

WITHOUT BOUNDARIES



By Dustin Semonavick

For the first time in her career at Rutgers, senior guard Matee Ajavon enters a season without a doubt in her mind about her health or a single limitation to her rapidly improving game.

After experiencing numerous injuries leading up to her sophomore and junior seasons, Ajavon was finally able to hit the hardwood without boundaries throughout the summer and into the preseason with hopes of making her senior season her best "On the Banks."

While being hampered by a left tibial stress fracture that caused her to miss large parts of the past two preseason's and four games last year, Ajavon has had to keep a positive front.

"It was aggravating because I couldn't play basketball at all," said Ajavon. "Coming into the last two seasons, I had to work myself back into shape after not playing for a long time. It was hard both mentally and physically because I was always playing catch up to everyone else."

be stellar, Ajavon knew that she could have been better if it wasn't for those preseason setbacks.

"If I could have started working on my game in the summer, who knows where I would have been," stated Ajavon. "The injury restricted me a lot as far as what I strive to improve on in between each season."

True signs of Ajavon's greatness began to shine through towards the latter parts of the regular season and into BIG EAST Tournament play. By the time the NCAA Tournament rolled around, no one could even remember that she had a preseason injury. That is, no one except for Ajavon who can view the scars left by the surgery.

Ajavon averaged 15.2 points, 3.7 assists and 3.5 rebounds per game in the 2007 NCAA Tournament and she was named the Most Outstanding Player of the Greensboro Regional and to the Final Four All-Tournament Team. She also scored 20-plus points in six of the last nine games of the year.

After a magical run that took the 2006-07 Rutgers squad to the brink of a national championship, Rutgers head coach C. Vivian Stringer knows that a healthy and improved Ajavon can further this team's success in the coming season.

"The sky is the limit as far as her abilities on the court," said Stringer. "I've never seen her run so hard and play so well and the fact that she finally came in on time and is healthy makes me excited to see what she can do. She's such a gifted athlete, and since her freshman year, she hasn't really been able to spend one week working on her game when the season ended."

That is until this year. Ajavon was cut from USA Basketball coming into college. This past summer Ajavon was selected for the 2007 Pan American team. She exploded for 27 points versus Brazil in the gold medal contest, helping lead the red, white and blue to victory.

"I always dreamed that I would have another opportunity to prove that I got better and that I shouldn't have been cut. It was like a dream come true to even play for the United States this summer."

"It was a great experience to play with a bunch of big name college players and against other people from different countries," Ajavon said of her summer journey to Rio de Janeiro. "We competed against some of the best players in the world and it was a great challenge that should help me going into the season."

Ajavon hopes to continue the productive growth she saw this summer. Although she hasn't set any specific individual goals for the upcoming season, Ajavon anticipates a great season both individually and as a team.



Even with the injuries, Ajavon averaged 12 points, nearly four assists, and over three rebounds per game during her junior campaign. She also led the team from behind the arc, shooting 39.5 percent. Although for most players these numbers would

"I want to be even better this year than last," explained Ajavon. "I have the benefit of starting early, so I'm conditioned. I really want to stay focused and start this season fresh."

Another goal for the 5-8 guard is to bring a stronger veteran leadership presence to her teammates this season. Although she has always been someone that leads by example on the court, she hopes to continue her progression as a vocal leader that all the players can look up to off the court.

"I think I'm growing into a bigger leader this year," said Ajavon. "I want to lead both by example and vocally. I know there are people that can be vocal or go out and just lead by action but I want to be both. I want to be able to show you what I'm talking about."

Stringer also sees the leadership potential in Ajavon. Although she was quiet as a freshman, the coach has taken notice to her rapid evolution as someone that will speak up and guide her younger teammates.

"Matee demonstrated that she can be a leader last year and I know she will do even more this year," said Stringer. "Her freshman year, she wouldn't say much of anything, but now she is very vocal, but at the same time remains calm and does all that she must do as a leader by way of her actions."

A key example of her leadership can be seen in the way Ajavon is effecting the development of rising star Epiphanny Prince. The sophomore credits Ajavon with pulling her to the side on many occasions after practice and working with her on things that she needed help with.

"She always helps me with the little things that are so important," said Prince. "Over time all the advice will make me into a better point guard."

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Ajavon, who was born in Liberia and moved to the United States when she was six, began playing basketball in the fourth grade. Ajavon said she would play with the guys for something to do.

"At first my friends and I just wanted to see who could dribble the best. We eventually would all leave early in the morning before school starts to get some runs in, but then we would have to go to school all sweaty."

Those early morning pick up games would pay off though when she began playing basketball at Malcolm X Shabazz High School in Newark, N.J. Ajavon developed into a star and led her team to back-to-back New Jersey Tournament of Champions titles (2003,



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2004), the first girl's team in state history to accomplish the feat.

In addition she was a three-time Associated Press All-State pick and in 2004 she was named to the Parade All-America Second Team and the USA Today Super 25 All-America Team.

With such outstanding high school and AAU league success, Ajavon was recruited heavily but in the end she was sold on Rutgers.

"I like the family atmosphere that coach Stringer provides," explained Ajavon. "She makes you feel comfortable and gives us all homes away from home."

Ajavon also wanted to remain close to her family and the fact that Rutgers is nearby, her mother Patience and siblings can attend every home game.

"Even though my mom is only thirty minutes away, she misses me all the time so it's always great for her to come to the games so we can see each other."

There is also another mother who is dreading her 'daughter' leaving home.

"As we get set to start this season, I'm a little sad, because every day as I start practice, I lose another day, another opportunity to be in the outstanding presence of the outstanding young women that are sitting in this audience," Stringer said at BIG EAST media day in late October of Ajavon, Essence Carson and junior Kia Vaughn. "I don't even want to start the first game. I just want to put it on freeze."