



New Mexico Activities Association Student-Athlete Spotlight

Colleges calling for Shiprock's Tanisha Begay

By Karl Schneider

Just after 10 p.m. on August 31, Tanisha Begay's phone started vibrating.

At the time, Begay, a junior at Shiprock High School, was driving home from Farmington with her parents. It was the day before college basketball programs could begin contacting high school players to start recruiting.

Begay and her parents were talking about what might happen on September 1, and what colleges might come calling for the services of the versatile guard when her phone began buzzing. It was the vibration pattern Begay used to notify her of an email. "I was like, 'What is this?' and I clicked on it and opened it up," Begay said. "Princeton was the first one and then Columbia was right after that."

The two Ivy League schools took full advantage of the time difference. It was September 1 on the East Coast and the two programs weren't wasting any time letting Begay know they want her on campus after she graduates in 2017.

Princeton and Columbia were the first to contact Begay but they wouldn't be the last.

The next day, the University of New Mexico, New Mexico State University and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas all reached out to Begay.

Being recruited by Division I programs is the culmination of the countless hours Begay has put into basketball since she was a child.

"I was probably three (years old). I had a little Tigger basketball goal and I used to play on that in the living room," Begay said.

She quickly went from bouncing around in her living room like the cartoon character on her hoop, to challenging players on the high school team well before she was old enough to enroll at the high school.

"I didn't know the concept of how middle school and high school basketball worked and the different levels," she said. "I used to play on my uncle's travelling team and we used to practice with them. I felt like I could be as good as them and play with them."

During her freshman year at Shiprock, Begay came off the bench to lead the team's second unit, averaging 8.8 points per game. The Lady Chieftains were one of the best teams in the state during the 2013-14 season, and reached the 3A state championship game with a record of 29-0.

The team was expected to cruise past Portales in the state final to claim the blue trophy but the Lady Chiefs fell 62-59 in overtime.

It was an imperfect ending to an otherwise perfect season



and all it did was motivate Begay to come back stronger.

In her sophomore season, Begay led Shiprock with a 15 point per game clip, helping the Lady Chieftains to a 26-5 record and the 4A semifinals. After the season she was named first team all-state.

But again, it wasn't good enough.

"Her willingness to play hard and her concentration and focus is above other people right now and she loves basketball. I'm really excited and can't wait to see her on the floor," Shiprock head coach Larenson Henderson said. "Tanisha, her intensity and wanting to improve, is leaps and bounds above others. She says it herself, 'I can never stop getting better because there's another player out there getting better.'"

Begay spent the summer like many of the top high school players in the country, bouncing from city to city with her travel team, New Mexico Heat Elite. The team played in tournaments around the country, making stops in Texas and Florida before wrapping up the summer at the Adidas Nationals in Atlanta, where the team reached the elite eight.

When the high school basketball season begins, Shiprock will return all but one player from last year's team.

"Our bond is going to be a lot stronger. I feel like we're connecting a lot more on and off the court," Begay said of the Lady Chieftains. "We're a lot more comfortable with each other this year. The way we talk to each other when we see each other, it's different. It's a lot different than last year."

Between school and playing on the Shiprock volleyball team, there's not much time for Begay to spend in the gym working on her basketball game, so she improvises.

She'll take a basketball into the kitchen at her family's home and dribble on the floor to work on her ball handling.

"Maybe I'll just hold the ball and walk around with it, just to feel the weight of it and how the grip is. Just the little things that will help me improve," she said.

As great a player as Begay is, she may be a better student.

The competitive drive that pushes her to be the best on the court also pushes her to be the best in the classroom. She said the drive to excel in the classroom was something that clicked in her when she was still in elementary school.

"It's just something important that all athletes have to manage," Begay said of school work. "Having that 4.0 or more is what drives me to be successful. You feel that success you have and you want to feel it even more, so what's the point of stopping at a certain point. I want to be the better person out there and it makes me feel a lot better being successful in the classroom and on the court."