

Tamika's Next Move

Tamika Catchings's jersey retirement ceremony is a testament to more than just her success on the court. With chapters yet to be written, Catchings's legacy is about following in coaching legend Pat Summitt's footsteps.

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Tamika Catchings hadn't worn hearing aids since she threw them out in second grade. The future WNBA star wanted to fit in, avoid bullying, and be like everyone else who wasn't born with hearing loss.

But as a freshman in college, she came face-to-face with Pat Summitt. The Tennessee head coach saw how good Catchings could be—as a player and a person—if she would openly accept who she was. Summitt asked Catchings a series of questions. What do people do if they have trouble seeing? What might they do if they walk with a limp? And so on. Then Summitt asked about people who have trouble hearing.

Catchings sighed.

“They need hearing aids,” she acknowledged.



Early on, Catchings began playing basketball as a means of breaking down social barriers caused by her hearing impairment. As she grew up, though, and then came under the guidance of Summitt and her staff, the sport became something Catchings wanted to be great at.

“I think the drive came from wanting to be accepted, initially, when I was younger, and then it continued because it was always like, I just want to be better,” Catchings says. “I wanted to be better than I was yesterday.”

That drive led to four straight years as a Kodak All-American at the University of Tennessee, a national title as a freshman, AP and Naismith player-of-the-year honors in 2000, and more than 2,000 points and 1,000 rebounds in her career as a Lady Volunteer. In a 16-year WNBA career, Catchings got 12 All-WNBA nods, 10 All-Star nominations, the 2011 MVP award, and the 2012 Finals MVP award after winning the league title. She also netted four Olympic gold medals with Team USA.

On June 24, she will become the first Indiana Fever player to have her number retired. A banner honoring her No. 24 jersey will hang in Bankers Life Fieldhouse, placing Catchings in the company of retired Pacers Reggie Miller, George McGinnis, Roger Brown, and Mel Daniels—as well as former Fever coach Lin Dunn, former Pacer coach Bobby Leonard, and deceased former co-owner Mel Simon.

Catchings bets she'll cry as she watches her number rise into the rafters. It's an honor she knows wouldn't be possible without Summitt.

“It's crazy, because I think about her, and it was like she always knew,” Catchings says. “They always say, ‘I see more in you than you see in yourself.’ That's how she was. One day, for me, she was like, ‘One day you will impact millions of people.’ I was like, ‘Pat, there's no way. Me?’”

In addition to her success as an athlete, Catchings also dedicated herself to improving her community. She started the Catch the Stars Foundation, for example, which seeks to aid disadvantaged youth through programs that promote fitness, literacy, and mentoring throughout the Indianapolis area.

But ask anyone around the Tennessee women's basketball program, and they'll say Catchings is as good an example as any of a former player carrying on the legacy of Summitt, who died June 28, 2016, five years after being diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease.



Holly Warlick, who coached on Summitt’s staff from 1985 to 2012 before assuming the head coaching role, was probably around Summitt more than anyone outside Summitt’s family. Warlick says Catchings came to Tennessee with the character Summitt and her staff wanted, and all they had to do was provide her with opportunities to show it.

Catchings was genuine, kind, and a family person. Quiet, she led by example, and tended to have a soft spot for underdogs who maybe didn’t get a lot of attention from coaches or play a lot.

Matthew Mitchell, a graduate assistant during Catchings’ junior year, says she always made him feel like a million dollars. Semeka Randall, who played at Tennessee with Catchings, says Catchings’s academic drive inspired her to apply herself and graduate a semester early with her teammate.

“When she walked across that stage in December, I was walking across that stage with her,” Randall remembers. “She just had a presence about her, and you pushed yourself because she did it, too.”

Catchings also worked hard, hated to lose, and played with reckless abandon.

“We would hold our breath all the time when Tamika would take the court, because she knew no boundaries—she knew no limits to what balls she would go for,” former assistant

Mickie DeMoss says. “She would throw her body up against the wall, into the bleachers, into other players.”

When Catchings was a kid, one-on-one games with her sister could get so physical her father, a former NBA player, would have to come out and take the ball away. “Blood blows,” Catchings says, were common.

DeMoss can’t remember one time Summitt, who had unreal expectations for her Lady Vols, ever hounded Catchings for not working hard enough. Summitt even made stuff up to get on her players, but never could with Catchings. Mitchell says Summitt and Catchings both brought it every day, and would make you look bad if you didn’t.

When Catchings tore her right ACL during her senior year, Warlick had two trains of thought. “With her, you don’t think it [is possible for her to get hurt] at first, because you just don’t. She’s indestructible—she just keeps bouncing up,” Warlick says. But on the other hand, Warlick is “surprised she hadn’t been hurt worse throughout her career, because that’s how hard she plays.”

The injury cut Catchings’s senior season short, but the team honored her by awarding her signature baby-blue headband to the player who hustled the most after each game.



The Indiana Fever selected her with the third overall pick in the 2001 WNBA Draft. They took a chance on her, despite her injury, and she made sure the organization never regretted it. Summitt saw it coming.

Between Catchings's final regular-season game and the Fever's lone playoff game in 2016, she happened upon a note Summitt had written to her on July 25, 2002. It read, "Great to see you, watch you play, and have lunch with you. You look terrific, and I know you're glad to be back on the court. I'm proud of you and proud for you. Hang tough through the hard times. You have a great pro career ahead of you."

Summitt died during Catchings's legacy tour during her final season with the Indiana Fever in 2016. In the immediate aftermath, Catchings thought she might not want to play anymore, but the next day she scored 26 points in a 12-point win over the Chicago Sky.

Her old coach would have wanted her to play, and in Catchings's eyes, the tour was always about honoring Summitt.

Now, Catchings is entering the next phase of her life, one that will see her continue to work with her foundation, run a recently purchased tea shop, and hold the position of director of player programs and franchise development with Pacers Sports & Entertainment. The challenges are different from when she had to find a path to the basket or defend an avid shooter, but there are obstacles all the same.

"You're trying to figure out how to make them all work and how, just like a team does, figure out how everybody works at their best level," Catchings says. "I just see that as the trickle effect of making everything work."

She'll be wearing her hearing aids, too—just had a new pair fitted a couple of weeks ago.