

## Road to glory passes through Lakehead

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Of all the odysseys Darnellia Russell has experienced — her teen pregnancy, her lawsuit against the Washington state school board, her high-school basketball team winning the state championship, the movie about her struggles and the fact she was ignored by the same U.S. Division I universities that once teased her with letters of recruitment — this has to be the oddest yet.

To get a university degree so she can play professionally in the WNBA, Russell is leaving her hometown of Seattle and travelling to another city in another country — to Thunder Bay and Lakehead University, where she could be one of the best female players in the country.

Without question, she'll be the only 24-year-old athlete in Canadian Interuniversity Sports to have been featured in a dozen or more major U.S. newspapers (such as *The Seattle Times* and *The Washington Post*), on television (Spike and ESPN), online (with Bill Maher) and at the 2005 Toronto International Film Festival, where *The Heart of the Game* garnered glowing reviews for chronicling Russell's plight, pluck and perseverance.

"I'm so ready to come [to Thunder Bay]," Russell said last week from her family home in Seattle. "I've been waiting for this. I've been waiting a long time for an opportunity to play basketball and get my degree."

*The Heart of the Game*, told in documentary form, started out as the story of the Roosevelt High School girls basketball team, but soon found Russell at its core as the single mother fighting for her rights.

Russell dropped out of school when she learned she was pregnant, but requested a fifth year of eligibility. The Washington Interscholastic Activities Association refused the request, saying "she didn't matriculate with her classmates." Russell challenged the decision and sued. The WIAA's lawyer argued in court that allowing Russell a fifth year was "kind of a green light for all who get in this type of situation. Is that fair? We should say no."

Bill, Russell's coach and a University of Washington professor, called it "sexism" and wondered why the boys who get teenage girls pregnant weren't held as accountable.

Twice, a Superior Court judge ruled Russell should be allowed to play. In response, the WIAA sued Russell and Roosevelt High. The association's legal action was pending when Roosevelt welcomed Russell for a final season and was rewarded with a state championship. (Russell hit two free throws to clinch the first Class 4A title in school history.) And quietly, after Roosevelt had celebrated its win, the WIAA dropped its suit.

That was where *The Heart of the Game* ended and where Russell's celebrity status exploded. She travelled the continent promoting the film as the teenager who took on the system and won. The movie received several honours, including the top entertainment award from the Women's Sports Foundation in Los Angeles. People recognized Russell and asked for her autograph. But those scholarship offers from Division I schools? They stopped coming soon after word got out she was pregnant.

Still eager to combine basketball and school, Russell found herself boxed in. She didn't have the money to attend a major school. She contacted the WNBA, but was told she needed a degree from a four-year institution, a league stipulation. She decided to attend Seattle Community College, where she was chosen as the team's most valuable player and the MVP of the Northwest Athletic Association of Community Colleges all-star game in a two-year span. Last season, she concentrated on school and served as a team manager.

And that's when a creative sports information director in Thunder Bay came up with the notion that perhaps, just maybe, Russell would like to play for Lakehead.

Mike Aylward had watched *The Heart of the Game* on television and wondered what had become of the 5-foot-6 guard whose refusal to give up matched her on-court tenacity. He found her through Google and

pitched the idea of her coming to Thunder Bay. It wasn't long before Lakehead Thunderwolves coach Jon Kreiner spoke to Russell and asked whether she was interested in paying a visit.

The day she arrived, there was a nasty snowstorm. In April.

"It was so crazy," Russell recalled. "I stepped out the door and there was snow everywhere, flying in my face. I said, 'Are you kidding me?' I went back inside the hotel. I've never seen snow like that before."

It didn't stop her from signing a letter of intent, a recent CIS development that may not be legally binding but indeed shows her commitment to Lakehead. And to help with the adjustment, Russell will be joined by Seattle teammate Chiaki Nakamura of Nagasaki, Japan, who will also be playing for the Thunderwolves in the fall.

Having seen enough of Russell's abilities at a scrimmage during the April visit, Kreiner is eager for the season to begin.

"Her basketball IQ is probably better than anyone's on our team because of where she's come from, where she's played," Kreiner said. "Her vision and understanding of the game are outstanding. ... One of her first comments to me was, 'It's going to take a while to learn all the players on the court.' Usually, a new recruit wants to show you what she's got [scoring-wise]. Darnellia is different."

Russell has been different from the moment she was ready for high school. At her mother's insistence, she attended the mostly white Roosevelt High because it had a good academic reputation. Uncomfortable in her new surroundings, Russell was at home on the basketball court, where she honed her game and became a complete player.

At that point, Division I and II universities were flooding Russell's mailbox with letters of interest. They all wanted her, until she became pregnant, lost a year of school and no longer seemed so appealing — not that Russell has ever been told that.

"I have no idea," Russell said when asked why she has to come to Canada to further her education and basketball plans. "I know if I went to a D1 school, I'd have one year, and if I went to a D2 school, I'd have two years. I don't understand all that stuff. I'm taking the opportunity because I know I may not keep getting opportunities for much longer."

Tom Warden, Lakehead's athletic director, said CIS rules work to Russell's advantage.

"When you register as a full-time student at a degree-granting [National Collegiate Athletic Association] institution, the clock starts," Warden said. "You have five years to play four years. Here, as long as you're eligible, you have five years regardless of the time between playing. She has three years of eligibility in Canada."

That's enough time for Russell to get her degree while her boyfriend and his family, along with her mom, look after her two girls (Tre'kayla, 5, and Sechoyah, 1; the boyfriend, Secoy Clemmons, is the father of both girls and involved in their upbringing). It's a sacrifice, Russell admitted, but she's made plenty before.

Her benefactors at Lakehead respect her dedication.

"We're willing to help her with her goal of making it to the WNBA," Warden said. "We're limited, but we do provide student athlete support through scholarships or awards, and the athletes can augment their situation with jobs. ... Philosophically, I believe in giving people a chance."

As for Russell, this is the culmination of all she's ever wanted — a university that wants her and a team she can play for. That she has to leave home for the wilds (and blizzards) of Northwestern Ontario is a small price to pay for going to school and keeping the game in her heart.

"It will be hard," she said, "but I'm so focused and ready. I'm really ready."

The odyssey continues.

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