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BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

After coming heartbreakingly close to the Final Four last season, Xavier seniors and longtime friends Amber Harris and Ta'Shia Phillips will do whatever it takes to win a national title in Indianapolis, the city where they grew up

It happens at least once every game. Briggette Jemison-Boyd and Brenda Phillips will be sitting together at a Xavier's basketball game, watching their daughters, Amber Harris and Ta'Shia Phillips, who have played together since middle school. Suddenly, there'll be an errant shot, a muffed blockout or a missed rebound, and one daughter will be in the other's face like a coach gone ballistic. "Everyone in the stands will be like, What is wrong with those two?" says Jemison-Boyd. "Brenda and I will just look at each other and laugh. Sure enough, 30 seconds later Amber and Ta'Shia are hugging each other."

Good friends since their daughters started playing together in the Family AAU program in Indianapolis nine years ago, Brenda and Briggette have traveled together, dined together and cheered together as their daughters have helped build Xavier, the small Jesuit school in Cincinnati, into a national title contender. Neither mom can recall a single argument between them. Their daughters, on the other hand....

"Ta'Shia had me in a headlock today," Harris, a 6'5" fifth-year senior forward, reports matter-of-factly after a practice in mid-October. "But it's O.K. She was just playing around. Sort of."

Xavier coach Kevin McGuff describes the pair's dynamic as "a love-love-love-love-love-hate relationship. They're like sisters. Ta'Shia can get on Amber, but no one else can."

For Phillips, it's all about expectations. "I expect a lot out of her, she expects a lot out of me," says the 6'6" senior center. "If we're not getting it from each other, we argue, we yell. And two seconds later it's back to normal."

"Normal" is a steady flow of production from the sometimes disputatious duo, who combined for 30 points, more than 20 rebounds and nearly four blocks a game last year as Xavier came within two points of becoming the first women's mid-major program to make the Final Four since Missouri State (then Southwest Missouri State) in 2001. If improving on Xavier's Elite Eight performance in 2010, a 55-53 loss to Stanford, isn't motivation enough, Harris and Phillips have an added incentive to take their team further: The Final Four will be in their hometown of Indianapolis.

That's where they grew up, attended high schools four miles apart and first discovered they are nothing alike.

They are teammates, they are roommates. But soulmates? "Never," says Phillips. They have different friends and different academic interests-Harris, 22, has earned one degree in liberal arts and is working on a second in criminal justice, while Phillips, 21, who completed an entrepreneurial studies degree in three years, is retaking

a few classes before starting on her MBA. And though they share an apartment, they stick to their respective rooms, where Phillips tends to her plants and reads her books and Harris plays her video games and roots for whatever NBA team LeBron James is playing for. "It's not that we have 'issues,'" explains Phillips. "Our personalities are just so different. Amber is outgoing, she finds a lot of things really funny. I'm more of a serious, quiet person. A lot of times when she is laughing about something, I'm like, 'Are you kidding me? This is not funny! Stop laughing!' But she can't help it. That's how she is, and that's how I am."

They're also radically different on the court. Phillips is an old-school, back-to-the-basket enforcer with a Kareem Abdul-Jabbar skyhook and a nose for rebounds. (Her 1,156 career boards is a school record.) The Atlantic 10's player of the year in 2009 and the defensive player of the year in '10, Phillips last season averaged 11.7 rebounds per game (fourth in the nation) and 13.9 points on 62.4% shooting (also fourth in the nation). "If you're going to play against Ta'Shia around the basket, you're in for a war, every night," says McGuff. "She works really hard early to get great position, and she does all the right things. She puts a lot of thought and effort into everything she does."

When Phillips screws up on the court, she growls in frustration. Harris, on the other hand, laughs at her own mistakes. Carefree, easily amused and "light, light, light," says McGuff, the lean and lanky Harris moves with an easy grace that could be misinterpreted as nonchalance. Last year she averaged 16.1 points and 8.9 rebounds and pushed her school-record career blocks mark to 289-in second place is Phillips, with 158-on her way to earning A-10 player of the year and State Farm All-America honors. She can shoot the three (42.4%), lead the break and play any position in a pinch. "She is the closest thing our game has to Kevin Durant," says Stanford coach Tara VanDerveer.

Harris could have given up her final year of eligibility to enter last April's WNBA draft, where she was projected to be a top five pick. (She sat out the 2008-09 season recovering from microfracture surgery on her left knee.) But the heartbreaking end to last season nagged at her. With the game against Stanford in the Sacramento regional final tied at 53, the Musketeers missed two wide-open layups in the final 12 seconds, leaving the door open for the Cardinal's Jeanette Pohlen to take an inbounds pass with 4.4 seconds left and dash coast-to-coast for the winning basket.

"We were so close," Harris says. "For me to leave without trying to go further wouldn't be right." Perhaps she also wasn't ready to part with a teammate who is more important to her than she's willing to admit.

Phillips started playing basketball when she was nine, but she didn't find her passion for the game until three years later, when she got knocked into a padded wall by an older AAU teammate. "I didn't realize you could hit people like that," says Phillips. "That changed my attitude about the game. I vowed that from then on I would be the one giving the hits."

Like Phillips, Harris started playing in a youth league in fourth grade and was slow to embrace the game. "When other kids were running down the court, she was trotting," says Briggette. In seventh grade Harris joined the Family. Her defining moment came soon after, when Shalicia Hurns, an older 6'3" slasher who would play at Purdue and Rutgers, blew past her with a dazzling crossover. "Amber couldn't believe anyone that height could dribble like that," says Family coach Kevin Merriweather. "Next thing you know, Amber's in the corner, dribbling by herself, becoming a ballhandler."

As the two future Miss Indiana Basketballs (Harris in '06, Phillips in '07) developed their respective signature skills-rebounding for Phillips, blocking for Harris-under Merriweather, they eyed each other warily. "We didn't like each other at first," recalls Harris. "My impression of her was that she was big and strong and mean."

In truth Harris appreciates Phillips's aggressiveness and willingness to do the dirty work in the paint. "I hate guarding her in practice," says Harris. "I'm strong, but I really have to work to push her out of the post. Most of the time I foul her."

Phillips, meanwhile, admires Harris's off-the-chart athleticism. "Amber is a basketball freak of nature," she says. "She can jump high, she can score whenever she wants to. It's almost like she can turn it on like a light switch." The two have come to rely so much on the other's strengths, says Phillips, that "it's sometimes hard to function without the other."

The back-to-back signings of Harris and Phillips, Xavier's first McDonald's All-Americans, were huge coups for McGuff, who envisions the Jesuit school with an enrollment of 6,966 becoming the Gonzaga of women's basketball: the model mid-major program that is high-major in every way except for the conference it plays in. In most respects the program is there: The 10,250-seat Cintas Center is one of the nicest on-campus facilities in the country, and the Muskies' nonconference schedule, which includes road games at South Carolina, Duke and Stanford this year, is among the nation's toughest.

Moreover, the Muskies have been to four straight NCAA tournaments, though last year's Elite Eight run represented the first NCAA wins in McGuff's eight-year tenure. Harris and Phillips will be complemented by a solid perimeter that includes sophomore three-point sharpshooter Katie Rutan, the team's third-leading scorer last year, and 5'6" senior point guard Special Jennings, a quick and crafty former youth football quarterback from Cleveland. Adding depth to the post will be 6'1" redshirt sophomore Amber Gray, a 2008 McDonald's All-American at Lakota West High in suburban Cincinnati who sat out the 2009-10 season at Tennessee while recovering from a stroke suffered after rotator-cuff surgery. The stroke was caused by a ruptured brain aneurysm, which took a Cincinnati surgical team 121/2 hours to repair. When doctors in Knoxville declined to clear her to play last summer, Gray transferred. In October she was granted medical clearance by Xavier and a waiver by the NCAA, which allows her to play right away. But Gray, whose initial rehab included learning to walk again, isn't yet back to her high school form. "I want her to take a long-term approach and not get too frustrated, because she does get frustrated some days," says McGuff.

Perhaps Gray, like Brenda and Briggette, will find comic relief in the frequent flare-ups between Harris and Phillips. If Gray hasn't already, she'll soon realize "all that 'I can't stand you' stuff is an act," as Jennings says. "Ta'Shia is totally serious, Amber is goofy, but they know each other and they know how to talk to each other."

When pressed, Harris admits that Phillips is "good at listening" and "a good person," while Phillips allows that Harris is "vibrant and hilarious and very caring." For all their differences, they do have much in common, including this: Come the first weekend in April, there's nowhere either would rather be than back home in Indiana.

PHOTO (COLOR): SUNNY PROSPECTS: Phillips and Harris combined for 30.0 points a game last season, and the talented duo will have a strong supporting cast.

PHOTO (COLOR): BLEND OF TALENTS: The silky Harris can score at will, while Phillips is more aggressive and willing to mix it up under the boards.

PHOTO (COLOR)

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By KELLI ANDERSON

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