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**Local News**

January 30, 2005

# TC St. Francis grad earns starting spot as a freshman

By **JEFF PEEK**  
 Record-Eagle staff writer

TRAVERSE CITY - Erin Carney isn't easily intimidated - by the jump to the college game or its premier teams - and that has helped land her a starting spot on one of the top-ranked NCAA women's basketball teams in the country.

Carney, a Traverse City St. Francis graduate who was among the senior finalists for Miss Basketball last season, is averaging 6.6 points and 6.5 rebounds for 17th-ranked DePaul (16-3).

She is one of two freshmen in the Blue Demons' starting lineup, a distinction that DePaul head coach Doug Bruno said Carney has earned.

"I don't write out the starting lineup, the players do," Bruno said. "So Erin starting isn't my doing, it's her doing.

"She made it a no-brainer to the coaching staff," he said. "And she made it a no-brainer to the players."

Carney, a 5-foot-11 forward, believes she has surprised a few people who doubted she would ever become an effective Division I player despite dominating Class C competition in high school.

Carney has even surprised herself a bit.

"The coaching staff tells you you have an opportunity, then wow, you realize you can really do it," she said. "Starting is an honor. I worked hard. I did everything I could to get in the best shape of my life and show them how much I wanted it.

"When the talent level is close, sometimes it comes down to who wants it the most," she said.

"Some people may have thought I wouldn't do anything in college, but in the long run it's not what they think, it's what I think. And I can see so much improvement since I got here."

Bruno first saw Carney on video while she was a junior at Flint Powers Catholic Central, then he watched her in person in a national AAU tournament the summer before she transferred to TC St. Francis.

"Erin's game is so predicated on her innards," Bruno said. "She's a player who's so strong up the middle - and by that I mean head, heart and gumption.

"She plays hard, but you don't play at a high level just by playing hard," he said. "Being a hard worker and being a competitor aren't synonymous. Working hard is an expectation.

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"What sets Erin apart is she has an inner strength that won't allow her to be beaten. It matters to her if the person on the other side of the ball wins. It takes a piece of her.

"You either have that," Bruno said, "or you don't."

Carney erupted for 22 points and 16 rebounds in a 99-54 win over Loyola-Chicago on Dec. 6 - her rebounds were the most by a DePaul freshman since 1987 - but Bruno said Carney really showed what she was made of a week later when the Blue Demons traveled to Knoxville to take on national power Tennessee.

The Volunteers won 78-63, but Carney more than held her own. She started against 6-5 center Tye'sha Fluker, who is six inches taller, and still came away with 10 rebounds, four points and four steals before fouling out. Fluker, meanwhile, took a seat after playing only nine minutes.

"You're going from a game against a team with an RPI of 220 to a team with an RPI of 1," Bruno said, referring to the Ratings Percentage Index, which ranks every team in the country. "Tennessee tried to bully her right off the bat, but Erin stood her ground. You had to see that game to appreciate how well she played.

"Like I always tell her, the Tennessee game was the best thing that could have happened to her, but..."

Carney completes Bruno's sentence: "The worst thing is, he expects it every time."

Carney said the game against the Volunteers tested her mettle from the start.

"I'm a shorty, and I went up against a 6-5 girl," she said. "(Bruno) told me I had to hold my own.

"Being able to go into that gym - with the great history that Tennessee has and the fans going crazy - and put my foot down and not be intimidated, that was a personal victory for me," Carney said. "I wasn't going to get pushed around. I stated my purpose and I got a lot of respect."

Bruno said Carney's game goes beyond determination, however.

"Make no mistake, Erin has talent," he said. "We're consistently looking for eye-body quickness. Some programs just look for athletic quickness - how fast you run, how high you jump. We look for that, too, but we also look for the quickness that goes from eye to brain to body.

"Erin has that quickness," Bruno said. "She's so quick that sometimes she goes too fast. That's what (longtime UCLA men's coach John) Wooden meant when he said, 'Be quick, but don't be in a hurry.' "

Bruno has made similar comments about the eye-body quickness of 6-2 junior forward Khara Smith, who leads the Blue Demons in scoring and was featured in a story in ESPN The Magazine two months ago.

Smith, a candidate for the women's Wooden Award, is averaging 18.7 points and 11.4 rebounds and has had double-doubles in 14 of the team's 19 games. Bruno believes Carney's presence has been a benefit to Smith.

"This is the first year Khara's had someone to take the pressure off her (inside)," Bruno said.

That assertion has become even more important since Smith's cousin Charlene Smith, a 5-8 guard, went down with a torn ACL in December. A pre-season all-Conference USA selection, Charlene Smith is out for the season.

Despite the loss, the Blue Demons continue to put points on the board. Every player in the starting lineup except Carney is averaging in double figures, including 5-11 freshman Allie Quigley (14.2), 5-10 senior Jenni Dant (12.1) and 6-0 sophomore Jenna Rubino (11.9).

DePaul is ranked No. 1 in the country in scoring at 85.4 per game. And while Carney admits she hasn't done as much to boost the team's offensive average, she is pleased with her play on the boards, where the Blue Demons are also tops in Division I with a 13.4 rebound-per-game margin over their opponents.

"Scoring has never been a big thing for me," Carney said. "I don't care how much I score as long as we win.

"Rebounding, yes, that's a big thing for me and that's where I can contribute most. I just want to be successful."

And how successful can Carney become? With three years of eligibility remaining after this season, Bruno is excited about her future. But he knows better than to place undo pressure on a freshman who, he is quick to point out, "has only played in 18 college basketball games."

"Very few players come through and don't get better from year to year, and Erin's

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going to get better," Bruno said. "I'm not going to put any numerical expectations - or restrictions - on her. And because we're a team I don't want to put it in terms of individual award expectations, either.

"She's already very good," he said. "We hope we can help her become a very special college player."

Carney said the adjustment period - both in terms of competition and fitting in on a team that includes 12 Chicago-area players - is already over.

"The first couple of games I was extra nervous," she said. "But you don't really feel like a freshman after awhile. You grow up real fast when you have to."

It has helped that Carney's older sister, Rachael, is also at DePaul after transferring from the University of Michigan. Under NCAA guidelines, Rachael Carney is sitting out this season but will be eligible to play for the Blue Demons next fall.

"She kind of keeps me sane," Erin said of her sister. "We're there for each other - practically inseparable most of the time."

The Carney family's connection at DePaul runs even deeper. Erin and Rachael's aunt, Mary Carney, played professionally under Bruno in 1979-80 as a member of the Chicago Hustle of the Women's Basketball League.

"I didn't know that when I recruited Erin," Bruno said. "And I appreciate the fact that the Carneys didn't tell me until after the fact, so Erin could stand on her own merits."

Carney said being so far away from family and friends - both in Traverse City and Flint - is "probably the toughest thing" about being at DePaul, which won't play a team in Michigan this season or anytime soon.

After this year, DePaul will leave Conference USA and join the tough Big East Conference. The closest team in that league is Notre Dame, in South Bend, Ind.




So the Blue Demons won't get an opportunity to play 11th-ranked Michigan State - and former Glen Lake star Liz Shimek, who Carney doesn't know personally but still keeps track of through the boxscores - unless they meet in the NCAA tournament in March.

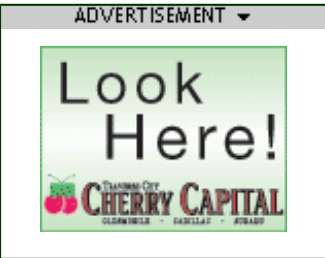
The tough-minded Carney, no doubt, would be up for the challenge.

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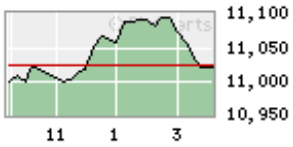
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