

Playing for two Lady Vols tough but worth it



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(Photo: Matt Slovin / The Tennessean)

KNOXVILLE – The moment the two Lady Vols enter the gym, dressed in their official practice gear, the intensity inside increases exponentially.

Passes become crisper. The pace quickens. The chatter ceases.

Cierra Burdick, one of the two players, wastes no time, taking control of the practice like Pat Summitt, the coach who recruited her.

"We've got players that played on the middle school championship team last year," Burdick barks, "and we can't make a free throw?"

Burdick, a star forward on the Lady Vols, and teammate Ariel Massengale, a guard, are coaches for the eighth-grade Emerald Force, an AAU team in Knoxville.

The second-seeded Lady Vols are days away from what they hope will be a very deep NCAA Tournament run, hosting No 15 seed Boise State on Saturday (12:30 p.m. Central, ESPN2).

But that seems to be the furthest thing from the minds of Burdick and Massengale as they install a man-to-man defense. Burdick instructs her players to "point your pistols," keeping one hand aimed at the ball and the other on their assignment.

"I've always been big on community service," said Burdick, who is Tennessee's leading scorer with Nashville native Isabelle Harrison out for the season with a torn anterior cruciate ligament. " ... We've got a great group of girls."

Playing for Burdick and Massengale isn't easy; four missed layups during a weave drill are paid for later in the form of 20 push-ups.

Burdick stops the players at 10 push-ups and gives one player a chance to hit a pair of free throws to cancel out the remaining 10. She misses the front end, and it's back to the floor for more punishment.

Messiah Middlebrook knew what she was getting herself into when she tried out for the Force. With college ball aspirations of her own, the chance to play for two members of one of the sport's most storied programs was too much to pass up.

"They're teaching us stuff at a college level," Middlebrook said. "When we get to college, we'll already know that stuff and we'll be great at it."

Dwayne Sanders, the director of Emerald Youth Foundation, the organization that sponsors the team, said college athletes don't always make the transition into coaching so effortlessly. They can be impatient and frustrate easily.

That hasn't been the case for Burdick and Massengale.

"If I was (on the team), that's who I'd want coaching me," Sanders said.

Burdick approached Sanders late last year and told him that she would like to increase her role with the foundation, having previously been a tutor. There have been challenges — like working around their practice and class schedule — but Sanders said it's well worth it, given the respect the two volunteers hold because of their status as Lady Vols.

"That's what you want student-athletes to do," Sanders said. "When they've got time to be out in the community with young ladies that could really use their mentoring, it's huge."

This weekend, when the Lady Vols begin NCAA Tournament play, teammates might need to strain to hear Burdick over the roar of what will likely be a decidedly pro-Lady Vols crowd.

They will have to forgive her, if that is the case — she went hoarse coaching the Force, which finished second in its first tournament last weekend, losing in the finals by 15 to the Tennessee Fury.

After running suicides, the girls, exhausted, put their hands behind their heads, trying to catch their breath.

"We would've won the championship," Burdick yells over the sound of panting, "if we would've made some layups."