As a former South Carolina Gatorade Player of the Year, a WNBA player with the Indiana Fever, and starter on C. Vivian Stringer’s inaugural Scarlet Knights women’s basketball team at Rutgers University, Usha Gilmore has executed plenty of jumps. Her biggest one, however, might be the career leap she made this past winter to Illinois Tech athletics, accepting her first women’s b-ball head coaching position.

“I’ve been an assistant coach for 11 years; I’m ready to be head coach,” says Gilmore, who came to IIT from the University of Illinois by way of Niagara University, Southern Polytechnic State University, Davidson College, Longwood University, Southern Illinois University, and Wagner College. “This is an opportunity to redo history; the women’s program has been gone for a while and now we’re bringing it back. This will be the first team of many.”

Gilmore intends for the quality of her basketball program to match the quality of IIT’s academic one, with an added bonus: Players will be taught how to recognize lessons available from the school of life.

“I want to mold these young ladies into successful human beings, because that is what I had under Coach Stringer and her assistant coach, Jolette Law, who taught our team to straighten up and fly right,” Gilmore explains. “Parents are letting their kids come to IIT for four years. I see myself becoming somewhat of a parent and taking on that responsibility. I think this will factor into the success of the basketball program.”

Gilmore has her own parents to thank for fostering her athletic gift early on and giving it ample room to grow. Her father built a court behind the family home in the small town of Moncks Corner, S.C., that was a hoops hangout for Gilmore, her brothers, and the neighborhood regulars—Button, Don, and Booby—who all taught Gilmore the gist of the game. That modest but mighty slab is where Stringer went to recruit Gilmore to Rutgers.

“Daddy had the light on the court and we were getting it done with the guys in the neighborhood,” recalls Gilmore, pulling a photo of the court, now a boat/golf cart port, from a tote bag. “We were out until about four in the morning and Coach Stringer wondered why we weren’t in bed. I told her that this is what we do. We play until we get tired, and we weren’t tired just yet.”

Though Gilmore plans to work her players hard in preparation for their debut home game against Clark University on October 26, she will be in step right next to them, expecting the same amount of commitment and dedication from herself. With her easy smile and reputation for having been the team comedienne at Rutgers, Gilmore knows that all work and no play won’t make for a slam dunk.

“We’re really excited for Usha. She’s always been a person who has loved the game,” says Stringer, Rutgers head coach and Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Famer. “She was an outstanding player at Rutgers University on a team that went to the Final Four and was later drafted into the pros. Usha is definitely a people person and someone everyone enjoys being around. The players will thoroughly enjoy playing for her. She has a way of making everything fun.”

MORE ONLINE
Scarlet Hawks Women’s Basketball: www.illinoistechathletics.com/sport/0/6.php
C. Vivian Stringer: www.scarletknights.com/basketball-women/coaches/stringer.asp
by MARCIA FAYE

Greatness Out of the Court That Daddy Built

PHOTO: MICHAEL GOS