

Hands of a thief

Big girls might cry

By Joe Vanden Acker

She is the resident pest. She is that little gnat buzzing in front of your face, the one you simply can't shoo away, and she just keeps coming back for more.

In a game dominated by players with great size, Jenny Stoner '08 is a 5-foot tall defensive dynamo on the basketball court. She can take the ball away from players a foot taller, and she literally can bring opposing guards to tears.

In three years on the hardwood for the Vikings, the Chicago, Ill., native has caused opponents to panic or be intimidated, or both, by the smallest player on the floor.

What Stoner may lack in height she makes up for with some of the quickest hands this side of a pickpocket. Those hands have been frustrating opponents on the basketball court for some time.

"I can't tell you how it came to be," says Stoner, who recalls her defensive prowess as far back as fourth grade. "The girl would cross half-court, and I would steal the ball. It's something that's been a part of my game for a very long time."

Stoner, a psychology major, made it particularly rough on one player during her prep career.

"I made her cry," she says. "She was good, too. She just got really frustrated."

Stoner instantly became a starter when she came to Lawrence out of Regina Dominican High School. She didn't waste a lot of time making her presence felt. In the first game of her career, she had a school-record ten steals and scored 19 points in a win over Dominican (Ill.) University.

"My thing would be man-to-man defense," says Stoner. "The first question I asked any of the coaches I was being recruited by was, 'What



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defense do you play?’ That’s my thing.”

A tri-captain last season, Stoner has piled up 201 steals for her career, and that ranks her sixth on Lawrence’s career list. With another full season under her belt, she will easily move into second place, but catching Beth Pollnow ’02, who has 294, will be difficult.

Stoner’s steal total dropped slightly last season after recording a career-best 72 as a sophomore. She didn’t lose anything in her game in 2006-07, but other teams began adjusting their game plans to minimize the havoc caused by the Lawrence point guard.

“If Jenny Stoner is guarding you, you do not bring the ball up,” Carroll College coach Kris Jacobson told the *Appleton Post-Crescent* in January. “That’s our rule here. You literally have to have two ball handlers on the floor.

“She’s a thorn.”

The “Stoner Rule” was likely a direct result of Lawrence’s 76-56 thrashing of Carroll in January 2006. Stoner played 38 minutes, had six steals and five assists, and frustrated 5-8 Pioneers star Crystal Hoewisch all night.

“I’d never noticed it as much, except in college where the point guard doesn’t bring the ball up the court,” Stoner says. “It’s satisfying to know that because of my presence out there, she’s not going to bring the ball up the court.

“It’s fun to know that you influenced the other team’s strategy and game plan.”

The other method coaches employ to slow down Stoner is complaining long and loud to the officials. Stoner gets so close to the player she is guarding, you couldn’t slip a piece of paper between the two, and that draws the wrath of every coach Lawrence faces.

“Get her off! Get her off!” is what opposing coaches cry to referees.

But Stoner moves her feet with a dancer’s grace and has the thing coaches love — active hands. National Basketball Association player Gary Payton was known as “the glove” during the prime of his career for his defensive prowess, but he has nothing on Stoner. Her on-the-ball defense is as good as any player in Division III.

“It’s one of those things that once you get a steal, you feel like you can keep going at it,” Stoner says.

Opponents are getting off lucky. Those players face Stoner once or twice a season, but her Lawrence teammates take her on every day in practice.

“At first I was intimidated by her, but now that I know her, I love her,” says guard Jen Gabriele ’10. “She makes me better every day in practice because I’ve found in games that

nobody pressured me as much as she did in practice, which made games seem easier. She picked my pocket at least twice a day in practice but built my confidence at the same time.”

Gabriele believes Stoner has a great mix of athletic and personal attributes, and that explains her defensive skill.

“Stoner has perfect lateral movement and long arms, so she is able to stay low and swipe at the ball all the time,” Gabriele says. “She also never seems to get tired, which inevitably makes the person dribbling the ball flustered. She is also a hungry defender. She enjoys playing defense, which is half the battle. Nobody likes to play defense, everybody wants to score, not Stoner. She is an all-around player.”

And all that comes in a package just scraping 60 inches.

While Stoner may have always been the shortest player on her basketball team, she doesn’t feel out of place at home. The Stoner clan is not blessed with great size. Her dad, Jim, is 5-6, and her mom, Jan, stands 4-11. Younger brother Joe is only 5-6, but he plays football at the University of Chicago.

Younger sister Julia is 4-11 but plays soccer and basketball at Regina Dominican. The youngest of the group, Jamie, is 12 but she is already taller than Jenny and plays a multitude of sports.

“As much as we are a short family, we’re pretty athletic,” says Stoner. “[Being short] does make you work harder. It’s not easy to be athletic. You have to find your own talent to stand out from the other players. It creates a challenge, and I’m a very competitive person. I take it and I go with it.”

With that competitive fire burning, Stoner is striving to improve her game. With teams consciously avoiding her when they have the ball, she is working on her defense away from the ball.

“You have to be more mobile off the ball. That was something I concentrated on last year,” she says.

Despite being second on the team at 8.3 points per game last season, Stoner also wants to improve her offense. She doesn’t want to be known as a one-trick pony.

“Another one of my goals, ever since high school, because I’ve never been a shooter, is to continue to be an offensive threat,” Stoner says. “I would really like to have more of an offensive game going. And that’s not necessarily scoring. That’s setting up my teammates and trying to be better.”

That sounds like a tall order, but no goal seems too large for this remarkable young woman.

“I would love to be much taller, but I’m not,” says Stoner. “You’ve got to make do with what you have.”

And she is doing that quite well. Just ask anyone playing against the Vikings. ■

It’s fun to know that you influenced the other team’s strategy and game plan.