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RANDLEMAN - Taylor Gantt sees a slight seam in the opposing defense. She quickly heads toward the basket, only to see the defense collapse around her. Instinctively, she drops the ball off to a teammate, who lays it up and in for two points.

A few minutes later, the top player for the opposing team slips past her defender and drives to the basket. Gantt sees the player driving, rotates over defensively and takes a charge.

A minute later, Gantt dribbles down the court, jumpstops at the 3-point line and drains a long jumper.

There are players who are considered all-around players. Randleman High School's Gantt is certainly one of them. After a couple of years in which Gantt performed very well, but the team experienced very little success, everything's coming together for Gantt and the Tigers girls varsity basketball team.

Thanks to Saturday's win over Piedmont Athletic Conference rival High Point Andrews, the Tigers have advanced to the fourth round of the state 2-A tournament for the first time since 1996. RHS will take a 24-2 record into that Elite Eight home contest against Kinston Tuesday night. Game time is 6 p.m.

In Gantt's first two seasons as a Tiger, RHS struggled, going 11-32. A coaching change brought in Randleman Middle School boys coach Brandon Varner and the Tigers have been soaring ever since. After qualifying for the state tournament last season in finishing 15-10, the Tigers are enjoying a stellar campaign, a campaign that included a perfect 12-0 record during the PAC regular season.

Gantt has been a big reason for that success.

"She's very competitive," said Varner, who added one of the reasons he accepted the head coaching job two years ago was because he knew Gantt would be there for the next two seasons. "You know every time she steps out there, she is going to give you 110 percent. She will do all the extras. She will hustle after the ball, she will rotate and take a charge and she just wants to win. Her basketball IQ is really good. She watches a lot of basketball. I tell the



Taylor Gantt.

kids to find something in their life that they are passionate about. Taylor is passionate about basketball."

After enjoying a successful junior campaign, Gantt's senior year has been sort of a fairytale.

"Through the summer, the girls started to gel and she could tell there were other pieces around her," Varner said of a very talented freshmen class. "Now we have a complete team. She knew it's not about individual stats, it's about what we do as a team and she embraced that."



Taylor Gantt.

As a freshman, Gantt averaged 14.8 points, 1.6 rebounds and 1.0 assists per game. In her sophomore season, she averaged 13.5 points, 2.6 rebounds and 1.4 assists. As a junior, her numbers increased to 15.2 points, 2.7 rebounds and 2.9 assists per contest. This year, with the addition of freshmen Gracyn Hall and Elizabeth York and the emergence of some other players, Gantt realized she didn't have to do it all.

"It's been a great ride," Gantt said about this season. "Gracyn Hall and Elizabeth York came in and we came together and played our style of basketball. We're playing our hearts out, playing defense, pushing the ball when we can and still playing slow down when we have to. My role is to get everyone involved and get everyone pumped up and keep them focused."

She's done a great job of that. She's averaging 11.3 points, 3.1 rebounds and 4.5 assists per game.

"I don't have to score like I did my first two years," Gantt said. "This year, I can relax more and focus on passing and sharing and watching them succeed."

"This year is a new role for her," Varner said. "She is more vocal and she has a great relationship with her teammates. She can run our team, she's an extra coach on the floor. She is very unselfish. We are trying to get her to that 10-assist game. She wants other girls to score. The bottom line is she wants to win. For two years it's been tough. Now we won more than 20 games, went undefeated in the conference and she's been the catalyst for that."



*Coach Brandon Varner addresses players on the sideline. Photo by PJ Ward-Brown/
PJ Ward-Brown Photography.*

Gantt admitted the first two years were tough.

"It was extremely hard," said Gantt, who will play next year at Lynchburg. "I love the game and going through that kept me motivated to keep working hard and not to lose focus. It's been worth it to stick through the hard times."

Now, Gantt and the Tigers are enjoying the good times, including Saturday's win over the Red Raiders.

"It was one of the greatest feelings ever," Gantt said of the win. "I'm so proud of our team and what we did. We didn't turn the ball over and we got stops when we needed to. It's a dream come true of mine. I am so happy from where we came and how well we are doing together. It's a little shocking and surprising, but we worked hard to get here and we deserve it."

That they do.