

2-22-1984

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Recommended Citation

University Marketing and Communications, "02/22/1984 - All Gateway Basketball Honors" (1984). 1984. 435.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/press_releases_1984/435

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Panther Sports News

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Feb. 22, 1984

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CHARLESTON, IL--Eastern Illinois University boasts four outstanding contenders for All-Gateway Collegiate Athletic Conference basketball honors.

Among the young and gifted nominees are two sophomores, Melanie Hatfield (Lawrenceburg, IN), a 5-6 guard, and Chris Aldridge, a 5-10 forward. Two junior forwards, 6-0 Toni Collins (Lincoln-Jamaica-Sidell), an All-GCAC pick last season, and Stacy Cook (Lincoln/Illinois Central CC), a second team All-GCAC volleyball player last fall, are also among the nominees for the league's all-star team.

Hatfield has been coming on strong for the Lady Panthers since the Gateway Conference season began and is averaging 12.8 points and 4.2 rebounds against league foes. Before the GCAC season, Hatfield was struggling with a 6.3 point, 2.8 rebound average, but her overall output has risen to 10 points and 4 boards as a result of her recent outstanding play.

"This is the first time Melanie has played guard and the first half of the season she was adjusting to handling the ball," EIU head coach Bobbie Hilke explained. "Now she is one of the quality guards in the conference.

"She's one of those players who has their best games against the best opposition," Hilke added.

Hatfield proved that in a Feb. 4 contest against league-leading Southern Illinois as she paced Eastern with 21 points. "She single-handedly kept us in that one," Hilke said after the 72-55 defeat.

Since adjusting to the guard position, Hatfield has started all 13 GCAC contests, scoring in double figures in all but two of these games while continuing to dish out assists at a steady pace.

One of the recipients of those scoring passes is Aldridge, who is currently leading Eastern with a 13.4 point average against Gateway opposition.

Although she scores consistently and has topped 20 points in her last two outings, Aldridge's real forte is rebounding. She leads the Lady Panthers in that category with 7.9 boards per league contest and pulled down 17 caroms in Eastern's 88-74 victory over Bradley on Feb. 16.

"I feel Chris' rebounding is truly exceptional because she is often pitted against much taller opposition," Hilke said. "She's terrifically competitive and is improving daily."

Two days after Aldridge's rebounding exhibition against the Lady Braves, she tallied 26 points against Western Illinois, setting a team mark for points in a GCAC game. Her 12 field goals that night also established a season standard.

While Aldridge owns the single-game mark in GCAC action, Collins lays claim to the all-time single game scoring record. She connected for 32 points against Ball State this season to eclipse the old mark by a single point.

Collins' name already graces several pages of the Panther record book, as she established single-season marks with 352 boards and 556 points as a freshman. Her 148 rebounds this season have catapulted her to No. 2 on the all-time list with 715.

In addition, her 13.4 scoring average for 309 points places her third on the all-time list with 1231 points. Although her per game output has dropped somewhat since her rookie season, Collins remains a stalwart player for the Panthers. "I think everyone in the Gateway keys on her, which makes it that much harder on her," Hilke said. "Also, we moved Toni from inside out to a wing. I think it's a testimony to her versatility that she's still scoring."

Since her switch to the wing, Collins has been dishing off more scoring passes, and as a result has moved into a tie for third on the all-time assists roster.

Eastern's fourth nominee for all-league honors is one of the most naturally talented athletes on the squad, Stacy Cook.

After not playing basketball for over a year, this junior college All-American joined the Panthers following the volleyball season and soon became an important factor inside, scoring 9.7 points and hauling down seven rebounds a contest.