

Making an impact

Junior forward Jaynetta Saunders leads the Aggies in her first season

BY REECE FLOOD
The Battalion

In her first season with the Texas A&M women's basketball team, junior forward Jaynetta Saunders is already making a major impact as one of the most talented players on the team. The junior college transfer is putting up big numbers early in her Aggie career. Saunders is leading the team with 103 field goals and 235 points this season, and she paces the team with 4.7 points per game.

Saunders' immediate impact on the team has impressed fellow teammate senior A&M forward Kera Alexander.

"She's a very athletic player," Alexander said. "Obviously, she adds a good dimension to our team, offensively, because it's really hard for people to match up with her. She really helps out rebounding. I think that's something we really need."

Saunders leads the team with 40 offensive rebounds this year and is second on the team with 116 total boards, averaging over seven a game. Defensively, Saunders leads the team with 39 steals and 30 blocked shots.

Alexander is not the only one to be impressed with her new teammate this season. Saunders has been recognized throughout the conference as an outstanding player, claiming the Big 12 Conference Rookie of the Week three times this year.

"It's an honor to be Rookie of the Week three times because we've got some real good people in the Big 12," Saunders said. "I'm just trying to play for the team, just trying to help the team out as much as I can."

This is not the first time Saunders has experienced success in athletics. Saunders was a dual athlete at Eastern High School in Louisville, Ky., where she competed in both basketball and track.

Saunders won the state championship in the high jump in the ninth and 12th grade, and is currently the all-time leading scorer for the EHS women's basketball team. The two-time All-District player finished high school with four varsity letters.

After high school, Saunders had to choose the sport in which she wanted to excel.

"In high school, I was more (interested) in track," Saunders said. "I could have gone anywhere for track, but I didn't make my grades. So, if I would have made my grades, I think I probably would have been running track."

With a new dedication to her school work and strong basketball skills, Saunders decided to attend Belleville Area College in Illinois, and stick with basketball.

Now able to focus more time on one sport, Saunders had an opportunity to show her true talent on the court. As a sophomore, Saunders averaged a nation's-best 27.1 points per game while being selected as a first team All-American by the National Junior College Athletic Association and the Women's Basketball Coaches Association/Kodak — then the recruiting began.

A&M coach Peggy Gillom was amazed at what she saw while watching Saunders play at Belleville.

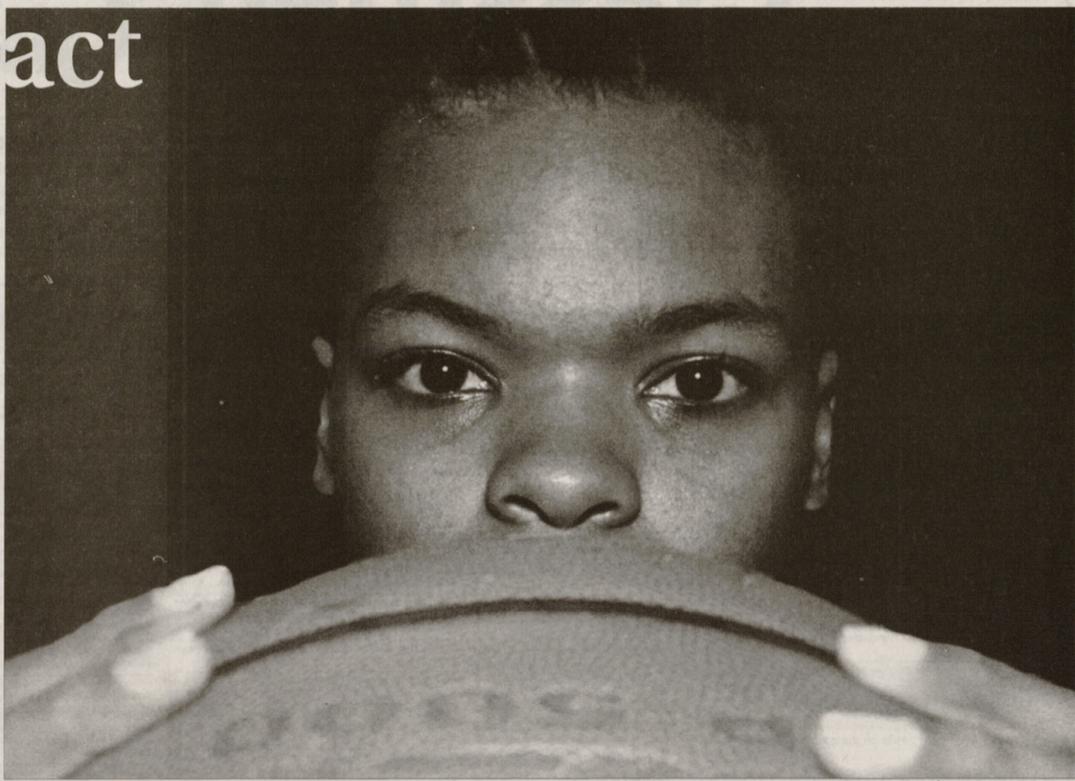
"When I first saw her I said, 'Oh my gosh, she's one of the best players I've ever recruited,'" Gillom said.

Gillom was not the only coach after the young superstar. Saunders was being recruited by some of the best teams in the nation. 1999 NCAA Champion Purdue University, University of North Carolina, University of Virginia and several other top-notch programs all wanted Saunders on their roster. But there was something about A&M she couldn't resist.

"The atmosphere, the coaches, the teachers, the staff — it's like a big family here," Saunders said. "It's like a family away from home."

Being so far away from her Kentucky home is still a little hard for Saunders. Her father wanted her to stay close to home and play at the University of Kentucky, but her parents have supported her decision to play further south.

"When I said I wanted to go play in Texas, they kind of had a problem with it because I'm the baby, and they don't want their baby that far away from home," Saunders said. "But once they met the coaches they felt I would be all right and they would take care of me the way that my par-



CODY WAGES/THE BATTALION

A&M junior forward **Jaynetta Saunders** is leading the Aggies in points, steals and blocked shots in just her first year on the team. Saunders came to A&M from Belleville Area College in Illinois where she was named a first team All-American.

ents would take care of me."

Another reason Saunders chose A&M was due to the negative recruiting by some of the other schools. Instead of utilizing negative tactics, Gillom and the rest of the coaching staff focused on what they could offer Saunders, and that is exactly what she wanted to hear.

"They let me hear about the academics, about (how) I'm going to get my education and make sure I graduate."

Gillom did not focus on merely academics. She thought Saunders was the type of player that could turn the program around and let her know what the coaching staff thought about her talent.

"We said 'Jaynetta, you're the one,'" Gillom said. "I'm giving you the green light; just go and play."

Now that Saunders has carved a niche at A&M, she plans on accomplishing several goals. While she's here, she wants "to be the best that I can be and help us win the Big 12."

Off the court, Saunders is quickly falling in love with A&M and said one of her favorite traditions is saying, "Howdy!"

"That's a real good tradition here," she said. "Everybody speaks to everybody."

Gillom feels that Saunders is adjusting well to her new life at A&M and attributes it to her character traits.

"Everybody loves her," Gillom said. "She makes friends with all the other athletes. She's a very friendly person. She doesn't know a stranger; that's the type of person she is. She's

very humble and very unselfish."

As far as classes go, Saunders is pursuing a degree in Agricultural Development and is pleased with the fact that the teachers treat her like every other student.

"They know you play sports, so they think you're going to slack," Saunders said. "I let the teachers know right then and there I'm here to learn. On the court, I play basketball, but off the court, I'm a regular student — just like everybody else."

After graduation, Saunders hopes to continue playing basketball in the Women's National Basketball Association. But until then, she will continue her dedication to earn a degree and strive for success on the court.

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