

Q & A with Wildcat and Mustang Legend Shanele “#5” Stires

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FORMER WILDCAT REMEMBERS DAYS AT K-STATE

I caught up with Shanele Stires in mid-season after two great victories over Portland and Gonzaga by the San Francisco Dons Women’s Basketball team.

CHAPMAN: Shanele, it’s been a while, but I like to personally take partial credit for your playing at K-State, so let’s compare notes and see if I made this up.

STIRES: Haha, I am curious, because we did have a couple of conversations I remember well.

Full disclosure: we did chat briefly and finally agreed on the chronology of my unofficial “recruiting” but my memory was not quite as good as hers.

CHAPMAN: Tell me about your track and field days, because as I recall you had struggles with basketball in high school:

STIRES: Because of my throwing, I was an Olympic hopeful in the shotput.

CHAPMAN: You were three time Kansas State Champion in shotput and once in discus, right?:

STIRES: Correct. I went to K-State to throw on a full ride scholarship in hopes of making the Olympics for the 1996 games. I wasn’t close to ready in ’92. I needed a lot of training and to put on weight, which I did. A lot of weight.

CHAPMAN: So, back to the basketball question, what happened in high school?

STIRES: I was cut from the team in both 8th and 9th grade and was very discouraged. Parents were involved, local coaching and school politics and some other unfortunate conversations, but the fact was I didn’t get to play and I am an athlete, so I found my way in track.

CHAPMAN: What was competing at K-State like?:

STIRES: Great coaching and competition, but I got 2nd in the spring Bog 8 outdoor and my goal to get into the women’s games began.

CHAPMAN: This was when I saw you practicing solo at the K-State practice facility and yelled at you. We chatted a bit and I mentioned there were needs with the women’s program for walk-ons and practice bodies.

STIRES: haha, yea, that’s right. I weighed a lot then as I was really beefed up for throwing. I look back at those pictures and can’t believe it was me.

CHAPMAN: You were an incredible athlete though. I recall you handing me your shotput several times and then laughing at me as I struggled to hold it, after you had been throwing it around for 2 hours.

STIRES: Haha, True. I remember seeing you at Bramlage for a Women’s game and you encouraged me to talk to Coach Yow, to go out for the team.

CHAPMAN: But I recall that you wanted a scholarship, not just to walk on.

STIRES: I just was so unsure of myself, the weight gain, the lack of play in high school and my inexperience, but you encouraged me anyway. And so I decided to think about it. And after a couple of months, I wanted the dream. I wanted to play hoops.

CHAPMAN: But you didn’t play at K-State. You disappeared.

STIRES: To earn a full scholarship at the Big 8 level, I needed to be good and so I had a plan. I finally got up the nerve and asked: “Are there any scholarships available? I’d like to play basketball” but it was the Coach at Cloud County Community College.

CHAPMAN: How did you end up there?

STIRES: I thought I could go to a place where no one knew me, where there were low expectations and I could really work on my game. Brett Erkenbrack was in his second year of coaching and just getting things started. He had not had a winning season yet and he was young and looking for new talent. I told him I would lose weight and work hard all summer and for some reason, he said "Yes!"

CHAPMAN: So that's when you "disappeared?"

STIRES: Yes, and my family was not too happy. We didn't have the resources and I turned down my fill ride scholarship in track to play basketball. Let's just say it was not a good conversation at home.

CHAPMAN: So other than taking the risk, how did you prepare?

STIRES: I worked out 8 hours a day, changed my diet and turned myself into a basketball player.

CHAPMAN: And then you helped Cloud County get 26 wins and you were a JuCo All American:

STIRES: Yes and I was scoring 22 points a game and getting 12 rebounds. All of a sudden, K-State and KU and some others came calling.

CHAPMAN: What was the recruiting process like?

STIRES: K-State was so bad then, but I loved the school and it was close to my family in Salina. KU had a much better program, but they kept making recruiting mistakes, so they basically took themselves out.

CHAPMAN: So why didn't you just try out at K-State instead of the Cloud County route?

STIRES: That's the same thing Coach Yow asked me, but I didn't think they would take me seriously, so I felt like I would have a better shot by going out and proving myself. The JuCo had no expectations of me. So I took a 1 year gamble. I was on scholarship at K-State and then Coach Brian Agler came on board. The program became competitive again. The relationship and knowledge learned from Coach Agler proved to be invaluable.

CHAPMAN: So you would say your experience at Kansas State was good?:

STIRES: It was an unbelievable place to play. After that I graduated in 1995, the only senior to do so, and went to play professionally in Greece.

CHAPMAN: So you were gone when Agler had to leave the program, but did you know about it?

STIRES: I did hear and felt bad for him. The rules are different today than back then, but basically he was just a nice guy trying to help out his players with some odd jobs to make some extra spending money. The rules were more strict and that was it.

CHAPMAN: You followed him a couple of times, so I assumed you liked playing for him:

STIRES: Definitely. There was a new pro ball league (ABL) developing and Agler got an opportunity. Tennessee, Stanford, Texas and UConn had such great teams then and basically became the league and the 1996 Olympic team. Agler was placed in Columbus, Ohio at a team called the Quest.

CHAPMAN: Were you drafted?

STIRES: I was invited to the first combo, over 1000 players and only 75 got drafted to 8 teams. I did not make the cut, and just finished outside that group. So It wasn't immediate.

CHAPMAN: Still you had only been playing competitive basketball for 4 years and you were almost a professional, That's pretty amazing.

STIRES: It wasn't enough. I wasn't done yet. I joined Athletes in Action and thought I would stay close, so this was in Cincinnati. Funny enough, they brought my team in to scrimmage against Agler's team. I had a great game, like 7 3-pointers, 15 rebounds. "You're playing well, keep it up." Coach told me.

CHAPMAN: I thought you were going to say he hired you on the spot:

STIRES: Haha, I wish. Shortly after, one of their star players slipped a disc and I got a call and signed a 30 day contract. I traveled with them, played some and helped them win the championship that year, and of course as you know, I used my charm and when she was healthy, they chose me over her to remain on the roster, and it was my first break.

CHAPMAN: How do you get from Ohio to Minnesota to San Francisco?:

STIRES: Hold on, Chap, I'm getting there... After my last contract ended, I didn't have a team. I went out to San Francisco for the 97 tryouts and Columbus formally drafts me. We win the championship and I re-sign for the following season. I finally was on a roster and we were winning. About that time, Agler gets a job in the new WNBA and then the ABL league folded. So I was again out of a job, no team.

CHAPMAN: From far away, it always appeared that wherever Agler went, you just followed automatically, but I am seeing a pattern here:

STIRES: HAHA, Not exactly. I waited tables in a mom and pop diner in Columbus while I played and then went full time. A lot of players went back to Europe and I did too and played in Sweden. I was averaging about 27 points a game and then I get a call. I have been drafted by Minnesota (Lynx). I played there three seasons and then I went back to Portugal for a year.

CHAPMAN: WOW. Do you even know where you are now?

STIRES: Still the dry sense of humor I see. Hahaha. As you can imagine, I wasn't exactly getting rich quick and by 2003, I was beginning to deteriorate slowly

CHAPMAN: How did you get into Coaching?:

STIRES: I love the game. After crossing the landmark age of 30, I suddenly felt a step slower and had maxed out my talent in pursuing my dream. Afterwards, I considered pursuing entrepreneurship, sales or something in the business route, and my off season work was fun, but I just didn't want to be away from the game. So I found myself still wanting to be competitive and to stay in it while I still had the credentials to do so.

CHAPMAN: How was the transition from playing to coaching?

STIRES: The lifestyle is so different in coaching. When you are an athlete you play, practice and everything you wish for is given to you, the world revolves around the athletes. When you are the coach, you are a parent, a counselor, a recruiter and everything you do revolves around the players and certainly it is not about you. That was a major mental adjustment to go from the taking side to the giving side.

CHAPMAN: You didn't go back to food service?:

STIRES: Uh, no. The thought of joining the real world, in the workforce with 16 hour days was just not for me. I thought I would take a look at coaching and got a chance with Ohio University. I learned a lot and gave it a couple of seasons. After that through connections I had made over the years, an opportunity surfaced here in San Francisco. USF is a great institution.

CHAPMAN: Are you in the place you would like to be now? I mean level of coaching, not the school.

STIRES: Eventually I would like to get back to the pro level, but I think it is important to go back to the basics and learn. Just like what I did to change from track to basketball, I think to be good you have to understand every level of playing and coaching. Also, the professional level doesn't have the daily grind of tests and school and everything, but I love it, don't get me wrong.

CHAPMAN: What about head coaching?

STIRES: Eventually, if I earn it and am afforded the opportunity, I would love to be a head coach for the right situation. For now I am happy here at San Francisco and doing the very best I can with a great head coach and university.

CHAPMAN: Have you been back to Manhattan, to a K-State game?

STIRES: I haven't. I have to get back sometime and would really love to. I have been invited several times and would have loved to be back for the induction if Nicole Ohlde and Kendra Wecker into the KSU Hall of Fame, but my schedule just wouldn't allow it. Those ladies were just awesome at K-State.

CHAPMAN: When the '96 Olympics came and you had made your commitment to basketball, did you have regrets? What was on your mind?

STIRES: YES!!! I didn't have any regrets, but I did often wonder what it would have been like to pursue the track and field portion of my athletic career! It would have been incredible to have competed for my country and in the Olympics of course. But basketball was truly my passion and love!

CHAPMAN: You've played for many coaches in your lifetime in multiple sports, who has been most influential and why?

STIRES: I would have to say that all the coaches that I have worked for have been profoundly influential on my career, and in that regard they all have influenced me in different ways - always learning from each experience. But professionally Beth Burns, at San Diego State (MWC champions & 2010 Sweet 16) showed me how thorough and detailed you have to be to run a top notch, nationally prominent program. However, No one has had more influence on me than Brian Agler, (former UMKC head coach)the current head coach of the Los Angeles Sparks. From teaching the details of the game screening and, breaking down the fundamentals, and bringing out competitive situations and pushing you to be the very best in every aspect of the game. He has been a true mentor to me and I rely on everything that he has ever taught me with player development and teaching the game to our players on a daily basis.

Shanele currently lives in San Francisco and is the Assistant Women's Basketball Coach for the University of San Francisco Dons.