

It's no longer the bad old days

By Melissa Isaacson | Mar 17, 2006

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Jenn'e Jackson's mom is shocked to hear this, but her daughter, a freshman on the Kentucky women's basketball team, carries around an old laminated newspaper clipping for inspiration.

In the photo, Beatrice Jackson, her long arms outstretched, is soaring over three opponents for a rebound.

"She looked kind of like me," said Jenn'e, a striking 6-foot-1-inch forward for the fifth-seeded Wildcats, who will play Chattanooga in the first round of the NCAA tournament Saturday at Allstate Arena.

The photo was taken when Beatrice was a star at East Dublin (Ga.) High in the early 1980s. Jenn'e knew her mom had played, but she never realized how talented she was until one day when she was a senior in high school, when Beatrice sauntered out to the driveway where Jenn'e and her sister were playing and promptly drilled several jumpers in a row.

"I guess she wanted to show us her skills," Jenn'e said. "She surprised us both. Whew, she could shoot."

Although Jenn'e's dad, Wade, liked to watch basketball and was the one who involved his daughters in the sport, there is no question from whom the basketball genes spring in the Jackson family.

Of course, it was only a matter of time that we would begin seeing this--not necessarily the hidden matriarchal athletic genes, but the newspaper clippings to prove it.

It is, if unofficially, the Title IX baby boom, the first generation of girls born not merely to athletic women but to women athletes. They are college age now, some getting the scholarships their mothers earned in an era when women's sports blossomed, while others are getting the opportunities their mothers should have had.

Janet Elliott, whose daughter Sarah is Kentucky's 6-6 starting center, straddled Title IX as a farm girl growing up in Kansas, where she graduated from high school in 1972.

"We didn't have any high school sports," Janet said. "I knew I could compete with my brothers on any given day, but I was very jealous of them. We'd have basketball and football tournaments in back of the farm, but Dad always took the boys to the real gym at the high school. He'd say, 'Girls can't go to the gym.'"

The best that Janet, not the most popular girl in town at nearly 6 feet--"I was a tomboy and a roughneck"--could hope for was intramurals until her senior year at Cumberland College, when the school got its first women's basketball team.

The team traveled by cargo vans through the mountains of Kentucky, and Janet thought she was the luckiest girl alive. Her "claim to fame," as she calls it, was when the team went to Knoxville to play Pat Summitt's first Tennessee team and was crushed 90-42.

Before Sarah's Kentucky team played No. 1 Tennessee in January, Janet told her daughter "Get one for me." After the Wildcats defeated the Vols for the first time in 20 years--a three-point victory secured by Sarah's last-minute steal--her mother wept in the stands.

"I have to pinch myself still, that that's my girl running down the court," said Janet, a self-taught coach who was the assistant for Sarah's high school team and now is a head coach at a neighboring school. "I still visualize her with her braids swinging from side to side and it blows me away that here she is with the opportunity to represent the people of Kentucky and herself as a person and as an athlete. I'm so proud of her."

The feeling is indeed mutual for Sarah.

"Mama called me today and told me to get down on my knees and count my blessings, and I do," Sarah said. "I'm a small-town gal getting to do all these big things, going to the NCAAs, and for her to see that, it just means everything to us. My mom is my hero."

Role models abound. Kentucky's leading scorer Samantha Mahoney is the daughter of Pam, a standout at Iowa and Wayne State who packed up her infant daughter and set her car seat in the bleachers while she played night games in a women's league.

"Basketball is so embedded in our lives, it's almost impossible to disassociate," said Pam, joking that she would give her daughter advice on post play while her husband, a junior college guard, would handle all the shooting and ballhandling lessons. "And every scenario that came up in Samantha's life, we were able to get through it with lessons she learned on the court."

Allie Quigley, DePaul's sophomore guard, is the daughter of Chris Prieboy, one of the top schoolgirl athletes in Illinois when she starred in four sports for Joliet Central before playing basketball and softball for the College of St. Francis.

Rachael and Erin Carney's mother Liz played high school ball in Detroit. Their paternal aunt, Mary Carney, was an All-American at Wayne State and later played for DePaul coach Doug Bruno and the WBL's Chicago Hustle in the late '70s and early '80s.

"It was really nice having your mom outside shooting hoops with us," Erin said. "It was a way of bonding with her on a different level."

In the Carney family, where coed pick-up games are both a battle and a religion, gender and sports are a non-issue, Liz said.

"My sister Irma's sons beg Mary to coach their teams (Irma and Mary coached them this year to a Catholic junior high championship), and my 13-year-old son wants to know why the women's NCAA bracket isn't in the paper every day like the men's," she said.

Mary Carney, who coached her sister-in-law when Liz was in high school, sees her nieces as part of a generation of women who escaped stigmas and see no limits. And with readily available role models, it has come that much easier to them.

At 46, Carney decided she wanted to run her first marathon and set out to train.

"The last 5 miles of the race, Rachael, who was then a freshman in high school, ran it with me," Mary Carney recalled. "Why was her crazy aunt running 26.2 miles? She wasn't getting any trophies for it. But she's doing it, there's a reason. It was all there."

And it was there for Allie Quigley, who with her sister Samantha needed only look to their mother to see a woman who knows how it feels to be a competitive athlete and has the perspective to appreciate it.

"I was trying to explain at one time to the girls that when I was in high school, we didn't even have a state tournament until I was a sophomore and it wasn't even close to what it is now," said Chris Quigley Strle, who graduated from Joliet Central in '79. "When we grew up, if you were an athlete, you were a tomboy and that's just the way it was. You don't hear that anymore. You hear, 'She's an athlete.' They're lucky."

Yes, they are.