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Thursday, Feb. 03, 2011 10 Comments

## She won't back down: Taylor Klingelhoefler still gets a rush from making baskets

BY STEVE KORTE - News-Democrat

O'FALLON -- It took O'Fallon's Taylor Klingelhoefler several years of playing youth basketball before she scored her first basket, but once she did, she was hooked.

"I started playing in kindergarten in a Little Boosters league, but it was in third grade when I actually made my first basket," Klingelhoefler said. "After that, I loved playing basketball."

Klingelhoefler recalls that first basket down to the details.

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A file photograph of O'Fallon's Taylor Klingelhoefler. - BND

"I'll never forget that," Klingelhoefler said. "It was right there at the top of the right elbow, right there at the top of the key and I just shot it up there. I remember that adrenaline rush. I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, this is what basketball feels like. I have to stick with it.'"

Klingelhoefler, who leads the O'Fallon Panthers in scoring with an average of 14.3 points per game, still gets a rush from making baskets.

"Getting that feeling from making a shot, it's awesome," Klingelhoefler said.

Scoring is just a part of Klingelhoefler's game. The 5-foot-6 junior ranks in the Top 10 in the Southwestern Conference in every category except rebounding and blocked shots.

"She plays so very hard," O'Fallon coach Ryan Massey said. "She constantly gives a great effort defensively and offensively for us. She's one of our best perimeter defenders as well as one of our best offensive players."

"That's the good thing about her. When her shots aren't falling and when she is not playing extremely well offensively, she plays so hard that she does so many other things for you on the floor."

Klingelhoefler leads the SWC in steals with an average of 2.63 per game, and she's ninth in assists with average of 2.16 per game.

Klingelhoefler is shooting 84.7 percent from the free-throw line, having made 100 of her 118 free-throw attempts.

"If her shot is not going from the outside, she's very capable of taking the ball to the basket, drawing contact and getting to the free-throw line," Massey said. "Then it doesn't hurt that she is shooting about (85) percent from the free-throw line."

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"Anytime she goes to the basket, good things are happening for us whether she makes the layup or gets fouled. Good things happen when she is aggressive."

Klingelhoefler honed her free-throw shooting skills competing for St. Clare Grade School in the Knights of Columbus' State Free-Throw Contest. She won the state championship twice.

"Her fifth-grade year she broke her foot, and obviously she couldn't run," Klingelhoefler's mother, Patty, said. "My husband and I wanted her to perfect her shot. We didn't want her to give up on basketball. We would take her to the gym after practice and we would practice on her shooting form. She was very competitive and she enjoyed shooting because it took a lot of persistence and a lot of practicing."

"She was shooting 25-50 free throws, then it was more like 50-75-100 we would do a couple of nights a week in order to prepare for each level of competition."

Patty Klingelhoefler coached her daughter in Booster Basketball, and said her struggles could be blamed on the coed makeup of the teams.

"Of course those boys, they just take over and they don't pass the ball to the girls, so it was frustrating," Patty Klingelhoefler said. "She's sees all these team members, all these boys scoring their baskets and their dads and moms cheering them on. When she became a third-grader, it was an all-girls team, and that's when it became fun for her."

Both Klingelhoefler's mother and father played basketball at Mascoutah High School. Her father, Rick, starred at McKendree University and is member of the school's Hall of Fame. He also belongs to the Bearcats' 1,000 Point Club after scoring 1,081 points in just two seasons (1980-81 and 1981-82).

"Back then we were getting Coach (Harry) Statham's 300th victory, and that kind of dates me because he's beyond 1,000 wins now," Rick Klingelhoefler said.

Rick Klingelhoefler said his daughter would practice against the boys with her older brother Tyler's teams at St. Clare Grade School.

"I was the coach of my son's sixth- and seventh-grade teams, and I would get Taylor out there and practice," Rick Klingelhoefler said. "She was two or three years younger than some of those guys. She would get knocked down a lot, and it was a pretty rough game for her, but I think that helped her progression a little bit."

Taylor Klingelhoefler's attack-the-basket playing style might have come from those days playing against the boys, or it might simply be a matter of genetics.

"I kind of play that way, too, I guess," Rick Klingelhoefler said. "She likes to take it to the hole and she gets knocked down a lot. She doesn't back away from any challenge or any bigger players."

"That's just kind of part of her. I think it's hard to teach a kid to play like that. That's something she's developed on her own over the years."

Playing aggressively can take a physical toll.

Taylor Klingelhoefler, who has been nursing an Achilles' tendon problem in her right leg, was grateful for the icy weather earlier this week that gave the Panthers a break from playing.

"Some games it'll be great and some games I'll have a lump on the Achilles," Taylor Klingelhoefler said. "It even effects my layups because I have to jump off my left leg and then come back down on it. There's nothing you can do except rest and (physical) therapy. I'm just pushing through it."

The Panthers have won nine of their last 12 games, improving their overall record to 14-8. Included in that stretch are wins over Belleville West, East St. Louis, Collinsville, Normal Community and Normal West.

"I keep telling the girls: Play hard, play smart and play together," Massey said. "Those are the three things we are really concentrating on ever since Christmas. We did not play well before Christmas. We had not found our identity as a team yet."

"As of late, our team has really come together. We have found our identity. We haven't played a complete game of smart basketball yet, but we're getting there."

Taylor Klingelhoefler said a 52-50 loss to the Freeburg in the first round of the Mascoutah Holiday Tournament sparked the turnaround.

"Since the Mascoutah Tournament, when we had our first loss against Freeburg, it was kind of like a wake-up call thing," Taylor Klingelhoefler said. "We need to start working together. We're better than this. After that, we have had a better team chemistry. We're all getting along, the team has been a lot better."

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In addition to Klingelhoef, the Panthers have junior guard-forward Katlin Kendall, who averages 9.8 points per game, and sophomore center Katie Roustio, who averages 10.7 points, 8.9 rebounds and 3.7 blocks per game.

"Katie Roustio has really, really stepped up her game recently," Massey said. "I just challenged her two or three weeks ago. She had over seven blocks shots in each of our games (Normal Community and Normal West) on Saturday. She is just a force inside."

The Panthers haven't had a winning season or won a regional since 2002-03, when they went 25-4 under Pat Hasenstab.

"I just want to see us win," Klingelhoef said of her goals for the rest of the season. "We haven't had a winning record, and it would feel good to get past regionals."

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