

Kiah & Tia finding hoops happiness on East Coast

Written by Sher Jasperse

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While a handful of top local prep athletes scattered to Division I programs around the Midwest this past fall, two of the Metro's premier girls basketball players heeded the call to "Go East, young woman" – Washington standout Tia Dawson to the rarified academic atmosphere of Ivy League Dartmouth College and Linn-Mar All-American Kiah Stokes to the stratosphere of women's college basketball at the University of Connecticut.

With a semester of college behind them, both are establishing a home far away from home on the East Coast and making contributions on the court.

Dawson has started every game for a youthful, rebuilding Dartmouth team that is struggling to win, while Stokes is carving out minutes from the bench for a perennially polished UConn team that rarely loses.

On Monday, Dawson was named Ivy League Co-Rookie of the Week for her performance in the Big Green's close loss to Harvard on Saturday. She scored a double-double – her second this season – with 10 points and 11 rebounds. Dawson's jumper with 32 seconds remaining in the game cut Harvard's lead to two, but Dartmouth couldn't close the gap.

Stokes had her own breakthrough on Monday evening, recording her first double-double of the season – 11 points and 11 rebounds – during 14 minutes of play, as the Huskies demolished North Carolina, 86-35.

Learning to persevere

"It's fun and stressful and exciting," says Stokes of her transition from high school superstar to bench player for No.3-ranked UConn (15-2) and legendary coach Geno Auriemma. "I love it here. I love our coaches and our team is amazing."

Moving hundreds of miles from home to attend college in a place where nobody knew her name was not particularly daunting for the 6-foot-3 post player, who was named Miss Iowa Basketball in 2011.

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"I've never been that homebody who got homesick and liked to sleep in my own bed – even in AAU," she laughs.

She finds dorm life a bit more crowded than she'd like, but has become best friends with her roommate, fellow freshman Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis, who was last year's National Gatorade Player of the Year.

Her college classes have been challenging, she says, "but I'm adjusting quite well. Sometimes it's hard because the teachers don't wait to see if you understand, but I ended up with a 3.4, and I could have done a little better."

The academic part has been relatively easy, it seems, compared to the boot camp intensity and high-level play of the UConn women's basketball program.

"That's the hardest part," says Stokes, who was used to being the tallest and usually the best player on the court from the time she began lofting shots as a little girl.

"Here everyone is on my level or better," she says. "Everyone is faster, stronger, tougher. That's something I never had to deal with in high school, so that's been the biggest adjustment for me."

UConn Associate Head Coach Chris Dailey, who coaches the post players, says Stokes has plenty of talent to build on as she develops the necessary focus and stamina.

"Right now she's working harder than she ever worked in high school. At this level it has to be done for two hours every day, and that's the hardest thing for any freshman because it's difficult to sustain that level."

Whether her playing time will increase from her roughly 12 minutes per game is entirely up to

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Stokes, says Dailey.

“How much you play is based on how you practice. We need her to develop to give us some depth at the post position. We think she’s got great ability. She can be a great shot blocker and rebounder, run the floor and finish around the basket.

“She has her good days and her days when she’s not as good. We’re working with her to maintain a consistent effort day in and day out, but it’s a process for any freshman, especially the post players.”

Meanwhile, Stokes’ mellow temperament has made it easy for her to mesh with her new teammates, Dailey says. “She’s great. Everybody loves her. She’s doing really well in school, she’s funny and she can take a joke. She’s just a joy to have around.”

Stokes, who has gained her “freshman 15” almost entirely as muscle via the weight room, says she is working to become more aggressive offensively and defensively while developing the relentless style that defines Husky basketball.

“Even if you think you can’t go anymore in a practice, you have to,” she says, “because in a game situation you’ll have to. At Connecticut we like to run the floor.”

As for the sometimes bellicose Coach Auriemma, Stokes says, “He’s intense and he does his fair share of yelling, but deep down he really cares for his team and wants the best for every individual player.”

Stokes’ parents and grandparents have been able to attend a handful of her games, and for Kiah watchers in Eastern Iowa, she has been visible in a few ESPN telecasts sporting the familiar number 41 that she has worn since she first put on a jersey – a tribute to her father, Greg Stokes, who wore the number during his playing career at Iowa.

A person of substance

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Three hours north of the Huskies' Connecticut campus, Tia Dawson has been facing down her own challenges in the small town of Hanover, New Hampshire.

She loves the campus and found Dartmouth to be a welcoming community, but admits that she battled homesickness early on.

"I have never been away from home – away from my mom and my family," she says. She is especially close to her mother, her hero and biggest supporter, who was known to drive across Iowa in a blizzard to avoid missing one of her games.

"My coaches told me, 'We're here for you,' and they helped me through it," says Dawson.

She has become close friends with the three other freshman players who live in her dorm, and the calls from her mother have tapered from three or four a day to three per week.

"My mom attended my first game at Kansas State, and after every game I Skype her and we talk about the game. We pray together before every game, which we always did, and we talk afterwards."

Dartmouth Coach Chris Wielgus says Dawson's initiation period was not unusual.

"I think it was a difficult adjustment for her, but her mother is the strength behind her and is determined for her to have this experience. So much went into her leaving home. She was very quiet at first, but she is very, very, very, very bright, and she absorbs everything."

An engineering major, Dawson says her biggest lesson as a college student has been learning to manage her time. "In high school I procrastinated all the time. Now that I'm here, I can't do that. In the first term I struggled with getting my homework done and was staying up all night."

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She eventually withdrew from one of her three courses, but got an A and a B in the other two – a major accomplishment at the academically elite school.

Wielgus says a turning point for Dawson came during a team trip to California over the holidays to play UC-Berkeley. Hearing a band playing in the hotel, Dawson got up and led her teammates in a dance.

“She’s got a sense of humor and a sense of irony. She chooses her words carefully, and she’s just a delightful person,” says Wielgus.

For Dawson, the trip was a chance to fulfill two lifelong ambitions. “I always wanted to go to California and I always wanted to ride a Segway, and I did both on that trip.”

On the court, Dawson is one of only two players who have started every game for Dartmouth (2-12), a team with only one senior and one junior.

“When coach said, ‘Tia, you’re starting,’ I was scared and nervous,” she recalls. “At first it was hard transitioning from high school to college ball because of how physical the players are, especially in the post.

“In high school I was the blocks and rebounds leader, and it was frustrating that I couldn’t perform as well as here. Coach Yo taught me some tricks and skills, and now I’m trying to get back to my old ways.”

Under the tutelage of “Coach Yo” – assistant coach Yolanda Griffith, a seven-time WNBA All-Star and two-time Olympic gold medalist – Dawson has become Dartmouth’s top rebounder with 6.4 per game and leads the team and the Ivy League in blocks at 1.9 per game. Her scoring average of 6.4 is second on the team.

Wielgus is effusive in her praise of her resilient 6-foot-2 freshman post.

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“She’s doing a remarkable job. We have a new affection for your state right now,” she laughs. “We have a very young team and we play a very tough schedule. Tia skipped the frying pan and went right into the fire. We’ve just scratched the surface of her ability.”

Dawson says practices have not been significantly longer or more difficult at Dartmouth than in high school – “academics come first here” – but, like Stokes, she is working to build strength and endurance.

“She has a knack for the ball, good hands and good timing,” says Wielgus, “and her work ethic – she doesn’t know how to do anything halfway. She’s athletic and long and she can run, but she needs more physical strength and range of motion. Every ounce of muscle she puts on shows in the game with an immediate pay-off.”

With two sophomores and two freshmen starting for the Big Green, Wielgus states, “this will be a very good team in time.”

Dawson agrees, and is happy to be playing basketball and pursuing her interest in architectural engineering at an institution that has been ranked No. 1 in the country for the caliber of its teaching.

“I think this is the right place for me to be,” she says. “I can pursue my passion for playing, and after four years or five years if I become an engineer, I will come out with a very good job.”

Adds her coach, “She has made enormous strides. The woman she’s becoming has an enormous future before her. [Her] whole community should be proud of her. She’s a real person of substance and a tribute to her mother and her family.”