

## Only the beginning ...

### Tomas Ress adds European style to Aggie basketball

At the age of 14, Tomas Ress left his Italian home, his family, his friends and everything he knew to pursue a dream. The reason — he towered above his classmates and could shoot a basketball.

That was all it took to change his life. Four years later Ress made the transition from the European circuit to the American courts 6,000 miles away. That was in 1998. After only a few months spent stirring up the Miami high school scene, the Italian was drawing the eyes of college recruiters across the country.

Texas A&M basketball coach Melvin Watkins was among those taking notice. Still in his first season as A&M's coach, Watkins saw Ress as part of the solution to the Aggies' basketball woes.

"He saw me, he liked me, he got me," Ress said about Watkins and his choice of A&M.

After leaving his home to start for the Virtus Bologna Junior team, Ress established himself as one of the top young big men in his country.

Since then Ress has played with the Italian national team — starting for the "Under 20" team and practicing with the Italian A1 team that won the Italian and European championships and also produced two NBA players.

Commonly referred to as the top Italian big man under 20, Ress made the choice to spend his senior year in the United States.

It was a choice that played out to perfection. Ress led Hialeah Champagnat Catholic School near Miami to the Florida state championship game.

Then Ress turned his focus to a different type of basketball, NCAA Division I. At 6-10, 207 pounds, with the on-court statistics to go with his size, he was a perfect candidate.

When Ress chose A&M, he became the first Italian to wear an Aggie uniform.

Signing with the Aggies was only the first step in a big transition. Ress did not have the strength to go along with his size, was not accustomed to the faster pace of American hoops and had to make a transition from playing under the basket to manning the perimeter for A&M.

Because Ress had so many adjustments to prepare to play in the Big 12, the coaching staff planned on red-shirting Ress for the 1999-2000 season. His preseason progress changed Watkins' mind and by late November, only two games into the Aggies season, Ress was seeing action.

Ress' improvement on the court paralleled his work in the weight room. In the months before the season, he gained 17-pounds, bulking up to a respectable 223-pounds, a weight that matched his 6 feet 10 inches and size 18 shoe.

Thanks to his European background, Ress was able to quickly adjust to his new position as A&M's forward. Previously, he had played in the paint due to his size advantage over his fellow Italians. However, the nature of European play had forced Ress to develop a perimeter shot, a quality that made the transition possible.

"Everybody can shoot in Europe. Even if you're a big guy, you have an outside shot," Ress said. "Here in the United States it's more physical, you run more ... it's just a very, very fast game."

The speed and nature of the Big 12 was the only obstacle remaining. According to Watkins, Ress was able to adjust during the early part of the season thanks to his "high basketball I.Q."

"What's unique about him — normally when you talk about European players, especially big kids, they usually grew up playing the perimeter. Tomas is just the opposite; he didn't have that in his repertoire before he came here," Watkins said. "So what he's accomplished to this date on the perimeter has really been amazing."

Ress' accomplishments soon earned him a starting role at forward. From there he began to make a run at becoming one of A&M's top contributors.

That run culminated in late January. Ress led the Aggies with 10 points against the University of Kansas. His second time to lead the Aggie scoring was with more flair. On Jan. 29 at the University of Missouri, the Italian was shooting lights out. Ress shot 70 percent from the floor, going 2-2 outside the arc and 6-6 from the charity stripe. The result — 22 points, eight rebounds, a pair of assists and a block.

The Aggies lost both those matches, but Ress had

established his game — mixing the outside shot with his inside experience that allowed him to drive into the paint and finish — a daunting task for a forward of his size.

"He's 6-10 with real, real good skills, which is a great asset to have," A&M senior post Aaron Jack said. "He's actually surprisingly strong for as frail as he looks ... as he continues to get stronger he's going to be an unbelievable match-up for people, playing on the perimeter. He's just so long and has a sweet shot."

As he has done ever since he was first approached to play basketball, Ress looks to adjust to his changing roles and continue to be an impact player for the Aggies.



Story by Jason Lincoln  
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