

# BALLERS

SPORTS + BUSINESS + INSPIRATION

APRIL ISSUE

UNIQUE  
THOMPSON

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SPECIAL  
JENNINGS

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KHRISTINA  
WILLIAMS

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STEPHANIE  
LOVELL

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SYDNEE  
WALKER

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TYASHA  
HARRIS  
ON A MISSION

**+**  
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# APRIL 2021 ISSUE

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# Editor's Note

**The Ballers Magazine** is a digital magazine dedicated to shining light on amazing people in sports that are inspiring the next generation.

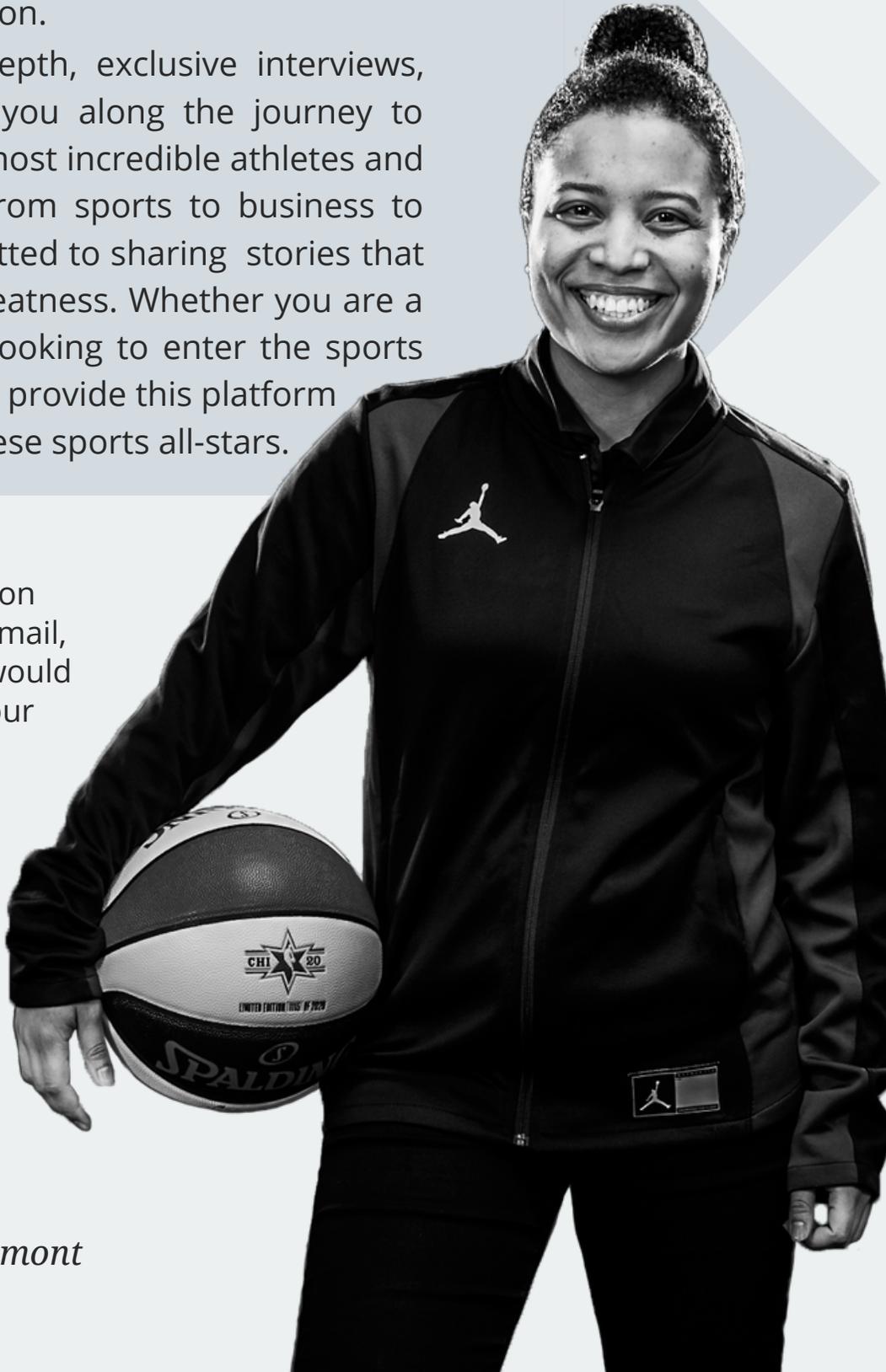
Through a series of in-depth, exclusive interviews, this magazine will bring you along the journey to success of the industry's most incredible athletes and business professionals. From sports to business to motivation, we are committed to sharing stories that encourage you to seek greatness. Whether you are a sports enthusiast or are looking to enter the sports industry, we are excited to provide this platform for you to connect with these sports all-stars.

Connect with us at  
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and let us know who you would  
like to see featured on our  
forthcoming issues.

*Sky's the limit,  
keep ballin'.*

*Sofi Dumont*

SOFI DUMONT  
Editor-in-Chief | @sofidumont





TYASHA  
HARRIS  
ON A MISSION

Tyasha Harris fell in love with basketball at the age of four years old. Growing up in Indianapolis, Indiana, Tyasha remembers becoming intrigued by the game after watching her dad play in different tournaments growing up. Committed to embarking on a journey of her own, she joined her YMCA team and local travel basketball team to immerse herself in the sport. As she continued to develop her skills on the court, Tyasha confirmed her dreams of playing the game at the highest level. Upon embarking on her collegiate career at the University of South Carolina, she was determined to maximize the opportunity to learn from Coach Staley and prepare for the next level. **She was all in.** Throughout her four years at South Carolina, Tyasha would go on to earn a series of accolades—including a national championship and the Dawn Staley Award —, and inch closer to the chance of playing at the next level. **Before she knew it, the moment she had been working towards from a very young age was here and she was ready.** With the seventh pick in the 2020 WNBA Draft, the Dallas Wings selected Tyasha. She had done it. She had achieved her childhood dreams of playing professional basketball. It has only been up from there! Since then, Tyasha has wrapped up her first season in the league—playing in the WNBA bubble as well as overseas in Turkey—, and has also started to build her personal brand off the court. From signing with Under Armour to investing in SportsLync—a new, digital platform for athletes, coaches and fans—, Tyasha has tapped into an array of avenues as she embarks on her professional career. **She is simply...ON A MISSION!**





**Take us through that process of deciding to attend the University of South Carolina. What was that transition from high school to college like for you?**

It was definitely nerve-wracking just because college is very serious. A lot of people would say college basketball is more of a business than high school basketball. When you get to college, it's business. I picked South Carolina because of the family atmosphere. I just loved how they were so family-oriented, and that's who I am. I am a big family person, and I am loyal to people who are loyal to me. I also (selected South Carolina) because of Coach Staley. She is a very, very decorated player and a highly-decorated coach. She has connections as well so if basketball were to stop, God-forbid, I knew that she would help me with whatever I wanted to do outside of basketball or in the field of sports.

**You had an incredible collegiate career at South Carolina, and earned an array of accolades including an NCAA title in 2017 and the Dawn Staley Award in 2020. Could you share more with us about what those experiences were like for you?**

Yeah! I knew coming into college that I wanted to win a national championship. I didn't know it was going to be my first year (though). You know, people go four years, five years trying to win a national championship and I got lucky enough to win it my first year. It was really, really fun doing that—especially because as a freshman, I think I was the first freshman to start for South Carolina and Coach Staley. So that was another accomplishment of mine. It was really fun. I mean the team was great, I got my ring, and I won the Dawn Staley Award (which) was great. She was a great point guard when she was playing, and everything that I want to do she has done, so it was great getting that award especially because she is a person that I look up to.

**Throughout your four years, how do you think your game elevated? What are some areas that you worked on during your time at South Carolina that really prepared you for that next step in your career?**

I think Coach Staley helped me a lot as a point guard. She gave me knowledge when I was a freshman. The biggest thing she told me was: "As a point guard, it is all a mental game. You have to kind of play mind games with your big girls, your wing players, or your All-Star players." I think as years went on, I learned how to be a leader and leave my legacy in college. I was a captain my sophomore, junior, and senior years. I had a person I looked up to also, A'ja Wilson, who was our captain when I was a freshman and all four years she was there. She taught me a lot of things. When she left, I had to kind of take over the reigns. Then my last year, I was one of the oldest players (on the team)—which I was not used to because I am actually young for my age. So being the oldest player, and my team being one of the youngest, I had to take on the role of that motherly figure. I kind of had to be what A'ja Wilson was for me to them.

**Let's talk about Draft Night! You were selected with the 7th pick in the 2020 WNBA Draft by the Dallas Wings. What was that moment like of hearing your name being called and achieving your dreams of playing basketball at the highest level?**

It was a lifelong dream. Everything that I had done before then was just to get to that point. That is the highest point to get to once you are a basketball player—playing in the league. It was a little bit different because of COVID so it was a weird experience, but I think ESPN did a great job of making it feel real even though we weren't in New York City. They had an orange carpet for us, and we had a lot of ESPN calls for our camera setups, (etc). It was a really, really fun experience.



**As you embarked on your professional career, what was that transition from college into the league like? What were some of the challenges that you faced early on?**

Yeah! I think transitioning from every step of basketball, you always (face) some of the same challenges. Obviously, there is the physicality and speed. I think that was the biggest thing for me—just the speed and physicality of the game—, but that is something that you get used to as you play more games. Other than that, I think it was more about learning that every player in the league was an All-Star in their high school and college. You have to find something different about you. Everybody can be fast and strong, everybody can shoot, everybody can score. So you have to find something that you are really good at, and try to perfect that. Whatever team you are on, try to make that role fit for you, and know your role on the team.



*Photographs courtesy of Tyasha Harris (@ballher\_52)*

**You also had a unique rookie season as you played your first year in the WNBA Bubble. Looking back on your time there, what are some things that you learned about yourself?**

I learned that I have patience. It was definitely difficult going from playing every game in college as the main person on your team to being a piece to the puzzle in the WNBA. So just trying to learn about what the coaches needed, and trying to be that leader for girls who may be 8 or 10 years older than me, was something I needed to learn. I just kind of had to get out of my shell and be comfortable with the things that I am uncomfortable with. The bubble just really showed that I have patience, and I had to move on from things quickly—especially with having games every other day.

**Whether it is tough losses or injuries, there are a series of challenges that one may face along the way. Let's talk about the mental aspect of the game. Could you share more with us about the importance of having that mental toughness and motivation to continue pushing through adversity?**

Yeah! Obviously, I think everyone should applaud every person that was in the bubble. It is a hard thing to do. It's hard not being able to leave, being in that basketball-mode 24/7, going (through) injuries, having tough losses, or getting cut right then and there. But, I want to credit my supporting staff. I have a trainer from back home and we did bible study twice a week. Even though it was bible study, we talked about other things (as well). He taught me about shifting my perspective—that was our biggest thing in the bubble. When things weren't going my way, I had to kind of shift my perspective and think positive so that my actions would align. There really isn't a right or wrong. It's whatever you think. So whenever I (faced) some bad times, I tried to not tie my emotions to it (in order) to stay positive throughout the 2-3 months we were there.

## **Transitioning a little bit off the court, let's talk branding! How have you started to build your personal brand in the space?**

I think branding is a big part (of this space). I learned that throughout my classes in college—where we talked about student-athletes building their brands. Then my agent, Jay Field, is big on that too. We always talk about how I can make money outside of the league. So right now, we are using social media as my biggest tool to brand myself, put myself out there, and let my fans know who I am.

## **Recently, you also entered the tech space and invested in SportsLync. What inspired you to enter this space and embark on this new journey?**

Yeah! So Jay has an app called SportsLync, and as a young, Black female athlete, I thought it would be wise to start making those strides in investing. A lot of people always talk about investments and creating money for the long term. He brought me the idea of this app, which can be as big as Instagram or TikTok, for athletes. I thought it was a great idea because I know, just during COVID, a lot of people were asking about the best ways to get exposure. You know, they were asking my trainer: "How can my daughters get seen by college coaches if they can't go on AAU trips or travel?" So this app is a way for people to put up their highlights and connect with athletes, agents, coaches, or whoever they want to connect with in the sports field. It is a way for people to get seen and gain exposure as a student athlete.



## **In addition to investing in SportsLync, you also joined the Under Armour family and signed your first endorsement deal with them. Could you share more with us about that experience and how your brand is growing with them as well?**

I am very blessed to have been able to sign with Under Armour. When I was choosing my agents, Jay (Field) always told me it was good to have a shoe deal. So we contacted Under Armour—because I wore (the brand) for four years at South Carolina since they are an Under Armour school—, and the crazy backstory is that they were also looking to see who my agent was to contact me. That was crazy for me. Under Armour wasn't on the scene for the WNBA, and they were looking to have a women's side (in the league) this year, so it was perfect timing. We had just finished our college season because of COVID, I was trying to get a shoe deal, and Under Armour was getting back in the WNBA scene. It was a no-brainer for me. 1) I had worn the brand for four years in college, and 2) The women who are signed to the brand now are like the face of the brand on the women's side. They ask us a lot of questions as well. We are so involved. They give us feedback, we give them feedback, and we just (collaborate) back and forth which is really cool actually.



**“Never take anything for granted.” I think as I was growing up, I took little things—like being able to get in the gym—for granted. Sometimes, you get tired of the same stuff. Once COVID hit though and I couldn’t go back to school, couldn’t go lift weights, and couldn’t see the people that cooked food for us, our trainers, or my teammates, I started missing it. So I would just say, “Don’t take anything for granted because you don’t know when you can’t have it anymore.””**

*- Tyasha on a piece of advice she would give to her younger self.*

**We have to talk about your phrase, “Finish Your Breakfast.” Tell us a little bit more about how you came up with that phrase and what it means to you?**

Oh yeah! I have a little friend group in Indiana that, during quarantine, worked out together. It was me, Kyle Guy, Djimon Henson, and Caitlin Gilbert. We went through this crazy workout (experience) of waking up at 5 a.m., running 4-5 miles in the freezing cold, and then working on basketball later on. Our trainer also found this hill, it was more like a mountain (\*laughs\*), and every other day we would either run miles or go to the soccer field and sprint. We would then have a basketball workout, and then hill work. We would also have bible study and yoga in the morning. It was just crazy. So we just started coming up with this phrase, “Finish Your Breakfast.” It basically means that anything you start, just make sure you finish it. Let’s say we would make this crazy move when we were working out and we didn’t finish the layup or make the shot, we would just say: “C’mon man, finish your breakfast.” We said “finish your breakfast” because we were considered ‘The Breakfast Club’ since we would start at 5 a.m. So we just kind of rolled with that.

**Going into the advice side of things, what are some pieces of advice that you would give to someone who is interested in pursuing a similar career path and playing basketball at the professional level?**

I would say, “Love it. Love what you do. Don’t think of it as a job.” As soon as you start thinking of it as a job, it gets tiresome. You have to be very committed to this. There are a lot of different things that go into it. You risk your body, you risk your time, you risk relationships. But, if you love it and sacrifice for it, there are a lot of great things that can come out of it.

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THE BALLERS MAGAZINE PRESENTS

# THE COACHES CORNER



A new segment dedicated to highlighting coaches and trainers in the industry! These feature stories give an inside look into their journeys to coaching, passions beyond the game, and keys to success both on and off the court.



# SPECIAL JENNINGS

*Girls Basketball Head Coach |  
Montverde Academy*

Coach Special Jennings discovered her interest in coaching during her time as a student athlete at Xavier University. After retiring from her professional basketball career, Coach Jennings was determined to give back to the game and pursue her passion for coaching full force. But for her, it was bigger than teaching young athletes the skills to win games. It was about the opportunity to mentor, support, and help them reach their highest potential. As she began her journey at Wright State, Coach Jennings immersed herself in the world of coaching. She continued developing her own style of coaching as she joined the women's basketball programs at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), Flagler College, and Augusta

*Photographs courtesy of Coach Special Jennings (@specialjennings)*

University as an assistant coach. This was just the beginning. Little did she know, but the opportunity to run her own program was right around the corner. In August 2020, Coach Jennings was named the new Girls Basketball Head Coach at Montverde Academy. The rest is history. Coach Jennings has recently wrapped up an incredible first season—with her program being ranked #1 in the country by MaxPreps and #4 by ESPN—, and is looking forward to continuing to work towards bringing a national championship to Montverde Academy.

**Take us back to your basketball journey in college. Could you share more with us about your experience playing collegiate basketball at Xavier University?**

I had a great experience at Xavier. We did things that, you know, a lot of people don't get the opportunity to do. We were ranked Top-3 in the country my last two years, Top-25 all four of my years, we won four regular season championships, three conference championships, we had four NCAA appearances, and an Elite 8 appearance. So I really couldn't have asked for a better collegiate experience than the one I had at Xavier.

**Reflecting back on your time in college, what were some key takeaways that you learned during your time there that prepared you for that next step in your career?**

I learned that life is hard. I learned about dedication and hard work. I learned that people are going to place their expectations on you, and you just have to be yourself. I think that when I was in school, and with us being so good, people put their own expectations and their own pressures on me as a player. When I was a freshman, I kind of fed in to that of: "Oh, I don't want to disappoint this person, I don't want to disappoint that person." But ultimately, the goal is to not disappoint yourself. Once I understood and realized, "Hey this is my journey. I am doing this for me and not for everybody else," it was like a weight was lifted off my shoulders.



**After graduating from college, you embarked on your professional basketball career overseas. What was that experience like?**

It was different. Everything is not at your disposal. You know, you are in a bit of a culture shock. In the States and in college, you are accustomed to one thing. I went to Europe and I was the only American on my team for a while, so getting accustomed to that (was a challenge). There was also a language barrier, so I had to learn my way through that—just having a translator and all of those things. I tell people all the time: “There is a difference between visiting a different country and living there for months at a time.” That was definitely a big part when I became a pro—just making that cultural adjustment.

**How do you think your experiences playing in college and at the professional level help you as you embarked on your coaching career?**

As a player, I viewed basketball in a different light than I do as a coach. Of course I am still a competitor when coaching, but as a player, I was super hands on—I ate, slept, and breathed basketball. I have learned that now as a coach, you have to meet players where they are. When I first got in the business, I was forcing everybody to be Special Jennings—I thought everybody wanted to play pro. When in reality, some people just want to go to school and get a degree. Some people are good enough to play college basketball and that’s it. You know, I was pushing my expectations on my players. So as a coach, you kind of have to turn it off a little bit, meet them where they are, and just help them reach whatever that potential is.

**Throughout your journey as an assistant coach—at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), Flagler College, and Augusta University—what were some things that you learned about the world of coaching?**

I think I learned a lot about what I did and didn’t want to do when I became a head coach. Fortunately for myself, I had the opportunity to work on different staffs—which allowed me to work under different people. That ultimately helped me become a better coach because I just became well-rounded. At the Division II level, which Flagler College and Augusta University were, it was just me and the Head Coach. So basically, (it was) like they threw me in the fire and I had to do pretty much everything. You have to learn quickly. I was the janitor, the manager, the video coordination, everything—you are everything at that level. That’s why I kind of tell coaches now, “Why don’t you want to coach Division II? Either way, you are going to learn.” At the Division I level, a lot of those coaches are stuck in a position. You are a Recruiting Coordinator and that’s it, you are stuck in that position. You are a Defensive Coach and that’s it, you are stuck in a position. Whereas you go somewhere where you get to wear different hats and learn different things, you are prepared for your next situation. I think that as an assistant (coach), all of those different staffs that I worked on helped me get ready for my head coaching opportunity.



**That actually leads perfectly into our next question! Could you share more with us about the experience of becoming the Girls Basketball Head Coach at Montverde Academy? What has that experience been like?**

I couldn't have asked for a better transition. Right now, we are 21-2. We are ranked #1 in the country by MaxPreps and #4 by ESPN, so just coming in, I couldn't have asked for a better start to coaching. Obviously with the pandemic, the biggest challenge has been working with things (surrounding) COVID. There have been some things that have tried to slow us down, but I wouldn't change anything about it. As a head coach, you wear all the hats—your hand is in everything. As an associate head coach at UIC at the Division I level, I learned how to delegate. As a head coach, you have to know that you can't do it all on your own. As bad as you want everything to come across your desk, you have to hire somebody that you trust, that understands you, and knows how you like things. So hiring the right person to work with me was a big thing.

**You just wrapped up an incredible season. Reflecting back on your first year, what are some things that you learned about yourself both as a coach and professional in the industry?**

Oh man, patience. Patience. I went from working with 18-22 year olds to now (working with) 14-18 year olds. I went from big sis to now more of the motherly role. It has been very different because, to younger kids, they do less of what you say and more of what you do. So you really have to be delicate with them and set a visual example for them. You have to hear your own voice a lot at this level—there is a lot of repeating yourself that goes on. I think just growing in becoming patient has been the biggest thing I have learned about myself as a head coach.

**As you continue your journey as a head coach, what are some goals that you have for the program—both from a recruiting and player development standpoint?**

Oh man, just a national championship. For the kids that want to come to Montverde Academy, the first thing I tell them is: "What do you want to get out of basketball? Education? Perfect, you are going to get that here. We are one of the top schools in the country. We have a 100% college acceptance rate. We have 90 countries that attend our school. We have 34 AP courses at our school. So education-wise, you are going to get that." Basketball-wise, it is important for me to have kids here that want to win a national championship. If they have that in mind, they are going to automatically work hard, they are going to come with a good attitude, they are going to have a work ethic, and they are going to have the right approach. Those are the athletes that I want. Any kid that wants to come to Montverde Academy, that is going to be at the forefront—"Do you have these intangibles?"



**Going into the advice side of things, what are some pieces of advice that you would give to someone who is interested in pursuing a similar career and going into coaching?**

"Do it your way." I think a lot of coaches and a lot of people that get into the business try to design their journey the same way as someone else's. You have to learn "you" first. What you are good at, what your weaknesses are, and what your strengths are. You have to be yourself. You can't be somebody else. You know I admire Dawn Staley, but I am not Dawn Staley. I may be able to achieve great things, but the way I get to greatness is not the same way that she has reached greatness. Those journeys look different. I think the sooner people understand that, the better off they will be. I think people will be even happier because they are being themselves and being authentic to who they are. You are not trying to cater to what you think someone else will like, how they would want it, or how it should look because of what someone else has said. You have got to be yourself. I go through this business as me—wrong, right, or indifferent, I stand on everything that I say. I move in the manner in which I want to move, what makes me comfortable, and what makes me happy. I have seen success because I am not trying to mimic anyone, so I think it is important to just be yourself (in this industry).

**BALLERS**  
THE MAGAZINE

X



# BUBBLE BALLIN'

OSHAЕ BRISSETT • BRIAN BOWEN II • JOSH REAVES





*Photo credits: Fort Wayne Mad Ants/NBAE*

BUBBLE BALLIN'

# OSHAE BRISSETT

Oshae Brissett discovered his love for basketball at a very young age. After watching his older brother play growing up, he quickly became passionate about the game and decided to embark on a journey of his own. Over the next few years, he would go on to play for elite high school programs —Findlay Prep and the Athlete Institute—, before starting his collegiate career at Syracuse University. During that time, Oshae solidified his dreams of playing the game at the highest level. He was determined to one day play in the NBA. As he

began his journey at Syracuse, Oshae continued to strengthen his game on the court and elevate his basketball IQ. At the end of his sophomore year, he decided to take that next step in his career and declare for the 2019 NBA Draft. He was ready. This was the time for him to turn his dreams into reality. Despite going undrafted, Oshae remained locked in. He was committed to reaching his dreams of playing the game at the highest level. Shortly after, Oshae signed his first pro contract with the Toronto Raptors and officially began his career in the NBA. He hasn't looked back since. Recently, Oshae finished his first G-League season playing for the Fort Wayne Mad Ants, and has signed a multi-year contract with the Indiana Pacers. Truly amazing!

# BUBBLE BALLIN' - OSHAE BRISSETT

**You attended the Athlete Institute early on in your career. Could you share more with us about your journey there? How did your game elevate during your time at the Institute?**

At first, I was at Findlay Prep in Las Vegas for three years. That was cool—I got to learn a lot, see a lot, and grow a lot because I was away from home at such a young age. You know going to a school like that, you are playing with the best players in the country. My first year I had Kelly Oubre Jr., Rashad Vaughn, Justin Jackson. My second year, Allonzo Trier, P. J. Washington, Markus Howard. Third year, Skylar Mays, P. J. Washington, Carlos Johnson. So you know, every year it was like we were just stacked with top competition. I had a couple of offers at that time, but I felt like I wasn't really ready to go to college. I went to the Athlete Institute where Coach Tony really put the ball in my hand, made me a guard, and really taught me that the NBA was changing—where they liked taller guards who could handle the ball and do more things (on the court). Working with him for that whole year really helped my confidence, and made me a well-rounded player.



**After the Athlete Institute, you embarked on your collegiate career at Syracuse University. As you took that next step and transitioned from high school to college, what were some challenges that you faced early on? How did you work to overcome them?**

I would just say playing in front of a crowd like that, and playing on such a high-level stage. Syracuse is one of those schools that a lot of people talk about. It is a lot of people's favorite school. Every game, we were playing on TV. We had a lot of ESPN games where we played against top teams and top players. I would say just focusing in on the actual game and not worrying about all of the outside noise that comes with playing at such a high-viewing school (was the biggest challenge).

"I would say scoring my first bucket at home. Being from Toronto, and having everyone in the fan sections know that I was from Toronto, made scoring that first bucket amazing. That would be my favorite (memory) for sure."

- Oshae on his favorite memory in the industry thus far.



**Let's talk about your journey to the league! You declared for the NBA Draft in 2019 and soon after signed with the Toronto Raptors. What was that experience like of signing your first pro contract and reaching your dreams of playing in the NBA?**

It was amazing. Amazing! Not even because it was my home team, but just because it was my first pro contract. I was really excited. I knew that a lot of people would love to be in my position, and have been playing their whole lives just to get there. I didn't take it for granted at all. As soon as it happened, I went straight to the gym. I kept on working because I knew that if I didn't get better and used this opportunity, this could really be it. The NBA is tough, you know. It was definitely really exciting though.

**As you continue your career in the league for the second year, what are some personal goals that you have?**

Just to keep getting better, keep learning, and keep having fun. I feel like that is the main thing—to keep having fun. For guys who are kind of in my position, fighting to get back in the league, we tend to put a lot of stress on ourselves. I feel like if you just keep having fun and doing your thing, everything will work out. So I just try to keep a good mindset and work every day.



**Something that you touched on was the importance of having that focused mindset, and in a sense, that mental toughness. Could you share your thoughts with us about the importance of having that mentality and motivation to continue pushing through the adversity that one may face throughout this journey?**

It is very important. Every day is not going to be your happiest or your best day. Every game is not going to be your best game. So it is really all (about) how you can bounce back. A big thing that coaches, scouts, and GMs look for is your (ability) to bounce back. You know, if you have a bad game one day, are you going to be able to have a bounce back game the next day without taking too long to get back into your groove? Everything like that comes from the mental side, it is not really all skill. Everyone has skill at this level. Everyone is good. The thing that separates people though is the work that they put in off the court—when no one is looking—, and their mental side. It's about being able to stay up and do the little things that need to be done.

**Going into the advice side of things, what are some pieces of advice that you would give to someone who is interested in playing basketball at the professional level?**

I would say the main thing is (to) understand that everyone is different. Don't watch what other people do, what other people accomplish. Your time will definitely come if you stay the course. I feel like a lot of people really watch other guys' accolades and what they accomplish—you know their contracts, what they are getting, and stuff (like that)—, and it really puts them down. You should really just be focusing on yourself and getting better because at any given time your chance will come. So I would really just say, "Focus on yourself and don't worry about what other people are doing."



## BUBBLE BALLIN'

# BRIAN BOWEN II

Born and raised in Saginaw, Michigan, Brian Bowen II fell in love with the game of basketball after his dad introduced him to the sport at the age of just three years old. Throughout his time in middle school and high school, Brian remembers working in the gym day and night to prepare himself to play at the next level. He was committed to achieving his dreams of becoming a professional basketball player. He was determined to reach his highest potential. Before he knew it,

*Photo credits: Fort Wayne Mad Ants/NBAE*

the opportunity was here and he was ready! After deciding to forego college, Brian signed his first pro contract with the Sydney Kings of the Australian National Basketball League (NBL) and officially began his professional career overseas. He didn't stop there. After his first year playing professionally, Brian decided to enter the 2019 NBA Draft. Although he went undrafted, he continued to keep his eyes on the prize and earned a two-way contract with the Indiana Pacers and its G-League affiliate—the Fort Wayne Mad Ants. Since then, Brian has finished his second season in the league and is looking forward to leaving his mark on the game both on and off the court in the years to come.

# BUBBLE BALLIN' - BRIAN BOWEN II

**Let's dive right in and talk about your journey early on! You played overseas in Australia for a year before starting your career in the NBA. Could you share more with us about what that experience was like for you?**

The experience was great—just playing in a different country, learning the culture, and experiencing life at such a young age. A lot of people can't say that they have been to a different country to play at a young age. I enjoyed the experience and believe it was great for me. It taught me how to be a professional—just being around guys that have played professionally and guys that have played in the NBA. I enjoyed the ride for sure.

**As you took that next step in your career and embarked on your journey in the NBA, how was that transition like for you?**

It was good! Being around the team these past two years, I have learned (and) am learning a lot. I have learned a lot about my game and about myself overall. I am just here trying to improve my game day-by-day and step-by-step. I am glad to be here

**Reflecting back on your first year in the league, what were some of the challenges that you faced early on? How did you work to overcome them?**

Some of the challenges were just getting used to certain parts of the game, (such as) the speed of the game. You know the NBA level is a lot different, guys are a lot more skilled. Also being on the two-way and coming down to the G-League, I have just been trying to get my game going and prove my worth at the same time. There are definitely some challenges and hardships that you have to go through, but I just try to overcome them as much as I can.



**As you embark on your second year in the league, what are some personal goals that you have?**

My biggest thing is to improve day-by-day and step-by-step. You know, the biggest thing I have really learned is to control what you can control. If you do that, you can go a long way in life—not only on the court, but off the court as well. That is what I am trying to do. I am trying to have that impact and get better with my game. So whether it is watching more film of (myself) and other players or talking to the coaching staff, I am just trying to learn as much as I can. My goal (is) to be a sponge because I definitely don't know everything. There are a lot of people who know a lot more than me, so as much as I can be a sponge, I think that is going to help my game go forward for sure.

## BUBBLE BALLIN' - BRIAN BOWEN II



**Transitioning a little bit off the court, what are some things that you are passionate about and would like to pursue in the years to come?**

When I was in school, I was in the business field. So I am just trying to learn as much as I can about the business field—whether it is with stocks or real estate—and am trying to be a sponge to all the things outside of basketball. Even coaching, I am just trying to learn as much as I can and go forward with that. I am still a young guy right now and have a lot of time ahead of me, but that window can close very quickly. I just want to keep my options open as much as I can, and learn a little bit about everything—fashion, real estate, stocks, and marketing.

**Throughout this journey, what are some of your sources of motivation?**

You know, you always look at those people that doubt you. There's people that love you, but there will always be people that doubt you—that drives me every day to get better and better. I am just trying to be the best person that I can be. The best player that I can be. I feel like I have been through a lot over the course of the past three years, so every time I get on the court, I just want to prove that I am here for a reason. I want to keep striving (towards) getting better and better each day.



**Going into the advice side of things, what are some pieces of advice that you would give to someone who is interested in pursuing a similar career and playing professional basketball?**

The biggest thing I would say is to work. Work can get you a very long way. It doesn't even matter if it is professional basketball—it can be any professional field. If you put the work in, stay humble, stay grounded without looking at the ups and downs, and just grind towards your goals, then they will come true. If you keep that mindset that there is always someone that is trying to outwork you, you are helping yourself out as much as you can, and that is all that you can control.

**Reflecting back on your own personal journey, what is a piece of advice that you would give to your younger self and why?**

I would say, "Lean on the people that are closest to you as much as you can. If you can get advice from them—whether it is your family members or close friends that have been in similar situations or are in similar fields as yours—, do it. Just try to get as much advice as you can, and be outspoken about it. Help those people know what your goals and dreams are, and hopefully they can help you achieve them as well. It takes a village to raise one up, so just leaning on the ones closest to you is the biggest thing."





BUBBLE BALLIN'

# JOSH REAVES

For Josh Reaves, basketball was a world he was surrounded by from a very young age. Growing up in Fairfax, Virginia, Josh remembers discovering the unique value that the game brought to his everyday life. It became an outlet to clear his head and a space where he could just be himself. As he continued his basketball journey at Penn State University, Josh kept solidifying his ties to the game—working on his skills on the court, basketball IQ, and personal

*Photo credits: Rio Grande Valley Vipers/NBAE*

recovery. After graduating from college, he decided to take that next step in his career and declare for the 2019 NBA Draft—a decision that would lead him to achieve his goal of playing basketball at the highest level. Despite going undrafted, Josh signed his first professional contract shortly after with the Dallas Mavericks. He had done it. He had achieved his dream of playing in the NBA. Josh would go on to play a season for the Mavericks before signing with the Rio Grande Valley Vipers—the Houston Rockets G-League affiliate. Currently, Josh wrapped up his second season in the league, and is looking forward to making an NBA roster in the near future.

# BUBBLE BALLIN' - JOSH REAVES



**Let's talk about your journey early on! You played college basketball at Penn State. How do you think your game elevated during your time there?**

It definitely helped me build a lot more confidence. My freshman year was pretty shaky. I didn't shoot well and didn't really play well, but it helped me understand that I needed to work on my game in every aspect. During the summers, I worked really hard to (elevate) my game and become a complete player. Throughout my years at Penn State, I think I did a really good job in that. I had four years of just working on my game and dedicating myself to it. It's a lot. It takes a lot. It was definitely worth it (though) because I feel like now I have a pretty good grasp on the game now. My time there and playing in the Big Ten was no easy thing, but it was definitely a good experience for me.

**As you took that next step and transitioned from college to the league, what were some challenges that you faced early on? How did you work to overcome them?**

I would say the biggest thing is just recovery—taking the time to work on my body and make sure that I am good to play. During college, you have three games a week max. Playing in the G-League or in the NBA, you may have games back-to-back. You have a ridiculous amount of games, so making sure that you are able to go each and every game is a big part of it. At this level, you have to listen to the trainers that you have and understand your own body—that was something I was fortunate enough to figure out in college. That is something I have taken to the next level.

## BUBBLE BALLIN' - JOSH REAVES



**Despite going undrafted in the 2019 NBA Draft, you continued working to achieve your dreams of playing in the league. During that time, what are some things that kept you motivated and locked in?**

My biggest motivation is my mom. I lost my father at a young age, and she had to do everything for me and my brother—my entire family actually. She has always been the person that everybody relies on, and everyone comes to for advice. She has been a very important person in my life. She has helped me grow as a person (both) on and off the basketball court. I just wanted to try and give back to her in any way that I could. This dream of mine to play professional (basketball) is just as much hers as it is mine because of how much she has been there for me throughout the entire process.

**Now take us through that experience of achieving your dreams and signing your first two-way contract with the Dallas Mavericks. What was that experience like for you?**

It was a crazy experience. I went to my grandpa's house to watch the draft, and it was a whole big family barbeque. We were all just hanging out and watching the draft, waiting to see what would happen, and I was fortunate enough to get the call from my agent when I got back home. I have never seen my grandma or my brother so excited before. At that moment, I knew that I kind of did something. The work was never over though, it was just getting started. I was fortunate enough to work that entire year and just learn so many things from the players that I was around.



**Going into the advice side of things, what are some pieces of advice that you would give to someone who is interested in pursuing a similar career and playing professional basketball?**

Man, it takes a lot of work. A lot of sacrifice. A lot of hours contemplating what you want to do with your career. There were times when I wanted to quit basketball because I just didn't think it was going to go anywhere—I was very frustrated. But, just having a good circle around you of people who actually care for you and want the best for you really helps. That is the main reason that kept me going and kept me focused. I would say, "Just have a good circle. Be aware that you are going to have to give a lot of things up in order to get where you want to go." You know, being in college you can get lost in your social life. There are a lot of things that can really deviate you from what you want to do. You have to stay focused and mentally tough (though). You have to learn to say "no" to things, and just be ready to work and take care of your body.

**Reflecting back on your journey thus far, what is a piece of advice that you would give to your younger self and why?**

"Man, get in the gym and just work." I could have gotten stronger. I could have become faster. I graduated college two years ago, but man, what I would do to be back in that body and that situation where I could do everything I wanted. You know, I had everything in college. I feel like I could have done more and I should have done more. I feel like I could be somewhere else if I just worked a little bit harder in some aspects—education-wise, strength and conditioning-wise. I would just tell myself, "You will be alright physically, just give it everything you've got no matter what."



Photographs courtesy of Stephanie Lovell (@stepheelovell)

# STEPHANIE LOVELL

*Sports Photographer & Creative* | **TOGETHXR**

Stephanie Lovell discovered her passion for visual storytelling and sports media during her time at the University of Oregon. After working for the university's TV station as a student reporter, Stephanie fell in love with capturing content and producing digital segments. **The rest is history!**

As she embarked on her professional career in the industry, she continued to dive into the world of shooting, editing, and production through her work with an array of sports organizations—such as the Sacramento Kings, Los Angeles Sparks, Drew League, and UCLA. Recently, she has joined TOGETHXR—a brand co-founded by Sue Bird, Alex Morgan, Chloe Kim, and Simone

Manuel dedicated to elevating women's voices—, and continues to use her passion for visual media to share stories through unique perspectives. **Incredible!**

## **Take us through that journey early on! How was that transition from college into the world of sports photography and visual media like for you?**

For me, I kind of made that jump after I graduated from college. I stayed in Eugene for a summer and worked as a team photographer for a minor league baseball team—the Eugene Emeralds. With baseball having such a long season, it really allowed me to get a lot of reps. It challenged my creativity as a photography shooter just trying to find different angles, perspective, and lighting to keep the content of the game of baseball interesting. From there, I applied—twice actually—for an internship with the Sacramento Kings. I interviewed the first time, but unfortunately did not get the position. About a month after I interviewed, I saw that they had posted the same job description once again, so I just took a shot in the dark. Luckily, it worked out for me and I transitioned into being a digital intern with the Sacramento Kings organization for their first year at Golden 1 Center. That was really cool for me. I was able to go back home for a little bit, and (also) work in the NBA for the first time. Basketball has always been a love of mine, so it was just a dream to be back in the Bay Area and be working for my favorite sports league.

**As you became immersed in the world of sports photography, what were some challenges that you faced early on? How did you work to overcome them?**

I was very much self-taught, so one of the main things that I tried to do as I became “the shooter” was not being discouraged or comparing myself to other people that were sports photographers around my same age. I really tried to focus on looking at people’s work that I admired, trying to pick out different things that I liked about their work, and then thinking about how they got there—rather than a straight left and right comparison of my work to someone else’s. It is definitely very easy to get discouraged in the world of sports, especially with social media and just how much content is in our faces at all times. I also wanted to be consistent with posting my work at first. Whether I thought it was the best picture I had ever taken or just a regular, action-by-action shot of a game, I really wanted to consistently post my work in order to get my name out there. I wanted to challenge myself to put my work out there in order to see what fans were resonating with, and what I personally liked as a shooter. Finding your own style is also a whole different challenge because it takes a really long time to figure out, but just (doing) those small things helped.

**From the Los Angeles Sparks to Drew League to UCLA, you have worked with an array of brands and organizations throughout this journey. Could you share more with us about what those experiences have been like for you? What are some things that you have learned about yourself across these experiences?**

Yeah! Each place I have worked at has been great and unique in their own different way. My time at the Sacramento Kings was very fun just because I grew up playing basketball and always had the goal of working in the NBA in some form. Also, I was really lucky to be able to work with the Sacramento Kings the first year that they were in the Golden 1 Center Arena. It allowed me to cover the different concerts and events that were also happening outside of the NBA games throughout the season. That allowed me to branch out my creativity in a more well-rounded and diverse way outside of basketball. Transitioning to the Sparks was really cool for me because they were such a smaller organization compared to the Sacramento Kings. For example when I was at the Kings, we had a Digital Department of eight full-time employees, and then myself and one other digital intern. So we had ten people (in the department). When I went to the LA Sparks, our front office as a whole had probably 25 people. I actually became the Digital Department as one singular person. It was definitely challenging just because there is so much that the digital team handles

—whether it is the actual social media content that you see during the games or the marketing content it makes for inside sales and the community department or practices with the team. It was definitely challenging to balance everything with my schedule, but I really enjoyed it. It gave me a very well-rounded perspective of all things digital—graphic design, motion graphics, photo and video, (etc). It just really gave me a wide range of knowledge in terms of how to market and resonate with your fan base and audience.





**Throughout this journey, what are some of the things that inspire and motivate you to continue growing and evolving in the industry?**

For me, I have gone in and out of having motivation personally. There is a lot of content and just stuff that you see on a daily basis through social media. Not comparing myself to the other work that I saw online was something that I really focused on. I more so just tried to figure out personally: “What do I enjoy creating personally? What types of content do you enjoy working on?” Just because you call yourself a creative, or photographer, or videographer—whatever your title is—, that doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to do everything. That was something that I personally have sat with and gone back and forth with. You know, sometimes you might be tempted to want to do everything, but it is okay to not do everything. I noticed that really becoming okay with that thought helped me become more motivated with my creative projects for work and on a personal level. Personal projects are something that I always try to do at least one or two of a year. I think all creatives should—just because it is very easy to get caught up in all of the different projects that you are doing for your brands, organizations, and clients. But once again, going back to what you really enjoy, what makes you feel accomplished, and what makes you feel alive is something that I think is very important for keeping your motivation and creativity active.

**Going into the advice side of things, what are some pieces of advice that you would give to someone who is interested in pursuing a career in sports photography or visual media?**

One thing I would definitely say is: “Don’t give up!” I know it can be a little bit hard—especially for women or people of color—to get noticed or get opportunities to work on higher levels, but your time will come. Personally I have noticed multiple times that right when I feel like I should give up, that is when my next biggest breakthrough happens. I would say, “Just keep going. If this is truly what you love and truly what you want to do with your life, there is a team, a league, a brand, or an agency out there that will see you. They will see you and value your work. It may take a little bit of time in order to find that match, but that match will be worth it in the long-run.”

**Reflecting back on your own personal journey, what is a piece of advice that you would give to your younger self and why?**

I would say, “Don’t be afraid to put yourself out there.” I was very good at sharing my work on social media and online, but in in-person situations, I tended to be that person that didn’t want to “get in the way” or “be a distraction.” Especially for women, those are terms in sports that we tend to hear often when people are speaking of women that work in sports. So I was always very conscious of holding myself to a very, very high and professional standard. Looking back on my last four years working in sports, I feel like I also may have hindered my own personal growth and networking in (the) industry by being so cautious of being in the way or having people notice me. I have learned that having people notice you isn’t necessarily a bad thing if they are noticing you for doing great work.



“The most important thing is to try and inspire people so that they can be great in whatever they want to do.” - Kobe Bryant ”

- Stephanie on one of her favorite quotes to live by.



Photographs courtesy of Kristina Williams (@khristinawilliams)

becoming one of the prominent media voices in women's basketball to earning incredible recognitions such as the 2021 Forbes 30 Under 30 honor, Kristina has continued to take the industry by storm with her passion for women's sports and creative storytelling.

### **How was that transition from college into the world of journalism and media in the entertainment industry like for you?**

I have always been someone who considered myself to be a workaholic. So while I was in college—it is so funny—I actually worked full-time at one of the biggest marketing agencies in New York. I worked (there) full-time, but I still found time to be a full-time college student, coach youth girls basketball, and work as a freelance reporter on the side. Looking back I am like, "How in the world did I graduate college with honors and do that?" I have no idea how I was able to navigate that. For me, I always try to take advantage of every and any opportunity. I remember being in school and volunteering to be the anchor of a new school news program. It was just so cool doing that. My professor at the time would invite different producers from networks, different reporters, (and) different industry professionals weekly. I was one of the students that kind of took advantage of that opportunity. At the end of every class each week, I would email the guest speaker and just say, "Thank you so much. Can I shadow you?" That kind of sparked a whole network of connections for me of reporting and broadcasting (professionals) within the industry. It opened up a lot of doors when I finished school as well in terms of trying to navigate through the industry. So for me, going from college to the entertainment industry, I was already kind of working through that industry while I was in school. I knew it was something I wanted to do, so for me, it was a "by all means necessary" kind of thing.

# KHRISTINA WILLIAMS

## *Founder & CEO | Girls Talk Sports TV*

Kristina Williams has been surrounded by the world of sports for as long as she can remember. For this Harlem, New York native, witnessing the impact of basketball on her community growing up was the catalyst that inspired her commitment to pursuing a career in sports. As she embarked on her collegiate journey at Hunter College, Kristina pursued a career in journalism and immersed herself in the area of storytelling. Upon graduating from college, she began her journalism career in the fashion and entertainment industry before deciding to pivot back to sports. It wasn't all smooth sailing though. After making that transition, she quickly discovered that there weren't many opportunities to break into the industry. A challenge that only fueled her drive. Instead of waiting for someone to give her an opportunity, Kristina decided to create her own and founded Girls Talk Sports TV—a digital media platform centered around the latest WNBA news and updates. She hasn't looked back since! From

**Take us through that journey of circling back to sports. When did you know that you wanted to step away from the fashion and entertainment space and circle back to pursuing your passion for sports?**

I started attending a lot of open runs in New York City, met some really great people, and started finding that love and passion to play again. I also met these people from a company that would produce celebrity charity basketball games—they would do it with people like Floyd Mayweather and all of these different celebrities. On top of everything that I was doing (\*laughs\*), I started to help direct some of those events and knew it was time to jump back into sports. Behind the scenes, a few people had their eye on me. They saw me out and about at every single basketball and community event. You know, just the act of showing up and being present in your local community. I was offered the opportunity to help launch a Semi Pro-Am Women's Basketball League in New York. When I was offered that I was like, "Okay! This is my way to get back into it. I think that it is great, we need something like this in New York City. You don't really see this." One of my mentors is Sharon Bond from Dyckman Basketball, so just spending the summers at Dyckman and not seeing the women's game being promoted as much as the men's game, really pushed me to go after that opportunity (as well). When I took that role of trying to launch this other basketball league, it was a lot on my plate. I got overwhelmed pretty quickly and realized that that was not my calling to do. But through the recruiting process of finding players for that league, I started to talk to a lot of the athletes. Many of them were former D-I, D-II, D-III players and some of them had played overseas. So just getting to know them, talking to them, and building relationships with these women, I found that many of them actually didn't want to play beyond college. They were okay with not going pro, and many of them wanted to see opportunities on the other end of the spectrum—in terms of reporting, videography, graphic design, and things like that. I remember being at my office just working and going about my day, and literally the name "Girls Talk Sports" came to my head. I knew I had to act on it. I just felt in that moment, I had that AHA moment of: "Why don't I create something where former athletes and sports enthusiasts women can have a place to create content, be in front of the camera, be credible sources, and they can be seen and heard?" That came out of that situation. At that moment I felt like, "This is my purpose. This is what I am supposed to do. This is how I am supposed to navigate back to sports." I wanted to grow the game in any way possible. For me, this is how I could do it at the next level (while) also using some of my talents and gifts to get back into the reporting game myself.



**Let's talk about building Girls Talk Sports TV! What were some challenges that you faced early on and how did you work to overcome them?**

Some of the challenges that I faced...well, when you start anything, money is a challenge. You know, people put in those sweat equity hours in that sense. They just buy into whatever it is that you are trying to build. I appreciate the women who were there—Ari, Kelly, Marjorie, just so many amazing women—to help me build it with sweat equity in the beginning. I saved up money from my marketing job so I had that kind of pushing us. That helped us get from places A to B, buy equipment, and things like that. Then, access was another (challenge). Just proving to the gatekeepers and whatnot that it's an actual outlet and we should get credentialed for these sporting events was tough in the beginning. We really built the reputation by showing up and being consistent. Through that, we were able to meet people, shake hands with them, share (more) about what we were building, and get the green light to go. I really learned a lot about leadership and how to navigate a team throughout that first year.



**You were also recently honored in the 2021 Forbes 30 Under 30 List. Congratulations on that! Could you share more with us about what receiving this honor meant to you?**

Thank you! I remember my friend Dorothy Gentry, shout-out to Dorothy, was the first person that hit me up to let me know. I think it was like 6:30 in the morning, maybe 7 a.m. when the list came out. I remember thinking, "Oh my God! Is this a typo? Did they make a mistake? Is this real?!" It was just crazy. It meant a lot because I remember that I was having a very, very rough week in that particular week. I was kind of thinking, "Is this for me? Is the work that I am doing enough?" You know, you have your highs and lows as an entrepreneur and someone navigating through this sports world. So it was one of those weeks. Making that list meant a lot to me. Even though I don't need an award to seek validation, it meant a lot—especially as someone who created their own brand and platform. It kind of gave me some space to breathe. It let me know: "You are on the right path. You are doing what you are supposed to be doing." I think that a person like me being on a list like that is also great for women's sports, for women's basketball. Ari and I both made the list together. We are both media. We both advocate for the WNBA and for women's basketball. You see that shift that is happening in the WNBA, where people are starting to take it seriously, and we see that the interest is there. The momentum is only going to keep going. Just to bring it back to your question, I think when people see me on that list, I think it will inspire or encourage them to do that thing that they may be holding off on. Just to take that step on faith and do what it is that they ever have wanted to do in their lives. So as someone who started their own thing, and also as a Black woman, I think it was important to have me on that list.

**Throughout this journey, both as an entrepreneur, journalist, and media professional, what are some things that you have learned about yourself?**

Oh that's a good question! One thing that I have learned is that sometimes I put a lot of pressure on myself to be perfect. I have realized that, each day, my best is going to look different and I should be okay with that. I am (walking) in my purpose. I am doing what I am meant to be doing. So I have learned that it's okay to take a breather, take breaks, and step back from time to time. There is never going to be a time where I have "arrived" or have reached whatever unattainable level of success that society has pressured us to obtain. Some of those things are not tangible. Just taking things moment by moment, day by day, and knowing that my best is going to look different each and every day is something that I (have) learned throughout this journey. You just need to put that one step forward, do what you can do, and try to control what you can control.

**Going into the advice side of things, what are some pieces of advice that you would give to someone who is interested in pursuing a similar career path in the industry?**

Some advice I would give is to definitely follow your heart. Also, if you want to get in this industry, you need to have mentors. For me, when I was coming up in the sports industry, I took advantage of peer mentorship—just really leaning on the women to the right and left of me. Not only that, but also getting to know people who are already successful in their positions. You know front office executives, people on the ground, people who work at the grassroots level. I was just a sponge in the beginning soaking up as much information as I could from different people, in different fields, who were doing different things other than basketball. So I would say, “Don’t be afraid to reach out and find a mentor, follow your heart, and also be consistent.” I would not be where I am if I wasn’t consistent, if I didn’t follow up with people, and say “thank you” to people. “Thank you” goes a long way in this industry because people don’t hear it a lot. Also, just be real. Be yourself. Be authentic. I always say this, “People connect with the person before they connect with the brand.” One more thing, you don’t need a million dollars or a million followers to make an impact. You can start where you are with what you have, and make a difference. Use what you have in your hand to get started.

**You touched on tribes, genuine relationships, and the value that having that group of people who empower and motivate you brings to one’s journey. Could you share your thoughts with us on the importance of having those mentors, peers, and friends along the way?**

Listen, I am so grateful for my tribe. They lift me up! There are days where I feel like I can’t go on because sometimes you deal with so many different things as an entrepreneur. Having those people in your corner uplift you and pray for you during those times is super important—especially for your emotional and mental health. Just knowing that people are there for me, are rooting for me, and want the best for me, means a lot. So definitely find your tribe, find those women who can encourage you, and find those people who can reciprocate that energy. You can’t pour from an empty glass. Also, find people who may not be in the same industry as you who can pour into you and you can learn from. I think having a diverse group of people in your tribe is important as well.





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THE BALLERS MAGAZINE PRESENTS

# THE SPOTLIGHT SERIES

A new segment dedicated to highlighting sports professionals that are up next! These feature stories give an inside look into the transition of athletes, creatives, and business professionals to the next level of their careers.



## SPOTLIGHT SERIES

# UNIQUE THOMPSON

Unique Thompson found her passion for the game of basketball during the 8th grade. For this Alabama native, this sport was her safe haven and creative outlet. It was a world that challenged her to be great in every aspect, and one that she was determined to pursue in the years to come. As Unique embarked on her collegiate career at Auburn University, she was determined to strengthen her skills on the court and leave her

mark on the game. She did just that. Not only did Unique break the Auburn career record for double-doubles, but she also became the first player to average a double-double for two consecutive seasons in University's history. She doesn't plan on stopping there! As she begins her professional career—after being drafted by the Indiana Fever in the 2021 WNBA Draft—, Unique is looking forward to giving her all in the league and using her platform to pursue her passion of advocating for individuals with disabilities. Simply amazing!

## SPOTLIGHT SERIES - UNIQUE THOMPSON

### **Take us through that decision to attend Auburn University. How did you know that Auburn was the place that you wanted to call home for the next four years?**

It was just a feeling. Every time that I came here on my unofficial and official visits, I had the same feeling. As soon as I got out of the car, it was just an atmosphere and a feeling that I didn't feel in any other campus that I visited.

### **As you took that next step and transitioned from high school to college, how was that transition like for you?**

I would say it was kind of crazy. I was still close enough to home to see my parents if I got home sick, and they would also come and visit me for a weekend. I have family close to Auburn as well, so I was able to adjust and adapt that way—just seeing familiar faces. That helped me a lot. The transition overall was very weird, it was different, and I knew that I had to adapt quickly.



*Photographs courtesy of Unique Thompson (@i.munique\_)*

### **What were some challenges that you faced early on? How did you work to overcome them?**

Well I had a lot of nagging injuries. They weren't major, but they were always small injuries that I had to push through. It was all about knowing that I had to keep pushing through them, and I couldn't let them affect or get in the way of my goals and the dreams that I had. Coming in my freshman year, I just knew that I had to sit down and realize what it was that I wanted. What I wanted out of coming to Auburn, and what I wanted to do after Auburn because I knew time here would fly by like it did. So just sitting down and taking the time to realize what it was that I wanted, that kept me going and (helped) me overcome those challenges.

**That actually transitions perfectly into our next question! You know whether it is tough losses or injuries, there are an array of challenges that one may face along the way. Could you share your thoughts on the importance of having that mental toughness to overcome adversity?**

Mental toughness is definitely important. I would say that is one of the many challenges that most people don't know about, but comes along with the game of basketball. Whether it is injuries or just having a bad night where you are missing shots, you just have to find a way to let it go quickly. You can't (dwell) too much on it. It is really a mind game that you have to play. So definitely, mental toughness is very important and plays a major factor in the game of basketball.

**You mentioned that your freshman year you experienced some injuries. Mentally, how did you remain motivated and locked in during that time despite those minor setbacks?**

Yeah! Just knowing that my coaches and my teammates were relying on me (motivated me). I just knew that I couldn't let them down. I had a major role on the team, even as a freshman, so that was one of the things that kept me going—just knowing that I had to be there for my team and I had to keep playing.

**As you embark on this new chapter of your career and enter the WNBA, what are some key takeaways from your time in college that you will bring along as you embark on this new journey?**

Literally all my time in college (\*laughs\*). It's just the memories, the friendships, the little journeys that you go through, the obstacles that you overcome—which may seem small (at the time), but they turn out to be major experiences—, all of it. I just know that I will be able to look back on those different things, see how I overcame them, and relate to them on my new journey as well.



**"It meant everything to me. It was just good knowing that all of the work that I put in, all the time that it took, and all the effort that I gave actually paid off. It was great to see all of those things come to pass."**

*- Unique on what setting the new Auburn career record for double-doubles meant to her.*



**Transitioning a little bit off the court, what are some things that you are passionate about beyond the game?**

I have a passion for individuals with disabilities. That is actually what my major was in—Special Education. If you ask me about that, you will see how excited I get because my passion really lies within that. After my professional career, I do plan on having an organization for those with disabilities. It will be, in a sense, like a learning center. I just want to bring a light to their culture in any way that I can. I feel as though they don't really get the attention that they deserve, and that people just kind of put a backlight on them. I feel (like) my purpose is to change that. To change the point of view and the labels that people place on them.

**Throughout this journey, what are some things that you have learned about yourself?**

I have learned that I am stronger than I thought I was, most definitely. Just being able to overcome different challenges and things that you go through as a student-athlete (have) mentally and physically taught me about (my) strength. You know, there are a lot of things that can pile up between a busy schedule and practices. So just being able to overcome those long days and long practices, you realize how strong you actually are.

**Going into the advice side of things, what are some pieces of advice that you would give to someone who is interested in playing collegiate basketball?**

I would just tell them to always keep going, no matter what. Even when you don't feel like it or when people are saying things (about you), keep going. You know, social media is definitely big. Everybody feels as though they are stronger behind a screen. So I (would) just say, "Don't take everything that everyone says to heart, and know that nobody can get in the way of your goals but you. Keep going and keep pursuing everything that you want."

**You have touched on the impact that basketball has had on your life since a very young age. If you could describe it, what does basketball mean to you? Why is this game so special?**

Basketball is my safe haven. It is easy to escape to, and I find comfort in it. Even if you are missing shots, and it may get aggravating, it just gives you a different world to escape to. It (empowers you) to keep going until you make them. I would definitely say basketball is my safe haven, it is comforting, and it allows me to escape from reality.



## SPOTLIGHT SERIES

# SYDNEE WALKER

Sydnee Walker knew she wanted to pursue a career in sports from a very young age. It wasn't until her time in college though, at the University of Oregon, that she discovered her niche in the industry. From covering the men's and women's basketball teams

as a sideline reporter to working in public relations for the university's athletic program, Sydnee began to uncover her love for storytelling and reporting. This was only the beginning. Ever since, Sydnee has joined Turner Sports as a Social Media Analyst and has also co-founded The Collaborative—a digital platform focused on connecting the sports and entertainment industry with journalists and public relations professionals.

**Take us through that journey as a student athlete. How was that transition into the world of sports media like for you?**

I was always very busy—I worked the whole time I was an athlete. I always felt like I really had a good handle of it (though) because I would have practice in the morning, classes in the afternoon, and extracurriculars at night. I was always learning media, doing TV, learning social, and networking with people on Twitter or LinkedIn. I did a lot of job studies and learned about how people got into their fields. I knew the field I wanted to go into, so just trying to connect with as many people as I could helped (that transition).

**You mentioned that you really immersed yourself early on in the media journalism space—doing media packages for teams, and covering men’s and women’s basketball. What were some challenges that you faced early on? How did you work to overcome them?**

I would say just learning how to edit first of all. I had never done any of that—you know, operating a camera and editing packages. I remember just staying up until 3am trying to figure out how I could package all of the game together (since) so much had happened. I remember repeating my stand ups over and over. So I just think trying to work through all of that, writing scripts, and figure out the most important parts of games that I wanted to get out to fans was how I overcame those (challenges).



*Photographs courtesy of Sydnee Walker (@sydnee\_walker)*

**Let’s talk about branding! How did you get started building your personal brand in sports journalism and media?**

When quarantine hit I was thinking, “What can I do to pass time?” So in April, I came up with the idea of starting a sports media series to connect sports journalists with those in the industry. I reached out to my friend, Ryan Ballis, and we came up with “The Collaborative”—which is focused on connecting the sports and entertainment industry with journalists and PR professionals. Our first guest was Spencer Paysinger, who was a former University of Oregon football player. He is also who the show “All American” is based on. He was our very first guest and that was awesome. Ever since then, we have had 29 guests and it has been a huge success. We have had a lot of people come through such as Maria Taylor, Laura Rutledge, Lisa Salters, and Jonathan Stewart. It has been really cool just having them connect with different students who are interested in being in their shoes, and giving back to the community they were once in.

## SPOTLIGHT SERIES - SYDNEE WALKER



**You are also currently working with Turner Sports. Could you share more with us about what that experience has been like for you?**

It has been amazing! Last fall, I went to their “She’s Got Game” event in Atlanta on their Techwood Campus. It was just this empowerment event for women in sports where we went to each of their departments and rotated (through) them. I got to their Social Department and was like, “Wow, this is really cool.” I didn’t know much about social, but I really liked it. I kept in touch with everyone, did a few job shadows, and when they opened up their internship program I went through that whole process. The whole thing was virtual, so I interned from June to August. I rotated between Data & Insights, Content, and Product Management. Upon completion in August, I was offered an extension in the Data & Insights Department. I expressed that that was something I was really interested in, so ever since, I have been working there. I am mainly responsible for content tagging, various data reports, and fulfilling requests for sales teams.

**Throughout this journey, what are some things that you have learned about yourself?**

That’s a tough one! I think I have learned that I am very ambitious. I have always been a very shy person. But just doing all of this, I’ve received a lot of messages from people saying how inspiring I am and that I have encouraged them to start doing media themselves or start their own podcasts. I never thought that I would inspire anyone to start something of their own, so that is really nice to see.





**Let's talk about tribes! You touched on the importance of networking and building genuine relationships. Could you share your thoughts with us on the importance of having that group of people that encourage you to grow and evolve in the space?**

It is very important. You always want to have those people that can vouch for you when you are not in the room, and also those people that are willing to share opportunities with you. There are always going to be people that will tear you down and want to be steps ahead of you, but there are a lot of people who will help you in this industry. I think just finding those people that are always willing to cheer you on and have your back no matter what (is important).

**Going into the advice side of things, what are some pieces of advice that you would give to someone interested in embarking on a career in sports journalism or sports media?**

I would say to get lots of practice. If you want to be in front of the camera (as well as) behind the camera, I would say to just do reps anywhere. I was always told, "Just grab your phone, go outside, and start interviewing people. You can do a stand up (interview) anywhere. There is always news happening around you." Also, always be in tune with what is going on—I have post notifications turned on for NBA TV, TNT, Sports Center, and ESPN (for instance). I am always in tune with what is going on whenever there is breaking news. A lot of companies will ask you nowadays: "What happened last week in basketball? Or the NFL?" So I think it is very important to be very knowledgeable about whatever sport you want to work for in the future.

# BELIEVE AND ACHIEVE

"Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

"You may not be there yet, but you're closer than yesterday. Trust the process."

Unknown

"Sometimes what you're most afraid of doing is the very thing that will set you free."

Robert Tew

"Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

T.S. Eliot.

"A stumbling block to the pessimist is a stepping stone to the optimist."

Eleanor Roosevelt

"You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

Martin Luther King Jr.

## DAILY AFFIRMATIONS



# BALLERS

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T H E M A G A Z I N E

*Sky's the limit, keep ballin'.*