



Something in Common

*By Bob Dixon, for the Signal
February 14, 2007*

Tatianna Thomas' 10-point outburst in the final two minutes of Hart's narrow victory over Canyon last week was ironic. It was ironic because of how she did it and because of whom she did it to.

Six of her decisive points came on a pair of 3-pointers. The first came in answer to Cowboy Nicole Leon's 3-pointer to tie the game. The second, which followed a Leon jumper, stretched Hart's lead to four with 67 seconds to play.

That's ironic because for five months last year, Leon and Thomas were trading bounce passes, not bombs. They were teammates. It's also ironic because in burying those jumpers, Thomas also buried Canyon, which is coached by Stan Delus, the man who helped her develop her long-range game in the first place.

It wasn't the first time Delus tasted bitter irony this year.

Two days before Canyon's loss to Hart, Delus saw his team fall to Valencia.

Charise Hall, the third Foothill League senior to play for Delus' summer travel team in 2006, scored 14 points for Valencia.

"Tatianna almost single-handedly beat us last Thursday," Delus says. "And against Va-

lencia, there's Charise, knocking down shots. Sometimes it comes back to haunt you."

Hauntings notwithstanding, this is no ghost story - it's not about anything as ephemeral as that.

To the contrary, this is a story of the intangible becoming tangible. It is a story of three girls turning their dreams into reality.

It all started last summer

Like so many high school varsity athletes, Thomas, Hall and Leon dreamed of playing their sport in college. They imagined the athletic scholarship that, for the prep athlete, represents the Holy Grail.

But there are just so many holy grails to go around. To secure one ahead of a crowd of competitors, the trio went in search of an edge.

What they found was summer travel ball. Actually, it found them.

Thomas, Hall and Leon played for the national travel basketball program FBC (Finest Basketball Club), which Delus is a coach for. FBC doesn't hold tryouts.

"Nikki told me about it," Hall says of her introduction to FBC. "It was one last opportu-



nity to get noticed and play on the next level."

Hall's affiliation with FBC began in the summer of 2005, as did Leon's. Thomas was the first to play for Delus' team in 2004.

The purpose of FBC is straightforward: Provide its players with a stage on which to perform.

"Most high school girls are under the radar," Delus says. "College coaches can't come out to see you play unless you are a superstar. They only come out to see you after they have seen you in club."

A big part of that formula comes down to scheduling. College coaches are too busy coaching to make recruiting trips during the high school season. They recruit in the summer, and so summer is when many of the high school elite play.

"At one of our games, there were over 200 college coaches watching," Thomas says. "They just covered the court."

Naturally, the competition is fierce. The concentration of high-caliber players is much higher than in high school ball. FBC, for example, can boast alumnae that includes consensus All-Americans Noelle Quinn (UCLA), Charde Houston (UConn), Crystal Erwin (Notre Dame), Jen Hall (Vanderbilt), Alexis Kendrick (Georgia) and Juanita Ward (Mississippi). This year's nominations include Lenita Ford (Cal) and Drey Mingo (Maryland).

With so many college coaches hanging

around at game time, the prize is never far from the players' sight.

"You have to be way more aggressive (than in high school). You have to get the ball and do something with it," Thomas says.

"Something (FBC) coaches always tell us is that playing club will either get you exposure or it will get you exposed. You don't want to send someone else to college."

With the stakes so high, the commitment must be high as well.

FBC players practice in Pasadena two to three days a week from March through July and play between 50 and 60 games in major venues in Florida, North Carolina, Minnesota, Texas, Georgia and Nevada.

"It's definitely intense," Leon says. "You have to pick up your game because you're going against the best players and everyone wants a scholarship. You pretty much take it personally, like, 'This girl is fighting me for a scholarship. Am I going to let her walk all over me?'"

The pressure can prove too much for some players, but then that's part of the experience as well. College coaches are as much interested in how the players respond to the pressure as in what they can do with a basketball.

"It makes you nervous when you know college coaches are watching, but I'm nervous before every game," Hall says.

The summer of 2005 was especially chal-



lenging for Leon. "My sophomore year I was freaking out," she says. "With everybody watching, I was so worried, 'Am I running funny? Is there something on my pants?' I was so nervous. But junior year I was ready to bring it. Still, if you're not nervous, you don't have a pulse."

Delus and the rest of the FBC coaching staff understand the pressure. They combat it by ratcheting up the pressure even before their girls take the court. It's something they drill into their players from the beginning.

"This is a big-time program." Delus says. "It's the number one Adidas program in the country and these girls are playing the best competition. This isn't the time to relax, you know?"

Says Thomas: "The coaches push us. They tell us right away, 'This is business.' There's time to have fun, but we're there to work."

The work paid off for all three this year. Thomas has accepted a scholarship offer to play for the University of Oregon next year. Leon has agreed to play for Cal-State Bakersfield.

Hall's offer came from Cal State Northridge. She says she owes it to the exposure she got playing with FBC.

"I wouldn't have gotten noticed without FBC," she says. "I sent letters to colleges telling them I wanted to play there. Northridge wrote back and said, 'We saw you play in the summer.'"

Says Leon: "I think it kind of put me on the map. I just would have been a regular high school player. With FBC, everyone is so

much faster and I had to adjust to that. Playing with them slowed the game down for me. I see things much better now." Hall, Thomas and Leon have reaped other rewards, as well.

On Saturday, each player's respective high school team will enter the playoffs. Thomas' Indians (24-2) swept the Foothill League and come in as the No.1 seed in CIF-Southern Section Division I-A. Valencia (18-7) finished second in league and Canyon (17-9) took third.

"It's not a coincidence," Leon says. "We all had a desire to be in the playoffs and we did what we needed to do to get where we are. All three of us battled every single time on the court over the summer."

But while they battled together with FBC, the Foothill League season pitted them against each other.

"It makes it a little more friendly when you've played together over the summer," Thomas says. "When you come down the court you may crack a joke. When I'm guarding Nikki, she's bumping me, elbowing me. We get to show the rest of the league the level we're playing at. We can say, 'Come play on our level.'"

Thomas, a small forward, drew the assignment of guarding Hall, a power forward in one game this season. It was a physical match-up, though perhaps not as physical as Hall has learned to expect.

"Every time we play we run into each other. We hit each other," Hall says. "The next time I saw her she said, 'You didn't hit me