

S.P.O.V. *

* Student Point of View

Sixth Man on the Women's Team

Behind every successful women's team are a few good practice men.

By FREDRICK ADONIS HILLIARD, BE'07

EVERY TIME I WALK INTO the gym for practice and hear shouts of "Hey, Mr. C!" I am reminded of the reasons I have been dedicated to the practice squad for the Vanderbilt women's basketball team for the past two years. The coaching staff gave me the nickname "Mr. C" ("Mr. Commitment") early in my tenure with the practice squad because they knew I would show up whenever I was needed. As a male practice player with a women's team, I believe I serve a vital role that allows newer players to learn, enables starters to remain healthy, and provides coaches with a new teaching tool.

I learned about the opportunity to be a practice player when I saw a flyer in my dorm at Vanderbilt. The chance to be a part of the women's basketball team came at a time when I had a great deal of course work as a bioengineering major and little time to do things for myself. But I viewed being a practice player as an opportunity to do something I enjoyed in a structured environment, fitting it around my hectic schedule. With a simple phone call, a physical, and a few days of intense practice with other young men

interested in the practice squad, I became a member of the Vanderbilt women's basketball team's practice squad.

When I decided to become a practice player, I knew that every practice, every play and every moment would be a challenge that would require me to perform my best. I had witnessed on a number of occasions the competitive nature and tenacity of women basketball players. One of my first coaches was a woman who is very close to me—my mom.



To this day I think my mom has the best jump shot in my family, although I am getting closer every day. When I was very young, she would come outside while I was playing and challenge me to a game of "HORSE." Frequently, she was victorious.

I began playing organized basketball during middle school in Birmingham, Ala., and continued through high school. In elementary and middle school I grew quickly: By age 13, I was 5-foot-7, wearing a size 13 shoe. Coaches and family members thought I was destined to be 6-foot-2, maybe even 6-foot-5, with a large wing span—the ideal basketball player.

To my disappointment, I stopped grow-

ing during my sophomore year of high school. As a member of the junior varsity team, I was still tall enough and broad enough to play center and power forward, but my coaches often reminded me that if I wanted to continue playing, I would have to improve my shooting and dribbling abilities.

After my sophomore year I transferred to a boarding school that specialized in honing math and science talents, the Alabama School of Math and Science. While I was dedicated to performing well in school, I still wanted to be part of a team. So I tried out for the basketball team and was designated as a back-up point guard, shooting guard and small forward. I worked diligently to develop my speed, dribbling ability and shooting skills. During my senior year I played solely small forward. However, my senior season was cut short when I tore my anterior cruciate ligament. Though recovering from this injury was arduous, I continued to enjoy other athletic activities—cross country, soccer and golf, which I still play when my time and Nashville's weather permit.

Throughout my five years of experience, I played every position on the team from point guard to center. Playing each of these positions is like riding a bike: One never forgets. The skills and abilities I attained during five years of organized basketball have allowed me to be a versatile presence during practices at Vanderbilt. I have been called upon several times to play as a point guard



NATALIE COX MEAD

and a center during the same practice session.

On average, I participate in three practices a week. Each lasts approximately two hours. As a male practice player, I am often required to learn the plays and tendencies of the coming opponent. One of the key lessons I learned at a young age is that to be an effective part of a team, you must know the plays before you can actually contribute. The male practice team is able to learn these plays and allow newer players to actively observe the skill sets that experienced players use against each play. The coaches also use male practice players in many of the drills during practice. Instead of coaches being actively involved in every drill, we enable them to watch and critique the players so they will be able to improve the specific skills that are targeted by these drills.

It is often said that if you want to learn the fundamentals of basketball, you should watch a women's basketball game. In my experience, playing against women is more challenging than playing against other guys because of the way women fight for rebounds or steals and stop their opponents from taking shots. Women's teams are so competitive

and determined that even practices are hard-fought battles.

Through my experience with the women's team, I have improved my knowledge of a sport I love and have become more involved in the Vanderbilt community. In addition to my education and community-service ventures, this has been a most rewarding experience.

One of my goals in life is to coach a youth league team. Often young children place an immense amount of pressure on themselves to achieve the status and skill set of a Michael Jordan or a Cynthia Cooper. It is my hope that more children will understand the importance of an education and realize sports are an *addition* to one's educational career. My experiences will make me a better coach and mentor by increasing my overall basketball IQ and emphasizing the importance of team cooperation. I will use these tools to positively impact young minds and sharpen athletic skills among generations of students, building in them the same great sense of pride, dedication and honor that my coaches instilled in me. ▼

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