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International flavor breeds domestic success

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Feature Photo credit: Brianna Turek
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While Indiana is a state known for its blue collar working class and its unbreakable passion for basketball, the attention is often focused on the Hoosiers of IU or the Boilermakers at Purdue. For one former Boilermaker in particular, her international pedigree and atypical perception of the game has brought a European twist to this Indianan pastime.

Marian University (<http://mynaiatourney.org/2016-teams/marian-ind/>) head coach, Katie Gearalds, 31, finished her career at Purdue University as the 4th-leading scorer in program history with 1,974 points and was taken No. 7 overall in the 2007 WNBA Draft by the Seattle Storm. Gearalds spent three years with the Storm, but is known better for her success while playing in Europe due to her style of play.

“The WNBA is an ‘athletes’ game,’ if you can do anything athletic, you could be successful. When you go to Europe, if you can shoot it, and you can think the game, you’ll have a chance to play. I couldn’t guard my own shadow in the WNBA, but I could think the game,” Gearalds said.

Her success with the Alges basketball club in Lisbon, Portugal, didn’t end with her playing career, as she’s brought in two players from that club to Indianapolis to play for her.

Meet Jessica Almeida and Joana Soeiro. Both of these players are Portuguese internationals and played for junior clubs in Lisbon while Gearalds was a star. Almeida is a junior this season, and transferred from Cochise College in Arizona to get the chance to play for coach Gearalds after playing with her in Lisbon.

“She was like the superstar of the club, so everybody wanted to meet her and we were like the younger team of the club, but we were so considered, like good for our age that we got to play in the senior team, it was like a gift to play with the senior team,” Almeida said.

What makes this European connection so special is the brand of basketball the Knights are able to produce. Not only does Gearalds have Almeida and Soeiro on the floor, she also brought in former teammate, Greek international Vicky Volonaki, 39, to help establish a system that played a European brand of basketball.

“I love having Vicky on our staff, she challenges me in a different way to see things. I like to think that I can see absolutely everything, and she sees another perspective that I don’t see,” Gearalds said. “Seeing the game as an American and then seeing the game from a European standpoint, the way we play, I

would say our team is very close to being a European style.”

One might believe that the best basketball is played here in the United States due to the global influence of the NBA and the success of the United States Men’s National Team in the Olympics and FIBA World Cup. However, Gearalds feels that this is a common misconception.

“I think Kobe Bryant said it best that AAU Basketball is killing the fundamentals kids know when they get to college, you don’t practice anymore, you don’t work on a craft. AAU is just game, after game, after game. When you watch an 18-year-old American kid vs. an 18-year-old European kid, [the European is] fundamentally more refined in my opinion. They practice instead of just playing games, and I think it makes a world of difference. . . Look at the San Antonio Spurs,” Gearalds said.

Almeida agreed that the European-style is a lot more tactical, even going so far as to say that the United States players are almost bred to be athletes, which comes with a very different style of play, more physicality and less finesse.

Both Gearalds and Volonaki agree that the experience Almeida and Soeiro have playing overseas has helped the entire Marian roster. However, it hasn’t come without growing pains.

The rules of European basketball are more reflective of the NBA, especially in terms of the pace of play.

“We’ve got 24 seconds on offense, that’s a big difference. Playing as a point guard was so different. You have to call for a ball screen to finish the play [in Europe]. Here, you can throw up an air-ball, I can go and grab the ball and ask for another set play,” Soeiro said.

These inconsistencies within the American rulebook poses a great challenge to both Gearalds and Volonaki.

“In Europe, basketball is one. They have the same rules from five-years-old to 35. The rules are one, we don’t change it,” Volonaki said. “I have many friends [in Greece] that watch. . . their comments are ‘30-second shot clock, 1 pick-and-roll, 2 pick-and-rolls, 3 pick-and-rolls,’ they’re making fun of it, they call it kind of boring.

Frustrations aside, this style of play has worked all season for the Knights. Gearalds greatly fancies the Spurs and their style of play. San Antonio has six integral players with significant international experience (Tony Parker, Manu Ginobili, Boris Diaw, Tim Duncan, Patty Mills and Boban Marjanovich), and with the five championships under Gregg Popovich, and the 56-10 record the Spurs have posted thus far this season, what coach wouldn’t want to emulate a proven winning-system?

“If we could have a team of international players, I would love it. I love our team right now, don’t put words in my mouth, [but] I think the fundamentals are so important to the game of basketball. The times are changing a little bit, and to have a kid who understands how to play so you don’t have to spend 45 minutes every practice explaining ‘why,’ having a kid whose understood it since they were ten years old because they practiced it every day for a year, for two years, three years, and not played game after game after game, it makes it easier as a coach. If we could bring in a couple more or one every year. . . for us, I think it helps,” Gearalds said.

Marian has had great success in Gearalds’ three seasons at the helm. From December 19, 2015 through February 13, 2016, the Knights rattled off 17-straight victories. The team won the Crossroads league regular-season title this year with a 27-6 (16-2) record, and placed 2nd in the conference tournament with a 64-68 loss to Indiana Wesleyan on February 29.

While the loss in the conference championship stung for Gearalds and her players, it proved to be beneficial coming into nationals.

“I feel like we needed it. We won 17 games in a row, that’s really hard to do. If we keep on winning games, coming here wouldn’t be the same,” Soeiro said.

Nearly any outcome could have been better than Marian’s 2015 tournament appearance. The Knights earned a No. 2 seed last season, yet were upset by the No. 7 seed Tabor College Bluejays in the first round.

Each year, teams trade gifts with first-round opponents, and the Tabor t-shirt Gearalds receives keeps her, and her team, motivated to never let that heartbreak happen again.

“When we watch film every night, [the shirt] is like right there on the board. Whenever we go to watch film, it’s there,” Almeida said.

Marian has avenged that loss and then some with perhaps the biggest upset of the tournament thus far. On Saturday, March 12, the Knights defeated No. 1 overall seed, and defending champion, Morningside College (<http://mynaiatourney.org/2016-teams/morningside-iowa/>).

Morningside’s proximity to the Tyson Events Center, which is where all 31 games of the championship are held, provides a home-court advantage that most teams in the field of 32 don’t experience. But, for Soeiro, Almeida, and the rest of the Marian Knights, it was just another game.

“We knew we could do it, but to actually do it was just amazing,” Almeida said.

The Spurs of NAIA DII Women’s Basketball produced a championship this season, with a 59-48 victory over the University of Southern Oregon on March 15. This was the first championship in program history.



Jessica Almeida
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Joana Soeiro
Joana Soeiro

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