call that we have to take care of business," says Wirth, a 6'1" guard who was averaging 15.0 points for the 19th-ranked Commodores (21--7, 10--3). "We have a chance to make history here."

Vanderbilt has won five SEC tournament titles and been to a Final Four, in 1993, but it has never won the regular-season title. Auburn hasn't won one in 20 years. In fact, no program besides Tennessee, LSU and Georgia has won it since 1992, and no team with more than one conference loss has won it since 1985. This year's winner will look different, in name and record. As both defending national champion Tennessee (19--8, 6--6) and frequent Final Four participant LSU (15--9, 8--4) struggle to rebuild after losing their entire starting lineups to graduation, every other team in the conference has improved. "People think because Tennessee and LSU are down, the whole league is down," says Vanderbilt coach Melanie Balcomb. "But I think from top to bottom the conference is tougher than it ever has been."

Consider Florida. In just her second season after taking over a 9--22 team, coach Amanda Butler has the Gators on the verge of an NCAA bid with a 23--5 record (9--4 in the SEC). The undersized team, whose tallest starter is 5'11" forward Marshae Dotson, makes up for its lack of height with a high-flying offense that averages a league-high 6.7 threes a game.

Perhaps the most underrated team in the conference is sixth-place Mississippi State (19--7, 6--5), which hasn't finished higher than third in 26 seasons. The Lady Bulldogs added depth and height this year with the addition of three junior college transfers originally from the Congo, including 6'5" forward Chanel Mokango, who is averaging 10.5 points and 3.3 blocks a game. "They can play," says Auburn coach Nell Fortner, whose team escaped Starkville with a 63--58 win on Feb. 15. "I really hope we don't have to face them again."

Surely the feeling is mutual. Once a powerhouse, Auburn was the national championship runner-up in 1988, '89 and '90 but hasn't made it to the Sweet 16 since 1996. The resurgent Tigers feature an all-Alabama starting lineup of one sophomore and four seniors, including point guard Whitney Boddie, whose 8.1 assists a game leads the country, and SEC player of the year favorite DeWanna Bonner, a willowy 6'4" guard who leads the conference in scoring with 20.7 points a game.

With Auburn ahead of Vanderbilt by one game through Sunday, the battle for the regular-season title might very well come down to the last day of the season. Vanderbilt, which beat Tennessee 74--58 at home on Jan. 11, has to travel to Knoxville on March 1 to face a team that's desperate to avoid making history of its own. No Lady Vols team has ever lost more than four SEC games in a season—or lost to the same team twice in the regular season.



No. 18 'Dores upset No. 3 Auburn 73-70

Thursday, February 19, 2009

By Teresa Walker

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) -- If the Vanderbilt Commodores want to win their first regular season Southeastern Conference title, they're going to have to play as well on the road as they have at home.

And they have been very, very good in Memorial Gym.

Merideth Marsh hit two free throws with 11 seconds left, and No. 18 Vanderbilt held off third-ranked Auburn 73-70 Thursday night and tied the Tigers atop the SEC with two games left in the regular season. It's the Commodores' second upset of a Top 10 team within eight days as they finished up the league schedule undefeated at home.

Now the challenge comes as Vanderbilt (21-6, 10-2) goes to Mississippi on Sunday and wraps up the season March 1 at Tennessee -- a place where the Commodores have never won.

"We're starting to figure things out," Vanderbilt senior Christina Wirth said. "This is always when we start playing our best basketball at the end of the season when we should be. It takes a while to figure that out. We've done that. ... Now we're growing up as a team, we're going to go on the road and take care of business."

Auburn (25-2, 10-2) snapped a five-game winning streak and missed a chance to clinch at least a share of its first SEC regular season title since 1999. The Tigers have lost 14 straight in this series. But they wrap up the regular season with two home games, and coach Nell Fortner reminded that the loss is disappointing, not ruinous.

"The road is a tough place to play. We didn't knock shots down in the first half and shot the ball better in the second half. Our defense was great in the second half, and we will learn. We will get better from it," Fortner said.

The Tigers led only once at 3-0 on DeWanna Bonner's opening 3-pointer and trailed by 18. But they pulled to 71-70 on a bucket underneath by Trevesha Jackson with 11.6 seconds left. Sherell Hobbs' 3-pointer from the right corner was well short, and the Commodores rebounded just before the buzzer.

"It was awful tough because they fought back," Vanderbilt coach Melanie Balcomb said. "They're a great team, and we just had a good cushion. We didn't foul. We almost got tentative and didn't get the transition buckets. But down the stretch, everybody made big plays that we needed."

Jence Rhoads had a career-high 16 points for Vanderbilt. Wirth and fellow senior Jennifer Risper had 14 apiece. Risper said a lot of people had asked if they were focused on Senior Night.

"The biggest thing we set a goal to win the SEC, and that started with tonight. So I think we were more concerned with that than we were anything else," Risper said.

Hobbs led Auburn with 19 points. Alli Smalley had 15, Bonner finished with 13, and Whitney Boddie 10.

Auburn came in as the SEC's top scoring offense and best shooting team, and the Tigers had been beating opponents by an average of 17.5 points. This time, the Tigers started slowly, missing six straight shots after Bonner's opening 3. Vandy, the nation's seventh-best shooters, hit four of its first five.

Bonner said they were a little passive early against Vandy's good defense.

"We got up great shots in the first half, just didn't knock them down," Bonner said.

Wirth's layup put Vandy ahead to stay as part of eight straight points, and the Commodores went into halftime up 40-24. They drove to the basket repeatedly for easy layups as Wirth said they took advantage of Auburn's starters trying to stay out of foul trouble.

"While someone may be there, they're not really coming over to block their shots. I think we did a great job of recognizing that and attacking that," Wirth said.

Bonner opened the second half with a putback that gave her 2,001 points for her career to start a 9-2 spurt. Auburn kept whittling away at Vandy's lead until Jackson scored underneath to pull the Tigers within 71-70 with 11.6 seconds left, then Auburn fouled quickly.

But Marsh had hit 19 straight free throws coming into this game, and she didn't miss with a chance to pad the lead. Vandy then fouled with 3.1 seconds left with a couple to give, forcing Auburn into a quick scramble and a late shot that came nowhere near the basket.

Vanderbilt focuses on each possession, not score

Friday, February 20, 2009

By Mike Organ

Vanderbilt Coach Melanie Balcomb said moving into first place in the Southeastern Conference was not what motivated her team Thursday against Auburn.

“I don’t think (the players) are thinking past every possession and I think that’s why we’re playing so well,” Balcomb said. “They’re not thinking what this game means or the magnitude. They’re thinking, ‘We’re playing Auburn today and we’ve got to focus on one possession at a time.’ We’re trying not to focus on the outcome, but focus on the task at hand.”

By claiming a 73-70 win Vanderbilt tied the Tigers for the top spot in the conference. If the Commodores win their last two games they will win their first SEC regular-season championship.

Marsh shows up: Merideth Marsh extended her string of made free throws to 21 by sinking a pair with just 11 seconds left, which put Vandy up 73-70.

Marsh, who picked up her third foul early in the game, finished the game with just five points.

“Merideth has a tendency to want to do too much,” Balcomb said. “Then when she got in foul trouble I really think she took her time and said, ‘OK, I’ve got to let it go.’ I’m really proud of her mental toughness.”

Perfect at home: Vanderbilt finished 7-0 in home games against SEC opponents. It is the first time the Commodores have gone undefeated at home in conference play since 1991.

Big deficit: Vanderbilt put Auburn in an unfamiliar position early. When Vandy jumped to a 25-12 lead it marked the largest deficit Auburn has suffered all season. The Tigers had not trailed by more than 11 points in any game prior to Thursday night. Vanderbilt took an 18-point lead at 30-12 and again at 38-20.

Fun with numbers: Vanderbilt and Auburn finished with the same number of rebounds (30), turnovers (12) and assists (13). Both teams also made the same number of free throws (5) in the first half.

Vanderbilt women are comfortable in system

Thursday, February 19, 2009

By Mike Organ

Vanderbilt women's basketball Coach Melanie Balcomb is increasingly playing the role of spectator as the regular season winds down.

That's the way her players like it.

Tonight, the No. 18 Commodores hope Balcomb will enjoy sitting back and watching them take over first place in the Southeastern Conference, as No. 3 Auburn visits for the women's final home game at Memorial Gym.

"She's talking about how we the players are starting to own it," Vanderbilt junior Merideth Marsh said. "What she means is that at the beginning of the season, she kind of owns it. The coaches are running practices; they're running the games. But it's kind of neat because Sunday in our huddle with about six minutes left, coach asked us, 'What defense do you feel comfortable in?' She's coming to us and asking now instead of just telling us what to do from the bench."

Auburn (25-1, 10-1 SEC) is riding a five-game win streak and clinging to first place in the conference. Vanderbilt (20-6, 9-2) is in second place and has won its past three games.

The Commodores have found a rhythm with just three games left before the conference tournament. That's given them the opportunity to live up to preseason expectations that picked them to win the regular season title.

Auburn was picked to finish third.

"We're starting to click on offense. We're starting to click on defense, and we're owning it," said Marsh, who has averaged nearly 20 points in Vanderbilt's current win streak. "We're running plays. We don't have to look to (Balcomb) and be like, on every dead ball, 'What are we in? What are we running?' We have confidence in each other and we know what we're doing."

Vanderbilt has a solid history against Auburn, boasting a 13-game win streak over the Tigers.

Auburn Coach Nell Fortner, whose team lost to Vanderbilt (49-44) in the opening round of last year's SEC Tournament, said the Commodores also will have an emotional edge tonight.

"There's a lot of implications with this game but for Vanderbilt, it is their senior night and that's always a night where kids want to do exceptionally well," Fortner said. "We've got a lot of tough hurdles here to get over. But I feel good about how we're playing on the road and we're going in there with some road confidence."

Playing Auburn with so much on the line doesn't come as a surprise for Vanderbilt's Hannah Tuomi, who expected several teams to be in the running for the title late in the season.

"Every game we have played in the SEC has been a tough game so far," Tuomi said. "I don't think we knew which teams it would come down to."

Little lineup leads VU women to 80-64 victory over Georgia

Monday, February 16, 2009

By David Boclair

Once again, a small lineup paid big dividends for the Vanderbilt women's basketball team.

Unable to make much headway with a traditional approach, the Commodores went with four guards late in the first half and again for long stretches of the second. The resultant speed advantage and a favorable foul situation was more than enough to carry the 24th-ranked Commodores to an 80-64 victory over Georgia before 5,010 at Memorial Gymnasium on Sunday.

"It creates a lot of mismatches, obviously, defensively and offensively," junior guard Merideth Marsh said. "... It creates tons of opportunities."

VU (20-6, 9-2) pulled away with a 13-0 run, second-half run, which began almost immediately after freshman guard Tia Gibbs, who is 5-foot-9, checked in for 6-foot post player Hannah Tuomi.

When Gibbs entered, the Commodores had a one-point lead, 51-50. Georgia (15-10, 5-5) got no closer than nine in the final eight minutes.

Christina Wirth started the surge with a 3-pointer. Gibbs then scored five straight points followed by five more from Marsh, who is 5-foot-6.

Wirth finished with a game-high 21 points, and Marsh added 18. Three other VU players, including both Gibbs and Tuomi, scored 10.

A similar approach worked in an overtime victory Jan. 29 against Arkansas and again last Thursday in an 18-point rout of No. 9 Florida.

The key is 5-foot-9 senior guard Jennifer Risper, who moves to one of the two post positions in that alignment. Risper is unquestionably the strongest player on the team, a trait that allows her to hold her ground against the larger bodies such as Georgia's 6-foot-5 Angel Robinson, 6-foot-1 Danielle Taylor and 6-foot-2 Porsha Phillips.

"Two things happen when (Risper) plays post," coach Melanie Balcomb said. "She can attack them off the dribble and get them in foul trouble, and she can defend. Because she's small and quick and physical, she can get around better than some of our post (players) who are big."

Risper finished with a team-high seven rebounds in addition to 10 points, three assists and a steal. As a team, Vanderbilt actually outrebounded Georgia 36-33.

She didn't have to deal with Phillips down the stretch.

That's because the Lady Bulldogs' sophomore forward was assessed her fourth foul when she was called for a charge with 15:04 to play, Then before coach Andy Landers inserted a substitute, she fouled out 11 seconds later as she tried to stop a driving Wirth.

That left Taylor (20 points, five rebounds) and Robinson (17 points, eight rebounds) to man the inside the rest of the way. Robinson ended up playing 36 minutes, including 19 of 20 in the second half, and Taylor played a career-high 33.

“(Phillips’ fifth foul) eliminated the rotation in the post,” Landers said. “We had to play those two kids the rest of the way. Robinson probably needed a little bit of a blow at some point, but never got it.”

Similarly, Phillips picked up her third foul with 8:15 to play in the first half and spent the rest of the time until intermission on the bench.

The Lady Bulldogs led by five, 20-15, when she went out, which was roughly two minutes after the first time VU went with the four guards. At halftime, the Commodores were in front 34-29.

“I felt like we needed to attack them and get them in foul trouble because we couldn’t shoot over them,” Balcomb said. “Defending, we couldn’t get around them and they were shooting over us.

“It doesn’t sound right that I went with a 5-9 guard to defend their high-low.”

One look at the final score, though, explains it all.

Vandy's Merideth Marsh extends free-throw streak in win

Monday, February 16, 2009

By Mike Organ

Christina Wirth whispered into Merideth Marsh's ear Sunday as No. 24 Vanderbilt started pulling away from Georgia.

It was something that might put added pressure on some players, but Marsh, who is brimming with confidence after making 19 consecutive free throws, was appreciative.

"She just said, 'I love it when you go to the free throw line because that's just two points,'" Marsh said.

Marsh made five free throws during a critical stretch when Vanderbilt broke open a 47-47 tie and pulled in front 64-50.

She finished 7-of-7 from the line and scored 18 points in the Commodores' 80-64 win.

For the season, Marsh has made 37 of 40 (92.5 percent) free throws. She has missed only one free throw against an SEC opponent.

"Free throws are something that I've always been good at," Marsh said. "I want to get to the free-throw line because I know I can knock them down."

Big defense: Vanderbilt held Georgia to just three field goals in the final 6:20.

"We were scoring and we couldn't get stops," Coach Melanie Balcomb said. "So we just got on them defensively. We kept talking about the high-low, ball pressure and checking out and giving them one shot. We were saying, 'We have got to get stops,' and were talking about nothing else."

On guard(s): Balcomb kept four guards on the floor for long stretches in an effort take advantage of the Commodores' speed advantage over the taller Bulldogs. Jennifer Risper, a 5-9 senior who normally plays guard, moved to the post.

"We were having trouble defending their posts ... we couldn't shoot over them and defending them, we couldn't get around them and they were shooting over us," Balcomb said. "When Jen Risper plays post, two things happen. She can attack them off the dribble and get them in foul trouble. She can also defend. Because she's small and quick and physical, she can get around better than some of our posts that are big."

Gibbs gets going: Freshman Tia Gibbs had not scored in the previous three games but came off the bench to score 10 points for Vanderbilt. She was 4-of-5 from the field.

Vanderbilt women upset No. 9 Florida

Friday, February 13, 2009

By Maurice Patton

Led by Merideth Marsh's record-tying performance, Vanderbilt displayed its long-range shooting ability early and often Thursday night in an 84-68 Southeastern Conference victory over No. 9 Florida at Memorial Gym.

Marsh connected on a career-high eight 3-pointers — tying the Commodore single-game record set by Abi Ramsey four years ago against the Gators — and scored a career- and game-high 26 points as 24th-ranked Vanderbilt (19-6, 8-2 SEC) won for the fifth time in its last six outings.

“She’s really focused right now,” Vanderbilt coach Melanie Balcomb said of the junior guard, who has scored 13 or more points in each of her last six games and has hit at least three 3-pointers in each of her last five. “It didn’t matter if it was against their man or zone defense. She got shots all sorts of ways and she shot it with a lot of confidence.”

The Commodores pulled into a second-place tie with Florida (22-3, 8-2), a game behind Auburn in the SEC standings, and snapped the Gators’ league-leading seven-game winning streak.

Marsh and Christina Wirth combined for six 3-pointers in the opening eight minutes, as Vanderbilt took a 24-7 lead. The visitors cut the deficit to 31-25, capping an 18-6 run with a Sha Brooks transition basket at the three-minute mark, and trailed 37-29 at halftime as Vanderbilt shot 6-for-21 from the floor after hitting 7 of its first 14 shots.

“Our game plan was to jump on them the first four minutes, and to come back in the second half and jump on them the first four minutes,” said Marsh. “We kept saying, ‘make a statement.’ We wanted to let them know we weren’t fooling around.”

Marsh hit four 3-pointers in a five-minute stretch of the second half to help the Commodores extend the lead back up to 66-46. Her final 3, with 5:15 left, was followed by a pair of Hannah Tuomi free throws that gave Vanderbilt an 80-53 cushion.

Wirth finished with 20 points, including five 3-pointers. Tuomi scored 17 points and Jennifer Risper 12 for Vanderbilt.

Azania Stewart scored 16 points and Steffi Sorensen 11 for Florida. Brooks, who had scored 29 points in each of her last two games — including Sunday’s 66-57 win over Tennessee — finished with just seven points when she fouled out with 4:37 remaining.

“We were trying to make Brooks work really hard before she caught the ball,” Balcomb said. “She’s a tremendous player, but I didn’t see (previous opponents) trying to keep the ball out of her hands to start with. We wanted to wear her down so she was exhausted by the time she caught it.”

Up the charts: With five 3s against Florida, Wirth moved past Julie Powell (203, 1991-94) and into third place on Vanderbilt’s career 3-point list. Wirth now has 206. She trails current Commodore assistant Caroline Williams (238, 2004-07) and Ramsey (252, 2002-05).

UK women fall to Vandy

Monday, February 9, 2009

By Jen Smith

Vanderbilt was too good too many times for Kentucky to get its upset on Sunday.

Three times in the second half in Memorial Coliseum, the Cats tied the game with the No. 20 Commodores and three times Vanderbilt found an answer.

In the end, the depleted Cats had no surges left in them and fell to Vanderbilt for the 13th straight time, 72-62.

“We tried awfully hard to make some plays to get back in it and hung with them and kept answering, but that’s what’s so good about Vanderbilt,” UK Coach Matthew Mitchell said. “They made big plays every time they needed to.”

UK’s last big charge came via a 15-6 run in the middle of the second half. Victoria Dunlap made a shot in the lane to tie it 46-46 with 8:30 remaining.

The Cats felt like they were just one big shot, one big possession away from surging ahead with 6,051 screaming fans behind them.

“If we had that lead, I’m sure we could have pulled away, we wouldn’t be thinking about being tired,” guard Amani Franklin said, “but when you’re down and frustrated, you get unfocused. We can’t have that.”

Fatigue and Vanderbilt’s defense became UK’s undoing.

After Kentucky tied it, the Commodores used a 14-3 run capped by a Merideth Marsh three-pointer to grab a 60-49 lead. In that span, UK missed seven straight shots and turned the ball over twice.

“We decided at that point we weren’t going to let them keep that momentum,” said Vandy’s Christina Wirth, who had a game-high 20 points and seven rebounds. “At some point you make a decision that when they get momentum you stop that and you grab your own.”

The Commodores held the Cats just shy of seven minutes without a field goal during their big second-half run.

“We had composure and stuck together,” Wirth said. “We just decided we’re going to outwork them, we’re going to make those big plays, especially on defense.”

When Franklin, who finished with 14 points, scored five in a row to cut the Vandy lead to six, Wirth responded with her own five-point spree to keep extending the lead.

“She just made big shot after big shot,” Mitchell said of Wirth, one of four Vandy players in double figures.

Marsh, a former Louisville Christian star, had 15 points. Hannah Tuomi added 13 points and six boards inside.

As a team, Vanderbilt (18-6, 7-2 Southeastern Conference) was impressive on offense, making 64.1 percent of its shots overall and 70.6 percent in the second half. The Commodores, who turned the ball over 23 times, missed just five shots in the second half.

“Once we wore them down a bit by pushing it every possession we could, things opened up and got easier for us,” Vandy Coach Melanie Balcomb said.

Mitchell denied that his team ran out of gas.

“They know where we are with our rotations and we have kids that are going to have to play a bunch of minutes, that’s the reality of it,” Mitchell said. “Really when the game was being decided, Vanderbilt had their same players on the floor, too.”

But it’s a long SEC season and UK (13-11, 3-6) has mostly been using the same six players.

Even UK’s players conceded that the big runs they made took some of the energy out of them.

“I’m pretty tired,” said Dunlap, who had 17 points and nine rebounds while playing 40 minutes. “But you try to play as many minutes as you can and not think about being tired.”

Dunlap had little help in the post with front-court mate Eleia Roddy in foul trouble nearly the entire game. She played just 12 minutes and had five points and no rebounds.

The Cats’ second-leading scorer and rebounder was sent to the bench with her second foul just two minutes into the game.

In Roddy’s absence, senior Jenné Jackson came off the bench to lead UK at the break with six points and two rebounds. The ex-North Hardin star’s first-half points tied her season high, but she never got in the game in the second half.

Roddy picked up her third and fourth fouls a little more than three minutes into the second half.

“It was difficult for her to get in a rhythm,” Mitchell said. “Once she got that fourth foul she was out of sorts then.”

Merideth Marsh reaches 3-point zone

Monday, February 2, 2009

By Mike Organ

Merideth Marsh has made 10 of 11 3-pointers in Vanderbilt's past two games.

The junior from Louisville, Ky., made all five of her 3-point attempts Sunday and helped the Commodores beat Alabama 88-64.

"I guess I'm in a rhythm," Marsh said. "I've been trying to get in the gym and get some shots up. Sure I'm making the shots, but I have to give the credit to my teammates. I'm not the one setting the screen or making the pass."

Marsh made 3-pointers several times when Alabama rallied, Tide Coach Wendell Hudson said.

"It's not just making the 3-pointers; it's when she made them," Hudson said. "You kind of feel like you're making a run and you feel like things might happen because you've chipped into that lead and then she steps up and makes a big 3-pointer."

5-on-4: Game officials allowed play to begin with 9:18 left and only four Vanderbilt players on the floor. Marsh was being treated for a cut on her knee, which was bleeding when Alabama in-bounded the ball on the opposite side of the court. Vanderbilt fans yelled at the officials, who eventually stopped play.

Biggest win: The 24-point winning margin was the largest this season for Vanderbilt against a Southeastern Conference opponent. The 88 points was the most the Commodores have scored in an SEC game.

Champions reunion: The Vanderbilt team that won the 1983-84 Women's National Invitation Tournament, the first national championship for the school, had a reunion on its 25th anniversary Sunday.

Members of the team introduced at halftime included: Karen Booker, Jackie Cowan Ransom, Dana Turner Reece, Harriet Brumfield Mason and Donna Atkinson. Teresa Lawrence-Phillips, an assistant coach on the team, Pam Neblett Moran, a part-time assistant, Shirley Simmons, a trainer, and June Stewart, the team's sports information director, also were recognized.

The team posted a 23-9 record and defeated Chattanooga 67-66 in the WNIT championship.

Vanderbilt owns Arkansas in OT

Friday, January 30, 2009

By Mike Organ

The No. 20 Vanderbilt women's basketball team played well for a total of just 15 minutes Thursday night against Arkansas, according to Coach Melanie Balcomb.

Fortunately for Vanderbilt, five of those minutes came in overtime.
Advertisement

Vanderbilt outscored the Razorbacks 13-2 in the extra period and held on for a 72-61 win.

"We played the first five minutes great of the first half," Balcomb said. "We played the first five minutes of the second half great and then the first four minutes or five minutes of (overtime) great. It was really tough to watch us play really well and then relax and let people back into the game."

A Memorial Gym crowd of 4,112 saw the Commodores (16-5, 5-1 SEC) let a 15-point lead slip away late in the second. The Razorbacks (12-9, 1-5) finished regulation on an 18-4 run which tied it at 59-59.

The collapse was reminiscent of Vandy's game against Notre Dame on Dec. 30 when the Fighting Irish overcame an 18-point second-half deficit to win 59-57.

"Honestly, I don't know if I can pinpoint one specific problem," said Merideth Marsh, who had a career-high 21 points. "Like coach said, we probably played about 15 minutes total — five here, five there, five there. In between there it's kind of like we got comfortable with our lead. That's what we've tended to do before."

Vanderbilt had trouble against Arkansas' 6-foot-3 junior Ashley McCray, who came off the bench and scored a career-high 20 points and grabbed a career-high 15 rebounds. She scored seven points in the final 14 minutes.

Arkansas' only lead came with 3:33 remaining in overtime when Ceira Ricketts' layup gave the Razorbacks a 61-59 edge.

"It was a game of spurts where at times we played so incredibly hard and rebounded so well and defended so well," Arkansas Coach Tom Collen said. "During those times we looked like we could beat anybody in the country. And then there were phases where we would throw the ball away, not make good decisions. I guess that's a sign of a young team."

Vanderbilt's Wirth gets ahead by doing her 'homework'

Thursday, January 22, 2009

By David Boclair

As the national anthem plays before every Vanderbilt women's basketball game, Christina Wirth stands in a line with her teammates, coaches and support staff.

But she is alone.

Eyes closed, head bowed, hands folded at her waist she temporarily transports herself to a place where she can be one with a single thought. A prayer, to be exact.

It is not a moment of hopeful desperation. It is an instant of confident reflection, one in which she reaffirms the choices she has made and the preparation she has undertaken.

"I'm just thanking God for the opportunity to play, to be where I am, to be at Vanderbilt and the team that I'm on, and I just pray that people will see Him through me as I play," she said. "One of the major things I pray for is that even through my failures and my mistakes He can be glorified."

As with anything failure is a possibility, of course. When Wirth is involved, though, it is not a probability.

The senior out of Mesa, Ariz., leaves little to chance when it comes to basketball or anything else. She talks often about "doing my homework" whether that involves mastering some of the subtleties of her sport, making life-altering decisions such as where to attend college or ... well, actually doing school work outside the classroom.

STUDY HABITS

Wirth was a 4.0 student all the way through Seton Catholic High School. She finally made her first B as a college freshman. Yet as she has progressed to the latter stages of a nursing education (she will begin a clinical rotation at one of the Vanderbilt hospitals this semester) she has maintained a 3.6 average at one of the country's renowned academic institutions.

As a member of VU's basketball team, she has virtually mastered four different positions in coach Melanie Balcomb's schemes – everything except point guard – and has thrived because of her attention to details such as footwork ("That's a dying art," she says), positioning and a thorough understanding of the opposition.

"She's all about preparation," Balcomb said. "So she's going to prepare in practice, she's going to prepare mentally and physically before a game, she's going to know the (scouting reports). That's why she has such a good basketball IQ – she's prepared and she's super-intelligent.

"She's going to study the other team that day, the way she studies for an exam."

ONE FOR THE TEAM

Wirth conceded that she didn't know the first thing about Vanderbilt when the recruiting process started, but "I did my homework" and eventually accepted the Commodores' scholarship offer over one from Stanford.

With the end of her college career roughly two months away, she is poised to become the 18th player in VU women's basketball history to score at least 1,300 career points, likely in one of the next two games (Thursday at Georgia or Sunday at South Carolina), and has a chance eventually to move into the all-time top 10.

Athletic department officials and coaches have been touting her as an All-America candidate from the start of the season, but individual records and honors hold little appeal for the second-oldest of six children. Her desire is to be connected to something larger than herself in a way that only a team sport allows.

Not coincidentally, she won the 'team ball competition' at the 2005 McDonald's High School All-American game.

"She is completely down to earth, completely humble with everything – all the accolades she has and everything," teammate Merideth Marsh, a junior guard, said. "Some players don't know how to balance that ... but if you know her, you would never look at her and be like, 'She's very cocky.'"

It was that attitude which prompted Wirth to go to nearby Scottsdale during her senior year in high school to watch a team from California play in a tournament and "do a little homework."

FINDING FRIENDSHIP

She already had signed her letter-of-intent and was told by the coaches that she would be roommates the following year with a fellow incoming freshman, Jennifer Risper, who was the star for Canyon Springs High School, which just so happened to be in the area.

"I had been hurt, it was my first game back ... and our team lost," Risper said. "I get up to leave the (meeting) room and Tina's standing there with a big smile on her face. We hadn't met, I didn't know what she looked like or who she was.

"She's like, 'I'm Christina.' That completely changed my mood. It didn't matter what had happened, I was just so excited to meet my roommate for college. I will always remember that."

That bit of preparation laid the foundation for a friendship that flourishes to this day. The two are roommates again this school year after having separated the previous two. Neither has a car, but they don't have to go to great lengths to keep each other entertained.

"She is my best friend, and I know I'm hers," Risper said. "It's just kind of cool. I didn't know I was going to come to college and meet someone ... you meet tons of people, but I know me and her are going to stay friends forever."

EARLY DECISION

It was not the first time Wirth acted earlier than most.

She was just 11 years old when she decided to make basketball her sport of choice over any number of other ones she tried and at which she excelled, most notably swimming. From that point, she dedicated herself to becoming the best basketball player she could.

Not only did she attend camps and participate in AAU programs, she also did more than her share of 'home' work. In this case, that meant shooting baskets in the driveway of her family home until midnight or later.

"I can remember countless hours in my driveway at midnight with the light on just shooting," she said. "I just never got sick of it. That was something I could do every day and I looked forward to it.

"I kind of liked it to be something where I could tell myself, 'No one else is working out right now.' That was

kind of like my time to get ahead. I thought about it as working while other people were sleeping. That appealed to me.”

Those sessions paid off in numerous high school All-American honors and her selection to multiple USA Basketball national teams and programs.

Later this year, she likely will be selected in the WNBA draft and – if given the opportunity – will pursue a professional career in the United States and/or internationally.

Whatever team she joins should expect her to be prepared.

“I was actually talking to someone (recently) about what if I would have picked a different sport,” she said. “Honestly, ... I think if I did pick another sport at that age I would have been successful at it too because of my work ethic.

“I definitely think God has blessed me with the talent to play basketball. ... But I think if you really just work hard at something you can be really good at it.”

It certainly reduces the risk of failure.

Chisholm's play off bench lifts VU women to victory over LSU

Sunday, January 18, 2009

By David Boclair

LSU did not get much from its bench on Sunday. VU got what it usually does from one of its key bench players.

Forward Chanel Chisholm accounted for 15 of the 18th-ranked Commodores' 20 bench points in a 75-67 victory over the Lady Tigers. Conversely, LSU used only three reserves – none scored a point.

“It felt like any other game,” Chisholm said. “I don't go in looking to score or anything like that, so whatever I get, I just get whether that's offensive rebounds or attacking – whatever opens up.”

The 5-foot-11 sophomore did all of those things as Vanderbilt (14-4 overall) improved to 3-0 in the SEC for the first time since 2000-01.

Her point total was a career-high and included six field goals (on 11 attempts), also a career-high and tied for the team lead. She had three of the Commodores' 21 offensive rebounds, had two baskets on put-backs and added a pair of steals.

“The player who hurt us was Chisholm,” LSU coach Van Chancellor said. “She's a kid who really hurt us. She got inside. She scored. She does a nice job.”

The Lady Tigers (9-6, 2-1) were without starter Katherine Graham, who was injured and missed her first game. Still, they got career-high performances from junior Allison Hightower (22 points) and freshman Ayana Dunning (20 points).

They shot 49.1 percent from the field (27-55) – the best by a VU opponent this season – and did not attempt a single 3-point shot.

Vanderbilt did not lead until Chisholm's layup with 13 seconds to play in the first half made it 31-30. She scored four points in a 6-0 run to close the half.

“She's comes off the bench and makes us better,” coach Melanie Balcomb said. “That's what you want is for kids to come off the bench and give you that energy and that spark. She certainly did again (Sunday).”

This time she did it when the Commodores' two starting forwards were not necessarily at their best.

Christina Wirth led VU with 17 points (15 in the second half) but made just six of a career-high 22 shots. Hannah Tuomi had a team-high 10 rebounds (six offensive) but committed seven turnovers and was limited by foul trouble in the second half.

“(Chisholm) is just a spark,” Wirth said. “She does that every day in practice so it's not a surprise to us. She just comes in, and she's a great driver, a great finisher and she just works so hard.

“Those are the things you can't take away from someone. We know what we're going to get from her every night.”

LSU had nothing of the sort.



Vandy presents tough challenge for LSU women

Sunday, January 18, 2009

By Scott Hotard

A week ago, some might have wondered why Vanderbilt — barely in the Top 25, without a victory over a ranked team — had been given the nod as Southeastern Conference women's basketball preseason favorite.

Not anymore. On the second playing date of the SEC schedule, the Commodores welcomed two-time reigning national champion Tennessee to Memorial Gymnasium. The roar of Vandy's 74-58 triumph could be heard throughout the conference.

“Right now,” LSU coach Van Chancellor said, “they’re pretty salty. Any team that can beat Tennessee like that is playing great basketball and doing a lot of good things.”

Vandy coach Melanie Balcomb's first victory over the rival Lady Vols bumped the Commodores (13-4, 2-0) six spots to No. 18 in the latest AP poll. It dropped Tennessee six notches to No. 13, its lowest ranking in 23 years. Some timing for Chancellor's Lady Tigers, Vandy's first opponent since Statement Sunday.

LSU won't have sophomore guard Katherine Graham, who sprained her left knee in Wednesday's win at UNO. That leaves the Lady Tigers (9-5, 2-0) with a shuffled lineup for today's 2 p.m. tip-off in Nashville, Tenn. Just what that lineup would be, Chancellor wasn't sure. But it would definitely include three freshmen: regular starters Ayana Dunning and LaSondra Barrett in the post, plus guard Destini Hughes or forward Courtney Jones.

“The way we're playing,” Chancellor said, “I feel good about our team. It's just you never know. We're going to be on the road with a young team coming off an injury against one of the best teams in the league.”

Not that LSU isn't hot. The Lady Tigers opened SEC play with a couple of statements of their own, beating Arkansas and Alabama by 41 combined points. This from a team picked fifth in the conference's preseason poll.

With a regular-season SEC winning streak at 17 games, LSU is tied with Vandy and No. 6 Auburn (17-0, 2-0) atop the standings. It has lost only twice in 10 games, including a 76-63 defeat at No. 1 Connecticut.

But this could be LSU's toughest test the rest of the regular season. The challenges, after all, aren't limited to the hot, veteran squad the Lady Tigers will face or the lineup adjustments they must make. Memorial Gym, with its end-of-the-floor bench locations, presents unique obstacles for any visiting squad — especially a young one.

With such a youthful group, Chancellor has spent much time pacing the sideline and barking calls from the sideline this season. He will have less of a role today.

“That is the hardest place I've seen to communicate with your players,” Chancellor said of Vandy's 46-year-old arena. “Nothing compares to it.”

Vandy is 9-1 in the building this season. That includes the big breakthrough against the Lady Vols, who entered last Sunday's contest with a 16-game win streak in the series.

“Vandy has a physicality about them — more than I've seen them have,” Chancellor said. “They're just play very hard-nosed basketball right now. They're playing real aggressive defensively, real aggressive going to the boards. This is a different Vandy team.”

Vandy women learn to deal with halftime leads

Monday, January 12, 2009

By David Boclair

Happiness is a luxury Melanie Balcomb cannot afford. Not during the course of a game, at least.

The Vanderbilt women's basketball coach found that out the hard way in recent weeks when big halftime leads against Tennessee State and Alabama were drastically reduced, and an 18-point second-half edge over Notre Dame ultimately was not enough.

"I've learned from those other games," she said. "Every team is different, and preseason – and every game – is just figuring (the players) out."

When her team took an eight-point lead to the locker room against Tennessee on Sunday, she decided to keep the compliments to a minimum. The approach worked as the Commodores led throughout the entire second half and built their advantage to as many as 21 points on their way to a 74-58 victory, their first triumph over the Lady Vols in nine seasons.

"I went into the locker room trying to find things we did poorly, and (told) them that second effort's great, but we need a third effort," Balcomb said. "... I tried to be very tough on them at halftime."

Jennifer Risper had a steal and an offensive rebound within the first 15 seconds of the second half. Leading scorer Christina Wirth made a jumper 1:21 into the half, and after having been shut out for the first 20 minutes, finished with 10 points.

Fewer than three minutes after intermission the lead had grown to 13 points.

"We just took the lead into the locker room, had a different talk at halftime than we usually do, and we took the momentum into the second half and ran with it," Risper said. "We just have to come out and play every game, and that's what we did."

Just three days earlier they led Alabama by 25 at halftime but held on for a nine-point victory after the lead shrunk to four with just under two minutes remaining. Similarly, on Dec. 19 they led TSU by 27 at intermission, grew the margin to as many as 35 but won by only 16.

In their next-to-last non-conference contest, they fell victim to the largest comeback in Notre Dame history, when they were beaten 59-57.

"We just knew we had to get the wrinkles out after our loss against Notre Dame and our performance against Alabama," Wirth said. "Coming out of the half (against Tennessee), we knew we couldn't play not to lose, we had a lead and we were going to keep it."

As a result, they can expect to keep hearing about all of their mistakes – real or perceived – at halftime of future contests, regardless of the score.

"I felt like I made a big mistake against Notre Dame and we weren't tough enough on them at halftime," Balcomb said. "Then at Alabama we had a big lead and let them back in the game. After that game I just said, 'Apparently my halftime talk was ineffective.'"

Vandy, Lady Vols haven't hit stride

Sunday, January 11, 2009

By Mike Organ

No question about it: The Vanderbilt and Tennessee women's basketball teams have lots of unanswered questions.

Tennessee charged into the season after winning back-to-back national championships. Vanderbilt came in as the favorite, according to a vote of the coaches and the media, to win the Southeastern Conference.
Advertisement

But so far the No. 7 Lady Vols (12-2, 1-0 SEC) and No. 24 Commodores (12-4, 1-0) have stumbled on the way into their showdown today at Memorial Gym.

Early in the season, Tennessee lost to Virginia (83-82) before barely getting by Chattanooga (66-63).

Two weeks ago, the Lady Vols struggled before pulling away against Gonzaga. They scored their fewest points ever (13) in a half and trailed by 20 against No. 17 Rutgers, before coming back with a 55-51 win on Jan. 6.

Vanderbilt lost three out of six games during a stretch that ended Jan. 3.

"I can't get a good pulse on this team as far as why we are not a 40-minute team," UT Coach Pat Summitt said. "That's what we've been talking about a lot because we go to Gonzaga and we don't play well in the first half. We come back and have a great second half. Then we go to Rutgers and do the same thing."

Summitt lost all five starters from last year's team, which claimed the program's eighth national title. This year, three starters are freshmen and one is a sophomore.

"Lack of consistency may be part of what happens with youth," Summitt said. "We have players come in and play for a half and then pull a no-show."

The rivals also mirrored each other Thursday with less than stellar performances in their SEC openers.

Vanderbilt held off Alabama, a team the Commodores beat last year by 45 points, in an 85-76 win. The Crimson Tide outscored Vandy by 16 points in the second half. Tennessee couldn't shake Kentucky until late in a 69-64 victory.

Both teams likely suffered first conference-game jitters, Vanderbilt sophomore Hannah Tuomi said.

"Everyone in the SEC has obviously improved from the bottom to the top," Tuomi said. "Every game is going to be tough. And when you play teams outside of the SEC like the Big 12 and Big Ten, it's such a different style of play than when you get into the SEC — your first game may not be your best."

The Commodores hope to snap a 16-game losing streak against the Lady Vols.

Point guard will coach: Redshirt sophomore Cait McMahan, who started six games at point guard for the Lady Vols this season, will become a student assistant coach because of a recurring knee injury, the school announced Saturday.

Risper racks up rebounds, other stats for VU women

Sunday, January 11, 2009

By David Boclair

Jennifer Risper does not necessarily do it all. Instead, the Vanderbilt senior tries to do all the things no team can do without.

“Everybody on this team can’t be the scorer or can’t be the passer,” she said. “We’ll never be a good team that way. You have to have a mix of people who can set the screens and make the right reads and rebound and do things that sometimes don’t even show up on the box score.”

“I think the more you have people who are willing to do whatever it takes – that even means hard stuff or the little things – the better we’ll be as a team.”

Vanderbilt will need to be at its best Sunday when it hosts the University of Tennessee (2 p.m., Memorial Gymnasium) in a critical early conference contest.

The Commodores (12-4) were the preseason pick of the media and SEC coaches to win the regular-season conference championship. With three losses in their last six, however, they dropped to 24th in the national rankings. The Lady Vols (12-2), who have 52 victories in 58 all-time meetings with VU, have won five in a row and have climbed to No. 7 in the latest AP Poll.

A 5-foot-9 guard, Risper actually was the scorer Thursday in the Commodores’ SEC opener, an 85-76 victory at Alabama. She had a team-high 17 points, including five straight after a big halftime lead was cut to two with fewer than two minutes remaining.

That performance was the exception, though. The only other time she ever scored so much was when she had 20 on Jan. 27, 2008 against Ole Miss. Through 16 games this season, she is fifth on the team in points per game (7.4), barely ahead of reserve Chanel Chisolm (7.3). Risper, however, leads the team in steals, is second in rebounds and assists, and has a team-high 39 fouls.

“I think what separates a lot of college teams is guards who are willing to rebound,” coach Melanie Balcomb said. “I always thought height was overrated, and right now we’re stronger and more athletic than we’ve ever been. Jen Risper led us in rebounding (last season), and she’s the strongest kid I have.”

Risper, likewise, led the Commodores’ in rebounding through most of non-conference play this season before she was overtaken late by Hannah Tuomi. However, Risper has been the team’s most consistent rebounder at both ends of the floor.

She is second to Christina Wirth in defensive rebounds and second to Tuomi for offensive boards.

“It’s an offensive thing and a defensive thing,” she said. “Plus, I want our shooters on the outside to know it’s OK, that I’m going to go in there and try to get that rebound for them.”

“Definitely, one of my goals is to lead this team in rebounding. Hannah’s (caught) me, so I’m going to have to go get a little more.”

Of course, that’s just one of the things she’ll be doing.

VU women look to right ship vs. TSU

Friday, December 19, 2008

By David Boclair

The losses have continued for Vanderbilt women's basketball coach Melanie Balcomb ever since her team was beaten 50-47 by California-Riverside back on Dec. 6. Never mind that the Commodores have not played another game.

"I lose weight and I lose sleep after we lose," Balcomb said. "So it's all good for me right before the holidays. ... We all can stand to lose weight right before the holidays."

While Balcomb has struggled to find her appetite, her players have had nearly two weeks to chew on the memory of a contest in which they made just one-third of their field goal attempts overall and one of 14 three-pointers, and in which they led three different times – the last with less than a minute to play.

All of that against an opponent that had lost twice as many games (four) as it had won (two) at the start of that contest.

They finally get the opportunity to wash the bad taste from their mouth Friday when they host Tennessee State (7 p.m., Memorial Gymnasium).

"It bothers you because you want to get it back," senior co-captain Jennifer Risper said. "You know you can't get that game back, but you just want to go out and play the next game and unleash everything that you didn't do in the game before."

In recent years, they have done exactly that. The last time VU (8-2, 19th in the Associated Press Rankings and 20th in the coaches' poll) lost two in a row was Feb. 12 and 19, 2006 – a span of 84 games.

When the Commodores lost for the first time this season (50-42 at Michigan), they came back five days later and whipped Davidson 82-50. They had a full two-week break last season after being beaten by Tennessee in the SEC tournament, but they opened the NCAA tournament with a 28-point victory over Montana.

Since they narrowly avoided a two-game losing streak with a 67-66 victory over South Carolina on Jan. 11, 2007, they have won eight of 12 following a defeat by more than 20 points and just one of those 12 by fewer than 10 (67-59 over Georgia last season).

"You can't dwell on it, so in practice you talk about it at times but other than that you move on and get better," Risper said. "It still bothers you, but you have to move forward and look at the next team."

In TSU (4-7), they will face an opponent which has lost two of its last three, most recently 64-60 on Tuesday at North Carolina Central.

"We're ready to play our next game," sophomore guard Jence Rhoads said. "We want to get past the loss and totally forget about it."

"... I think it's kind of eating at us."

Unlike what Balcomb has been doing.



Homecoming for former Canyon Springs stars Risper, Jones

Saturday, December 6, 2008

By Allan Steele

When he was hired as the UC Riverside women's basketball coach four years ago, one of the first priorities for John Margaritis was to check out the local talent and see who he could recruit.

He quickly found that one of the area's best players already had her mind set on heading to Nashville, Tenn.

"Here's the kid who's going to Vanderbilt," Margaritis thought after seeing Jennifer Risper play.

Risper had helped lead Moreno Valley Canyon Springs High to a CIF title and a berth in the state championship game. She was a do-everything guard who could score, defend, pass and rebound -- traits that quickly caught the attention of college coaches.

Margaritis admits there wasn't much of a recruiting war. UCR was still finding its way as a Division I program. Vanderbilt was, well, Vanderbilt, a major program in the tough Southeastern Conference.

Four years later, Risper leads the No. 16 Commodores (8-1) into the Student Recreation Center for a homecoming matchup today that should be emotional for the senior.

The trip west already has included a win at Cal State Fullerton and a ceremony Friday at Canyon Springs High, where Risper and former teammate Brandi Jones became the first players to have their jerseys retired.

About 30 friends and family are expected to attend today's game at UCR (2-4).

"I just want to make them proud and thank them for being there for me," Risper said by phone, adding there might be some butterflies prior to the game.

After reaching the Sweet 16 a year ago, Vanderbilt was picked as the preseason favorite over perennial power Tennessee in the SEC.

Risper, just as she did at Canyon Springs, has done just about everything on the court. She's among the conference leaders in assists and steals.

Last year, she was selected to the SEC all-defensive team and was among the conference leaders in rebounding and free-throw percentage.

UCR assistant coach Jason Flowers put together the scouting report on Vanderbilt.

"The thing that sets her apart is how hard she plays," Flowers said. "Everything comes back to that. ... She's aggressive. Her energy sparks the rest of the group."

Risper said the choice to attend Vanderbilt was easy. A knee injury before her senior season may have scared away some schools, but not Vanderbilt.

"They were very loyal," Risper said. "I just felt like God wanted me here. From the beginning, I felt this is where I'm supposed to be."

Canyon Springs coach Gail Hale said she knew during their tryouts as freshmen that Risper and Jones would be special.

“There was no question the caliber of players they would be and what they would contribute to our program,” Hale said by phone. “Both Jennifer and Brandi played every position for us. There were times when we had five guards in and Jen and Brandi would go down to the post. They handled the ball, they could shoot. They did it all and they’re still doing that for their college teams.”

Jones, who was known as Brandi Jones-Fitzgerald in high school, plays for Nevada and is among the team leaders in scoring and rebounding. Because the Wolfpack also are in Southern California playing at UC Santa Barbara and UCLA, Hale said it was the perfect time to get the two players together for the jersey-retirement ceremony.

“It’s an honor,” Jones said by phone, adding that she didn’t even think about going to college until late in her high school career.

“Coach Hale pushed me and I decided to push myself,” Jones said. “My senior year, I passed my math class to get into UNR and it was an amazing feeling.”

Risper said she was excited when she saw Riverside on the schedule. Margaritis joked he hopes she doesn’t get too excited because Vanderbilt will be a tough matchup even without an overly energized Risper in the middle of the action.

“I just hope I do well,” she said.

Tuomi is 'The Janitor' for VU women

Tuesday, December 2, 2008

By David Boclair

Call her 'The Janitor.'

With her blue-collar approach to basketball and her willingness to do the dirty work that others won't – or can't – Hannah Tuomi is not just an indomitable, but also an invaluable presence for Vanderbilt's women's basketball team this season.

"She does all the dirty work," coach Melanie Balcomb said. "She cleans up the mess. That's what I always say, 'Clean it up Hannah.' She cleans up her mess (and) other people's messes."

At 6-foot-1, the sophomore forward has shown real polish as a post player through the Commodores' first seven games.

She is second on the team at 13.1 points per contest and is tied for the lead in offensive and total rebounds. She has a nice, tidy field goal percentage (66.1) and has yet to make fewer than half of her attempts in any game.

"Hannah's just consistent every night," senior forward Christina Wirth said. "You know she's always posting so you feel confident throwing her the ball. Her offense is just steady-Eddie. It's never like she's having a horrible shooting night."

"She just gets it done – and a lot of them are offensive rebounds where she gets it and puts them back in. That's the kind of stuff that no matter what the other team does, she's going to be consistent."

That consistency produced double-figure point totals in each of VU's first six games – and she was the only Commodore who did so. That matched her total of 10-plus point performances for all of 2007-08.

The streak ended during Saturday's victory over Virginia Tech, when she attempted a season-low five shots but still made four and finished with eight points.

"We play as a team," Tuomi said. "I think that's the most important thing. If I'm not doing well one night, somebody else could be doing well. It's just about a team effort, really."

When VU hosts Radford on Tuesday (7 p.m., Memorial Gymnasium), Tuomi will be at least one inch taller than anyone who attempts to guard her.

Size, however, rarely is an issue with her, even when she gives away a few inches. Her attention to detail and her work ethic have reduced the importance of height when it comes to scoring in the low post.

"She's worked really hard on footwork, using her body, sealing," Balcomb said. "If you ever see her catch it, she's always catching the ball in a good, attacking position where she usually doesn't have to shoot over anybody."

"... She does all the little things that we coach and works very, very hard at them."

Rhoads assisting VU women's success

Monday, November 17, 2008

By David Boclair

There is an obvious explanation for the large number of assists (17, to be exact) Vanderbilt point guard Jence Rhoads has after two games. She has taken more shots than usual.

Well, the connection is obvious to coach Melanie Balcomb, at least.

“(Rhoads) needs to shoot the ball,” Balcomb said. “... (Opponents) have to guard her, and that gets other people open. I think she needs to continue going to the basket and being aggressive herself.”

Rhoads led the Commodores in assists last season as a freshman with 114, an average of 3.4 per games. She attempted 134 field goals.

Western Kentucky apparently was convinced of her willingness to attempt to score. The Commodores improved to 2-0 Sunday with a 90-72 victory at E.A. Diddle Arena.

Rhoads took just four shots (she made three) against the Lady Toppers but was credited with another eight assists against only two turnovers.

In Friday's 85-51 season-opening victory over Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, she took seven shots (roughly twice her per game average of last season and one short of her single-game high) yet still dished out a career-high nine assists with no turnovers.

“She's just one of those quiet players out there who just gets the job done every night,” senior forward Christina Wirth said. “It doesn't surprise me.”

While Rhoads might be the one with the most assists, she hardly is the only one getting the ball to teammates in scoring positions.

VU had 25 assists on 33 field goals in the victory over A&M-Corpus Christi and another 22 on 36 baskets at WKU.

“There's times when you make a substitution and it's kind of a different rotation than you're used to,” Wirth said following Friday's victory. “But I think we did a good job of talking to each other and kind of helping each other out.”

Gold Nuggets: Wirth scored a career-high 24 points against WKU and moved to 25th on VU's career scoring list with 1,049 points. Liz Sherwood finished last season 24th all-time with 1,056. ... Sophomore Hannah Tuomi tied her career-high with 14 points in the opener and then topped it with 19 against WKU. ... Vanderbilt improved to 6-2 all-time (3-0 at home) in season-openers under Balcomb.

Nashville gets 2014 Women's Final Four

Saturday, November 15, 2008

By Mike Organ

Nashville businesses could earn an estimated \$20 million, after the NCAA announced Friday it had selected Music City as the site of the 2014 women's basketball Final Four.

It was precisely that economic impact, and the boon to Nashville's public image, that prompted the application by officials from the Nashville Sports Council and Ohio Valley Conference.

Advertisement

"Every hotel in this town and in every part of this county will be filled and every restaurant will be packed," said Metro Nashville Vice Mayor Diane Neighbors, who was co-chair of Nashville's bid committee.

The three games — semifinals and championship — will be played over three days at Sommet Center in spring of that year.

Nashville was among five cities chosen by the NCAA to host the tournament from 2012 through 2016. The other cities awarded Final Fours were Denver (2012), New Orleans (2013), Tampa Bay (2015) and Indianapolis (2016).

Losing cities include Dallas, San Antonio, site of the 2010 Final Four, and Columbus, Ohio.

Neighbors said the downtown layout and the close proximity of so many hotels and entertainment venues impressed members of the NCAA committee who visited last summer.

"The committee really appreciated the downtown campus," Neighbors said. "We took them to symphony hall, the Country Music Hall of Fame, Lower Broadway, Second Avenue, and then showed them how close some of the university venues are for some of the practices."

Another selling point was the state's strong tradition of girls' and women's basketball.

"Opportunities and the commitment from the community were important as we looked at the bid proposals," said Jacki Silar, chairwoman of the NCAA Division I Women's Basketball Committee. "For Nashville, because of their history and hosting women's basketball (NCAA Tournament) first and second rounds, as well as the women's regional, and the support that they get in that state, was important."

OVC started process

The idea to submit a bid for the games started with Ohio Valley Conference Commissioner Jon Steinbrecher, who figured well before Friday's announcement that Nashville's application was looking good.

"We weren't getting a lot of questions back from the NCAA committee asking about this or that," Steinbrecher

said. “They weren’t telling us, ‘You have a problem here,’ or ‘You have a problem there.’ There was very little of that, so we felt very good about what we were proposing.”

The OVC will be recognized as the NCAA member host of the Final Four tournament.

But the biggest benefit will go to the city as a whole, which should see a boost in tourism that carries beyond the basketball tournament. Women’s college basketball media coverage throughout the 2013-14 season will be full of references to Nashville, said Scott Ramsey, executive director of the Nashville Sports Council.

“The women’s basketball season will be billed as the Road to Nashville that year,” Ramsey said. “It will put Nashville on a national platform for a media showcase, not only for the broadcast of the games, but the constant stories that will be generated from Nashville.”

University of Tennessee Lady Vols Coach Pat Summitt, whose team has played in six of the last seven Final Fours and won the last two national championships, welcomed the news.

“I’m thrilled for the state of Tennessee and particularly the city of Nashville,” Summitt said. “It speaks volumes about the great sports fans we have in Tennessee and the appeal of the city of Nashville. I am confident the fans will show up in droves and provide for an unbelievable atmosphere.”

Vanderbilt women’s basketball Coach Melanie Balcomb said bringing the Final Four to Tennessee seems like a no-brainer.

“It starts in the grass roots, and Tennessee girls high school basketball has always been so well known,” Balcomb said. “And now there are so many good college programs as well as high schools. What a great place to put (the Final Four) because of the fan base and the people who are so interested and excited about women’s basketball in this state.”



FRIDAY CONVERSATION: Christina Wirth

Friday, November 14, 2008

Posted by Meghan Rose

Named to the Preseason All-Southeastern Conference First Team, senior Christina Wirth is primed for a huge season. The Vanderbilt women's team has been pegged to win the SEC Championship and is the preseason No. 12 team in the country. The forward spoke with Meghan Rose of the Vanderbilt Hustler about how the team handles high expectations, what her role as a leader is and how she became such a versatile player.

Vanderbilt Hustler: As one of three seniors on a team picked to win the SEC this season, what would you say is your major role?

Christina Wirth: One good thing about our team is that we have a lot more experience overall, not just with the seniors. Last year, we were pretty young, so I think my job is having the most experience on the team with Jen Risper. Our season has a lot of ups and downs, and you need someone on the team to keep everyone focused and to stay grounded.

VH: Having started 68 consecutive games through the end of last season, how important is it for you to have an impact in every game you play?

CW: I think you earn the respect of your teammates and they count on you. Whether I'm having a good game or not, I still feel that I can bring something to the team through communicating with and encouraging my teammates. I try to make sure we're on the same page with our coaches, and that the five of us that are on the court at the time carry it out on the floor.

VH: After averaging 13.1 points per game last season as a junior, what would you say your basic individual goals are for this season?

CW: I don't really make scoring a goal, I think that it's something that just comes if you're open you shoot, but you can't force it. For me, rebounding is definitely a big goal for me this season; we're pretty small underneath. All of our post players are about 6 feet tall. I think that rebounding is something that, as a team, we have to worry about, making sure that we are boxing out and be really disciplined. I also want to get to the free throw line a lot more this season. People know me as a shooter, and they run at me to try to take my shot away. I have to drive more, and try to take it to the basket.

VH: Both the preseason AP and the Coaches' Polls have Vandy ranked No. 12 in the nation. Has this recognition affected the team's spirits at all?

CW: I think that it's a great honor, to know that people are seeing us as one of those great programs. But as a team, we're doing a good job of not letting it get to our heads at all or putting too much pressure on ourselves. I think that we are going to go out there and know that we have a great opportunity in front of us, and we knew that even before the rankings came out. We're just going to take the season one game at a time, and hopefully we'll be in a good position come March and April.

VH: How much of an honor was it for you to be named to the All-SEC first team?

CW: It wasn't something that I was really expecting after the end of last season. We play in an amazing conference with amazing players. I don't think it's something that I've really done in my life, but God has given me the ability and the opportunity to go out there and play.

VH: What would you pinpoint as the greatest strength of your game?

CW: I'm definitely not the most athletic player by any means, but I think that I am pretty fundamentally sound. I know how to take advantage of what the other defense gives me. I can adapt well to the style of play of the other team. I've gotten better at my low-post play during my years here. Before college I didn't really play post at all.

VH: You're a very versatile player on the court. How have you managed to transition between guard and forward during your years at Vanderbilt?

CW: It was kind of tough. I had to learn a lot of plays during my freshman year for a couple of positions since they told me there was a chance I could play both post and guard. Our post coach, Vicky Picott, has done an amazing job of teaching me and she's been very patient with me. During my sophomore year, everything began to click for me.

VH: After only graduating senior Liz Sherwood from last year's team, how is the team meshing early on this season?

CW: I'm excited, we have everyone back except for one person, and we have two freshmen this season. Basically it's the same core, and we have a definite chemistry on the court and off the court. It's a lot of fun, and we're pretty competitive. I think it's going to help us a lot. Our program is getting pretty good at playing our best basketball at the end of the season. Give us a couple of months and a few games under our belt, and I think we'll be doing pretty well.

VH: How important is a successful start, as you begin to face tougher conference competition in the latter part of the season?

CW: We look at every game as an opportunity to get better, even exhibition games that don't really count. We make goals for every game, and we take each one seriously. We all know that these games now matter for seating in the tournament, and it's important to recognize how important these games now are, even though it's a very long season. Having a lot of experience on our team is really going to help us take care of business early.

VH: With all of the hype around the team this season, what goals have you set as a team?

CW: We have set individual goals for each game, but we also have goals as a team. We want to win the SEC regular season. We won the SEC Championship when I was a sophomore, but we haven't won the regular season since I've been here. We also want to win the SEC Championship and go to the NCAA Tournament again this season, and we want to go further than the Sweet 16.

VH: Your dad Alan is a former major league baseball player and your five siblings are also involved in sports. How did your family influence your decision to play basketball competitively?

CW: Growing up and always being around sports, my parents always encouraged us to get involved and play them. I'm a pretty self-motivated person, and I chose basketball as my sport when I was about 11 or 12 and started to focus on it. All of the girls in my family played basketball, and my brother decided to play soccer. I guess you'd call us a sports family.



WBB challenges TAMUCC Friday

Thursday, November 13, 2008

By Josh Arntz

NASHVILLE, Tenn. -- After a much anticipated preseason, which saw the Commodores picked to win the Southeastern Conference and two exciting exhibition games, the women's basketball team will open regular season play against Texas A&M-Corpus Christi at 7 p.m. CT on Friday, Nov. 14, in Memorial Gymnasium.

The Islanders travel to Nashville with four returning starters from last year's squad, which finished 12-20 overall and 7-9 in conference, including preseason first-team All-Southland Conference Elisa Beagle. The 6-0 senior center averaged 10.3 points and 7.3 rebounds per game last year. She also ranks as the second-leading rebounder (642) in Islander history and is seventh all-time in points scored (806).

Deziree Green, Shaye Montgomery and Adrienne Scott comprise the remaining returning starters, and will likely join Beagle at tip-off. Green, a 5-10 junior guard, averaged 9.3 points, second-best on the team, and 5.0 rebounds per game. Montgomery, a 5-6 junior guard, netted 8.6 points and 3.7 boards, also leading the team in assists with 123 total (3.8 per game). Scott, a 6-1 sophomore forward, started every game of her first season, totaling 5.5 points and 6.1 rebounds per contest.

The Commodores will meet the Islanders' experience with five, veteran returning starters of their own - junior Merideth Marsh, sophomores Jence Rhoads and Hannah Tuomi, and seniors Jennifer Risper and Christina Wirth.

"We've been working on a lot of ball pressure and just being in the right spots on defense, and the whole idea of trusting each other, like help-sides and stuff like that," Marsh remarked. "Those are a few things that we've been working on and really keying in on, so we'll probably carry that over into the game."

Wirth and Risper will certainly anchor the 'Dore attack Friday and throughout the season. Wirth, a preseason All-SEC First-Team selection, averaged 20 points in VU's two exhibition games. She made 13-of-23 field goal attempts, including 4-of-9 three-pointers, and had 5.5 rebounds, 2.5 assists and one steal in 61 minutes of action.

Risper also played well against Tusculum College and Love & Basketball, averaging five points, six rebounds, 5.5 assists and 5.5 steals in a total of 50 minutes.

"Each practice game just lets us get a feel for each other and all the stuff we've done in practice offensively and defensively," said Marsh. "In practice, you get to play with everybody, but in the games the coaches set the people who you're going to play with.

"So, it's a neat thing to get you ready for the season, and see who you work well with."

Freshman Tia Gibbs also played well during the exhibition games, scoring 31 points. Gibbs hit three three-pointers in the first 14 minutes of her career, and nailed another three treys in her second contest.

"I'm not so nervous any more," Gibbs stated. "The first two exhibition games really helped. Those were real games to me, so I feel like this is just another one."

The Commodores will head to Bowling Green, Ky., after their tilt with TAMUCC for a 2 p.m. match against Western Ken-

tucky at E. A. Diddle Arena on Sunday, Nov. 16. The game will represent a homecoming, of sorts, for Marsh and Gibbs, both Louisville natives.

“I enjoy playing Western Kentucky because it’s close enough to home that a bunch of family and friends can come and watch,” Marsh noted. “And I know a lot of people who go to Western and the coaching staff. So, of course, it’s fun to play in your home state.”

“Pretty much my whole family will be there,” Gibbs added, “and I haven’t really gotten to see them since the summer. So, I can’t wait for that game.”

Coach Melanie Balcomb’s team has defeated the Hilltoppers in three consecutive contests, and gone 1-1 in Bowling Green in its last two trips. The ‘Dores won 75-54 in Nashville last season, and 86-78 at Diddle the previous season, Marsh’s freshman year.

“I’ve always loved playing in Diddle Arena,” said Marsh. “It’s just one of those places, growing up in Kentucky, where you watch a lot of games and it’s just a fun place to play.”

“I love Western’s gym,” Gibbs echoed. “They say it’s one of the hardest gyms to play in, but I’m excited.”

The freshman from Louisville will also lace-up against former opponents from her earlier career. Gibbs has played against WKU sophomores Arnika Brown, from Hopkinsville, Ky., and Hope Brown, from Radcliff, Ky.

“It’ll be good to play against some Kentucky faces again,” she noted.

Vandy women are small but fast

Thursday, November 13, 2008

By Mike Organ

A tall order awaits Vanderbilt's short lineup.

The Commodores are picked to win the Southeastern Conference regular season despite being unusually small.

The tallest starter in the lineup is 6-foot-1 Christina Wirth. The next tallest is post player Hannah Tuomi, who is only 6-0.

"I've always felt size is overrated," Coach Melanie Balcomb said. "I would rather Hannah be 6-1 and Tina be 6-2. But as long as they're tough and they're strong and they're quick and they're smart, I'd take that over another inch."

Balcomb might bring Amy Malo or Rebecca Silinski, both 6-3, off the bench if the Commodores find themselves extremely outmatched.

But what the Commodores lack in size, they make up in speed and quickness. Balcomb has worked during the past two seasons on picking up the offensive pace, and this year's squad will be the fastest so far.

"You don't have to be small to be quick, but a lot of your players that have been big struggle shifting laterally," Balcomb said. "The big difference people don't realize is some kids are fast up and down and some kids are fast laterally. We're more explosive than we were in the past. Off the dribble we're more explosive."

Tuomi said she plays "bigger than I am," but can still keep up with the run-and-gun attack.

"I guess I am an ideal post for such a quick, fast-paced team," said Tuomi, who started as a freshman last year in every Southeastern Conference. "I feel I can keep up with the guards. We're all on the same page."

The smaller, quicker lineup, Balcomb said, fits the long-range plan she put in place when she arrived at Vanderbilt in 2002. She inherited a team that featured 6-6 Chantelle Anderson, along with Jenni Benningfield and Nicole Jules, who were both 6-3.

"We've been trying to recruit to our philosophy and trying to bring in some toughness and athleticism as well as continuing to bring in skill," Balcomb said. "The focus has not been on height. If you get it, great. But that certainly has not been our priority."

THREE THINGS TO WATCH

Off the bench. Some expected Jessica Mooney, the most athletic player on the roster, to join the starting lineup this season. Instead, she'll continue her role off the bench, entering the game to cause havoc for teams that start to wear down.

Quicker crew. The Commodores shifted to a higher tempo last season and plan to crank it up another notch this season.

Balanced talent. Vandy was picked to win the SEC, yet Christina Wirth was the only Commodore named to the All-SEC preseason first or second teams.

PREDICTION

In a rebuilding effort, the Commodores set a school record last season by winning 11 SEC regular-season games. All five starters return, and there's plenty of talent on the bench for them to make a run at the regular-season championship



Vandy finds itself tabbed as SEC's preseason fave

Wednesday, November 12, 2008

By Teresa Walker

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Melanie Balcomb and her Vanderbilt Commodores have had it. They're sick and tired of running through the Southeastern Conference and into the NCAA tournament where they keep hitting an invisible wall.

Last March, the Commodores reached the regional semifinals for the third time under Balcomb and lost for the third time, 80-66, to Maryland.

"This needs to be the year that we break through that Sweet 16 ceiling," Balcomb said.

She just might have the team to do that this season. Balcomb returns all five starters from a team that went 25-9 last season and reached the NCAA tournament regional semifinal for the 13th time in school history. That included a school-record 11 SEC wins, earning the Commodores the target as the SEC's preseason favorite to win the regular season title.

"The only thing that picking us first in a poll does is give us a little confidence and say we always thought we were good enough to move forward and break that ceiling," Balcomb said. "Now other people have respect for what we did last year, and there's no reason we can't believe that this year. You have to believe it first to achieve it."

Balcomb lost only one senior from last year's team, 6-foot-4 center Liz Sherwood. She has a trio of seniors this season led by Christina Wirth, the SEC's top 3-point shooter last season, starting guard Jen Risper and guard Amy Malo. The other returning starters include Merideth Marsh, Jence Rhoads and Hannah Tuomi.

That's why the Commodores are ranked No. 12 in the preseason poll as they prepare to open the season Friday night against Texas A&M Corpus Christi.

"It doesn't really matter. It matters how we play and what we do and where we finish," Balcomb said.

For the first time in years, Balcomb has her top scorer back. Wirth averaged 13.1 points per game, eighth in the SEC. The Commodores were balanced last season with five different players scoring at least 8.7 points per game.

That helped them lead the SEC in shooting from the floor (46.6 percent) and from 3-point range (38.1 percent). They ranked second in scoring offense (71.1 points per game) and second in scoring defense (56.6 percent), and they were third in the SEC in scoring margin with an edge of 14.4 points per game.

"It's nice. We do have a lot of our offense back and the nucleus again back," Balcomb said. "We'll miss Liz Sherwood a lot. The game changed when she came in. She could've started. We kind of had a starting seven, which is why I think we did so well last year. We had depth."

These Commodores spent the offseason working to get stronger and faster. They'll need the athleticism because no one is taller than 6-3 on this squad, a departure at a school that brought the SEC 6-6 Chantelle Anderson and 6-10 Heidi Gillingham.

"I call us the all 6-foot team," Balcomb said. "Our guards are getting taller and our posts are getting smaller, so we're going to have to play faster. We're going to have to play more in the full-court game than the half-court game because we don't have that big post presence we've had on offense or defense."

Vandy has two freshmen on the roster in Tia Gibbs and Jordan Coleman. How quickly they contribute could determine how far this team goes.

The challenges start early with Vanderbilt visiting Western Kentucky in Bowling Green on Sunday, less than 48 hours after opening the season. Bowling Green is one of the first-round sites for the NCAA tournament in March.

The Commodores also will visit Michigan on Nov. 23, host Notre Dame on Dec. 30 and head to Iowa State on Jan. 3 before opening the SEC schedule Jan. 8 at Alabama. Instate rival Tennessee visits on Jan. 11, and the Commodores wrap up the regular season March 1 returning that game with the Lady Vols in Knoxville.

"If we keep building the way we did last year, starting better than we were and improve like we did last year, we should be capable," Balcomb said.

Women's Basketball

Commodores' commandment: overcome thy neighbor

Monday, November 10, 2008

Posted by Graham Hays

It's something of an understatement to suggest the University of Tennessee casts a wide shadow over women's basketball in the SEC. In fact, Knoxville's city limits might better be described as the event horizon of a black hole from which there is no escape.

No program feels the gravitational pull of the eight-time national champions more intensely than Vanderbilt, the Lady Vols' in-state neighbor a mere three hours to the west in Nashville. A successful program in its own right by almost any standard, having accrued 20-win seasons by the dozens and 13 trips to the Sweet 16, Vanderbilt has nonetheless long seemed destined to spend hardcourt eternity as the "other" school in the Volunteer State.

But the next step toward equal footing might come, at least in part, courtesy of two players for whom the program originally wasn't even that high-profile.

"I'd actually never heard of Vanderbilt growing up," admitted Commodores senior and Arizona native Christina Wirth.

Echoed classmate and fellow left-coaster Jennifer Risper, "Actually, I'd never even heard about Vanderbilt while I was in California."

Years later, Wirth and Risper have learned all about life in the SEC, and the league has learned enough about them to mark the Commodores as preseason favorites to win the conference title and end more than a decade of dominance for Tennessee and LSU.

In a league going through a changing of the guard following the departures of Candace Parker and Sylvia Fowles -- the top two picks in the WNBA draft and two of 10 SEC players among the 43 selections -- Vanderbilt has the benefit of experience on its side. The team lost just one rotation player, center Liz Sherwood, from a lineup that went 25-9 and advanced to the Sweet 16 last season. Age and experience are not always synonyms for players who suddenly find themselves asked to lead as seniors, but after playing last season as de facto elder stateswomen, Wirth and Risper have both age and wisdom.

"I think that just kind of helped us to mature as leaders faster than most," Wirth said of last season. "Usually, at other schools, you have that one extra year as a grace period to figure it out before you're seniors. But last year, we were kind of, I guess, forced to step up in that role, which I think is going to help us tremendously this year."

Vanderbilt notched quality wins against Duke and Iowa State early last season, but it also dropped an overtime decision at Indiana State and home games against Colorado and Old Dominion before the calendar hit January. It was those early losses, Risper said, that forced the players to reevaluate why the results weren't matching what they felt they were capable of accomplishing. And with that came a renewed focus on practice habits.

"You can earn your voice by just being that hard worker or having a good attitude," Risper said. "As a leader, last year and this year, there may be times -- there's always times -- where somebody doesn't want to be at practice or is going through something or is stressed out from work or whatever it is. And you have to maintain and you have to have a good attitude, because that's what everybody sees."

The truth is the Commodores don't have the luxury of taking things for granted. Like Hannibal crossing the Alps, their

Final Four aspirations rest on strategy and preparation. Last year's Final Four offered four ideal examples of the fact that championship-caliber teams are the ones with both athleticism and execution, but almost every team skews at least slightly toward one end or the other. And for Vanderbilt, it's toward the latter.

"We pride ourselves on doing the little things right," Wirth said. "We don't take shortcuts. We're not always the most athletic team -- I think that since I've been here, our team has become a lot more athletic in terms of the players we're recruiting now. But even without that, we're just going to be fundamental and do things right and play together. And I think we win a lot of games because of that."

A star within a team framework, Wirth embodies all of that. She shot 41.5 percent from 3-point range last season (on a prolific 171 attempts), averaged five rebounds per game and 1.7 assists for every turnover she committed. Iowa's Wendy Ausdemore, Florida State's Mara Freshour and Villanova's Lisa Karcic are the only returning players in BCS conferences who shot a better percentage from behind the arc.

With Wirth, Merideth Marsh (67-for-179) and Lauren Lueders (42-for-111), Vanderbilt ranked 10th nationally in 3-point field goal percentage last season. Playing in significantly less demanding conferences, Utah and Wisconsin-Green Bay were the only other teams to rank in the top 10 in both 3-point field goal percentage and overall field goal percentage. Throw in Risper's all-around efforts and an emerging point guard in sophomore Jence Rhoads (nearly a 2-1 assist-to-turnover ratio as a freshman) and coach Melanie Balcomb's perimeter options will exploit any mistakes opposing defenses make.

But it's the glass -- where the 5-foot-9 Risper led the team with 6.3 rebounds per game (she also led the team in steals and free-throw attempts) -- that has Wirth's attention. Without Sherwood, the 6-foot-1 Wirth and 6-foot sophomore Hannah Tuomi represent the extent of the projected starting lineup's interior size.

"We're going to be very undersized this year," Wirth conceded. "And I think people will look at our lineup and say, 'Oh gosh, [they] don't have any post players.' I don't really think that's true. We do have undersized post players, but our post coach, Vicky Picott, just does an awesome job of showing you how to use your body.

"Some of the hardest post players I've had to play against are the mid-sized post players that can't just get away with getting the ball lobbed up to them and putting it in. You have to work for it. You have to use your quickness, or get lower than other post players and things like that. It's all the little things that sometimes people don't want to do, I think our team is willing to do. And because of that, I think we're going to be OK."

The early schedule is relatively soft, save for games against Notre Dame and at Iowa State in a five-day span around New Year's Day, but after opening conference play at Alabama, Vanderbilt faces Tennessee, LSU and Georgia in quick succession. With the Commodores just 6-51 all-time against the Lady Volunteers, including 16 losses in a row, that first meeting in Nashville will likely determine how seriously a lot of people take Vanderbilt this season.

But led by the West Coast transplants, these Commodores are less interested in living up to their neighbor's legacy than in creating one of their own in March and April.

"Personally, I try not to listen to it that much or care about [the Tennessee rivalry] that much -- not that I don't care, but ... you get that question constantly," Wirth said. "They're a great team. They have more tradition than just about any other program in the country, and they've earned that. I think Pat Summitt does a great job there. But I think that Vanderbilt's image -- old image -- was, 'Oh, they're soft; they're going to get pushed around by bigger, stronger Tennessee.' And I think that's changing. And I think the team that we have now doesn't care about that at all, doesn't really care who is on the other side of the floor we're playing against."

Which means it may become significantly more difficult to keep word of Vanderbilt's success from leaking out well beyond the boundaries of the state of Tennessee.



Sisterhood of the Traveling '34'

Friday, November 7, 2008

Written by Nelson Bryan, BA '73

In the 1954 film *White Christmas*, the singing/dancing Haynes sisters (played by Rosemary Clooney and Vera-Allen) perform a number titled "Sisters." The lyrics, in part, contain these lines: "Sisters, sisters, there were never such devoted sisters ... Caring, sharing, every little thing that we are wearing." Some 50-plus years later, those lines take on new significance for Vanderbilt when senior guard/forward Christina Wirth takes to the basketball court wearing the number 34—the same number she's worn since high school and the same number she shares with her sisters.

Her older sister, Alana, was the first Wirth to wear number 34 when they played together at Seton Catholic High School in Mesa, Ariz. "When she graduated she asked, 'Will you take my number?' So I took her number."

Their 16-year-old sister, Theresa, now a sophomore at the same high school, wears 34, but she is the last player at Seton High who ever will.

"My high-school coach actually retired my jersey this past year," Christina says. "It was pretty neat. I had no idea she was going to do that. I talked to her about it, though, because my younger sister really wanted to wear that number." That was acceptable to the coach. Theresa is wearing 34 even as Christina's jersey hangs from the rafters.

"I have 9-year-old twin sisters, too," Christina says with a laugh. "We joke with them that when they're in high school, they'll wear the numbers 3 and 4."

During her high school career, Wirth compiled 2,550 points, 1,173 rebounds, 312 steals, 266 assists and 120 blocked shots. In 2005 she was selected as the Arizona Player of the Year and the Gatorade Arizona Player of the Year, and was named to the USA Today All-America Top 25 and to Street and Smith's and McDonald's All-America teams.

"I had never really heard of Vanderbilt until I got my first letter from them in high school," Wirth recalls. "I researched Vanderbilt and learned a lot that I liked. For me it came down to Vanderbilt and Stanford as the final two choices. Distance was never really a factor for me."

She also had been courted by Arizona State, but that was too close to home. "You grow up a lot when you move away. I took my official visit here and loved the other players. That was probably the biggest selling point for me. I could tell that the team had great chemistry, and I wanted to be a part of that. I could see myself as having them as my friends."

Thus a new sisterhood entered Wirth's life.

"We had a great summer," Wirth says of this year's team. "We were all here spending time together when things

weren't quite so hectic, and also were training with our strength coach. We got in pretty good shape this summer, so we'll try to carry that over to the preseason and practice.

"During the summer, when mostly athletes are here, it's fun to meet people on other teams who are going through the same things you are. During the school year we don't all live in the same dorm. In the summer we do—most of us on the same floor. You walk out of your room, and next door is your teammate. You just hang out and fun stuff happens."

During her Vanderbilt career Wirth's numbers have continued to climb. Last year she started all 34 games (there's that number again). She scored 446 points for an average 13.1 per game; had a shooting percentage of .473, which included a .415 three-point shot percentage, and a free-throw percentage of .833; grabbed 170 rebounds for an average of five per game; and accounted for 89 assists, nine blocked shots and 48 steals.

The 2008–09 season began Oct. 17 with an intense practice schedule. "We go really hard the first few weeks of practice and always have a pretty tough nonconference schedule," Wirth says. "The SEC is tough from top to bottom. You can't really take a night off, which is the way it should be."

When it comes to her studies, Wirth doesn't take a night off, either. "Through all her success, Tina has always been very humble," says Christy Hogan, academic counselor and tutor co-coordinator. "She is a talented, well-rounded person who works hard in everything she does and never loses her faith."

Wirth is on track to achieve her goal of becoming a nurse practitioner, specializing in pediatrics. "Human and organizational development at Peabody was my undergraduate major," she says, "with a minor in child development. There's a master's bridge program with the nursing school, and now I have two years of nursing school to get my master's and become a nurse practitioner. They've been great about my basketball schedule. Just being able to start my master's while I'm still on scholarship is great."

On the basketball court, as on a health-care team, "It's about being part of something bigger than you," says Wirth, who has volunteered at the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt. "You want to give your best and work together for amazing results."

VU women picked No. 1 in SEC

Thursday, November 6, 2008

By David Boclair

Vanderbilt is the team to beat, according to Southeastern Conference women's basketball coaches. Coaches around the country have a slightly different opinion.

The SEC released its fifth annual women's basketball preseason awards today, and the Commodores were chosen as the conference's top team for the 2008-09 season. The University of Tennessee, the 2008 national champion, was picked second, followed by (in order) Auburn, Georgia, LSU and Florida.

Vanderbilt also was named the favorite by the media two weeks earlier.

In the preseason ESPN/USA Today coaches poll, also released today, the Lady Commodores were ranked 12th, second among SEC schools. The Lady Volunteers were No. 6.

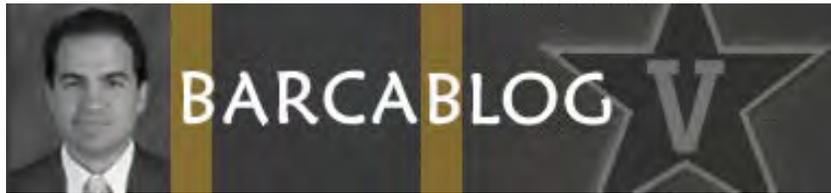
"I'm more comfortable under the radar, I think Vanderbilt always has been the underdog, and at the same time we haven't been able to break through past the Sweet 16, we haven't been able to beat Tennessee," coach Melanie Balcomb said. "It's kind of a nice change to be in a different position. ... But none of that matters. It matters what we do in the end, and where we are in the end."

SEC coaches also named Commodores senior guard Christina Wirth to its eight-person All-Preseason SEC team. Senior guard Jennifer Risper was named to the second team.

"It's different," Wirth said of the Commodores' status as conference favorites. "People always expect us to be good, not really great. So I think it's a great honor that people are starting realize we are one of those up and coming teams that has the potential to break into that elite group of programs."

Vanderbilt was 25-9 overall (11-3 in the SEC), won the SEC Tournament and advanced to the NCAA Sweet 16 last season.

"We're basically returning our whole starting five and a lot of our bench," Risper said. "I guess people just see that we're a more experienced team, and we did well last year."



Barca Blog - Forever Young

Tuesday, November 4, 2008

By Brandon Barca, vucommodores.com

Last week, I visited the practice facility inside Memorial Gym to catch a glimpse of a women's basketball television commercial shoot featuring first-team All-SEC selection Christina Wirth.

Wirth wasn't the only one in the spotlight for the production. She was joined by two wide-eyed youngsters - Haley (12 years old) and Hadley (3) - to symbolize how childhood dreams of playing big-time collegiate basketball can become a reality.

After the lights and the cameras cut off, I spoke with Wirth to find out a little bit about her youth basketball experiences. Here's the interview:

Christina, when you see a three-year old out there playing basketball does it bring back memories for you?

"Yeah, Hadley actually looks just like me. So, it was cute. During the filming, I was sitting next to her while her older sister (Haley) was shooting and she said 'I love basketball.' It was a fun experience to have both of them involved.

"It's sometimes kind of hard to remember playing basketball as a kid when you get to this level. It's so competitive now and you think back and realize that you really just loved it when you were little. I still do, but it's a different kind of game now. It's so much more competitive and serious. It was good to see the love of the game by a little kid."

How young were you when you first started and what do you remember?

"I want to say five or six years old, just playing in the YMCA leagues with co-ed teams. I remember I began playing AAU basketball when I was 10 or 11 and then started being more serious about basketball. But, up until then I played all different kinds of sports, and just doing what little kids do."

Did any one have a significant influence on you growing up?

"Both of my parents really like sports. I always played with my older sister on the same teams growing. I think that was kind of the stuff to do, and then I got to the point where I started really loving it myself and doing it because I wanted to and not because anyone was making me or my parents wanted me to, but because I wanted to."

How much older is your sister?

"She's two years older than me, so we played together for two years in high school. Up until then, we played on a lot of the same teams when we were little and then AAU for a couple of years."

Were the two of you competitive against each other? Did she have an edge being older and taller?

"No, actually I was probably taller than her. She's only 5'9" now. I passed her up pretty early. We actually played different positions, even though I was taller. I played more guard and she was a smaller post player. So, I think it helped that we were playing different positions so we didn't always have to guard each other, because it would have gotten ugly.

"We definitely had a sibling rivalry. Sometimes we would guard each other in practice and our coach would make us switch off of each other because it was getting out of hand, but we get along pretty well. So, it was fun, and looking back, I'm glad I got to play with her."

Now you're in your senior season. Does today's commercial shoot with the kids put things in perspective for you about what the pure joy of basketball is?

"Yeah, definitely. I know it's a blessing to be here. I've known that my whole four years, and I think now that it's my last year I'm understanding that even more, just because I don't know what next year is going to bring or if this could be my last year playing or what. I don't want to take it for granted. I just want to enjoy it, and remember even though there is a lot of pressure, and obviously winning is the goal of this program, but more than that it's just a blessing to be able to be out here and to have the opportunity to play. So, I just want to try to enjoy it and not forget that."

Vandy women favored to win SEC; UT rebuilds

Thursday, October 23, 2008

By Maurice Patton

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — On paper, it appears that the Vanderbilt and Tennessee women are playing a game of role reversal.

The Commodores lost just one player — senior reserve Liz Sherwood — from last year's NCAA Region semi-finalist team. Among the returnees are a pair of All-Southeastern Conference performers, Tina Wirth and Jen Risper.

"I've never been in that situation at Vanderbilt," seventh-year Coach Melanie Balcomb said. "I think that's what I'm looking forward to, what's most exciting for me. We get the nucleus of our team back.

"We didn't lose our leading scorer, for the first time since I've been here."

UT, meanwhile, lost five players from its national championship squad, bringing back only one player — Angie Bjorklund — who averaged more than 16 minutes per game.

"We've only got four players that saw playing time last year," Lady Vols Coach Pat Summitt said. "We've got six true freshmen and one redshirt freshman."

That probably explains why the league media are tabbing the Commodores as the preseason favorite to win the SEC, ahead of Tennessee.

"I thought, really, Vanderbilt, then Auburn, Georgia, then Tennessee maybe," Summitt said. "I was more surprised to see us picked second. I'm not surprised at all to see where (the Commodores) are."

While the preseason selection doesn't earn Vanderbilt any advantage on the basketball floor, it certainly offers the team some validation for past accomplishments.

"It says we have a lot of people coming back from last year and we were good last year," Balcomb said. "It shows respect for our program. It shows our players that people think we can do it, other than just us. That can build confidence. We used to think we can do things that nobody else thinks we can do. We've earned that respect, that recognition."

And while Balcomb is glad she won't have to rely on her incoming freshmen, Summitt's squad will rise or fall on the play of her youngsters. Shekinna Stricklen, a 6-foot-2 guard, is a preseason second-team All-SEC selection.

"Stricklen will be in our lineup, unless she makes me mad between now and the opening game," Summitt said. "We think she's got a chance to be a very special guard in our program. She and Glory Johnson are a notch ahead of our other freshmen."

Summitt admitted UT's predicted finish could be based more on reputation than potential.

"You can't live on your reputation," she said. "We're going to have to get it done."

Women's Basketball

Going country with a couple of Commodores

Wednesday, October 22, 2008

Posted by Graham Hays

“Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?”

So reads the title of Mark Zwonitzer’s biography of the Carter Family, the so-called First Family of Country Music. I’ll admit up front, Kathleen Edwards, Kim Richey and anything else with an “alt” in front of “country” is about as far as my musical appreciation extends down that road, but Zwonitzer’s book is a great read for the history alone.

More to the point, the title taken from a Carter Family song is also a fitting, if easily answered, theme for newly crowned SEC favorite Vanderbilt’s Christina Wirth and Jennifer Risper.

Vanderbilt fans absolutely will miss Wirth and Risper when they depart after this season. But as it turns out, the two West Coast transplants will carry some of the Music City with them when they go.

Talking to Wirth and Risper on Tuesday for an upcoming story on how the Commodores hope to go about living up to their preseason support (a panel of SEC and national media members recently voted Vanderbilt as the preseason SEC favorite), Risper let it slip that she and Wirth, her roommate, are taking a class on country music this semester. A Californian from the Inland Empire outside Los Angeles, Risper was hardly a country music aficionado when she came to Vanderbilt, but a little time in Nashville can go a long way.

“I kind of like hearing all the history about that and everything that’s going on with that,” Risper said of the class. “I used to never, never want to listen to country music, but that’s because I never really gave it a chance, either.”

It didn’t hurt that she quickly established a bond with Wirth, whose own well-developed love of country music emerged long before she left Arizona for the genre’s heartland. Now the two human and organizational development majors have found a way to have a little educational fun (this is Vanderbilt, after all) with their musical interest, learning about everything from current country music to its roots at the turn of the last century and before.

“We have listening quizzes, and so Jen and I listen to country music in the room, so we can study,” Wirth said. “So it’s kind of an easy way to study for a test, just by listening to music. But it’s just a fun elective, I guess. One of our assignments is to go to a country concert and write about it, so that’s on our to-do list.”

Who said there aren’t any happy endings in country?