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LAMORINDA SPORTS

Miramonte grad Clair Steele comes home to finish her college career at Saint Mary's



Clair Steele

Photo provided

By Jon Kingdon

Clair Steele may or may not have read the Thomas Wolfe novel, "You Can't Go Home Again," but if she did, it's clear she did not take it to heart. After playing basketball and graduating from Lehigh University, the Miramonte High School graduate is going to take advantage of her extra year of eligibility by transferring to Saint Mary's so she can study for a master's degree in management and technology and also to play the sport she loves: basketball.

Saint Mary's head coach Paul Thomas jumped at the opportunity to recruit Steele when he saw her name on the transfer portal list. "We're ecstatic to have Clair be part of our program," Thomas said. "She is going to add a lot of basketball talent and intangibles to our team. The timing for Clair to come back to the West Coast and play at Saint Mary's was just spot on."

There was more than basketball and academics for Steele in going to a school so far away from home. "I had to grow up a lot being across the country and away from my parents," Steele said. "It was a big learning curve and a big step in growing up. I grew into myself and made a lot of close friends. Lehigh is a great school so the classes could be challenging along with playing Division I basketball."

The Pennsylvania climate was another hurdle for Steele.

"My first winter was a real adjustment," Steele said. "I was a summer Tahoe person, so I was not used to the snow, the cold, and the lack of sun so that was a huge difference going to Pennsylvania. I did come to really appreciate sunny days."

With a fifth year of eligibility due to the coronavirus pandemic and having graduated with a major in managing and marketing, Steele was ready to move back home. "I grew up watching Saint Mary's basketball and going to their games. It just felt right," Steele said. "I've known Coach Thomas since the second grade, and he has established a great program here. He's a great guy and I know a number of his players like Taycee Wedin and Ali Bamberger having played with them in Cal Stars."

Steele feels her skills matches up with the Gael's program. "My talents fit in well with the Saint Mary's system," Steele said. "I'm a pass first point guard but I can also score. I'm good at creating and getting my teammates involved so I'll be able to fit right in. I know that there were some turnover issues and that's an area where I can also make an impact."

A good point guard, as a rule, should have twice as many assists as turnovers. After a 2.41 assist to turnover ratio at Miramonte, Steele showed a constant improvement each year at Lehigh in this stat and last year she led the nation with 131 as-

sists and only 33 turnovers for a 3.97 assist to turnover ratio.

"Clair's biggest development over her career at Lehigh was in her shot selection and knowing when to shoot and when to pass the ball," Lehigh Assistant Coach Glenn Rigney said. "One of our favorite plays was for Clair to dribble into the paint and if she didn't have a shot, to keep dribbling under the basket and then look for the open man. She got a lot of assists that way."

A top player is one that makes everyone else around her better and that is what Thomas is expecting to get from Steele. "We have some really good people up front that can score like Amy West, Ali Bamberger, Aspen Garrison and Ellie Croco and Clair will make them all better by getting them the ball in better spots," Thomas said. "We have a lot of talent in the backcourt with Tayce Wedin, Addison Wedin, Makena Mastora, Tayla Dalton, and Jade Kirisome but they don't have the bulldog mentality that Clair brings to the court. She is not afraid of competition, being physical or 'in the moment.' She is going to thrive in the West Coast Conference."

Though only 5'5", the Lehigh staff had no concerns about Steele's height. "It was more her style of play that we saw as a positive," Rigney said. "We noticed that whenever Clair had to switch onto a post player, none of them ever scored on her ... though she did foul once in a while. She just had that fight, grit, and toughness and an 'I'm going to get it done' type of attitude that she carries onto the basketball court and over into life. She is a really focused player who pays attention to preparation and scouting and really prepares for the player that she knows she is going to defend. She's a really smart, heady player."

Lacking some height has never been an issue for Steele, going back to when she began playing basketball. "I don't notice it," Steele said. "I just go into every game the same and don't think about it. I'm not afraid of anyone and I'm the most competitive person anywhere. I don't worry about how tall my matchup is and it's never been a threat to me personally. I just put my confidence over that and make plays."

Kelly Sopak, who began coaching Steele in the first grade through Miramonte High School, witnessed how Steele never saw her height as a negative: "Clair has always been a shorter player but she has learned to make it

an advantage, having learned how to navigate playing against bigger kids from the beginning and has taken that disadvantage and made it a huge advantage of hers."

Thomas made it clear what he expects Steele to bring to the team: "We're looking for her leadership on and off the court with the maturity of a fifth-year player," Thomas said. She knows what Division I college basketball is like and being on the road in hostile environments. Sharing that experience with our eight freshmen and sophomores is something else we are looking for from her. Clair will also provide more competition for our team in practice, and she will make our younger players work and it will only make us better. The players are 100% excited about Clair coming to our team."

After her parents, Sopak was the first person Steele called after choosing to go to Saint

Mary's. "In my role in coaching high school and Cal Sports, I helped Clair to choose the school where she fit and with their style of play but I admit that I really wanted to see her back at Saint Mary's so I may have influenced her in that a little bit. As a pass first, defensive minded point guard, she will fit in well with Saint Mary's offensive weaponry."

Rigney anticipates only positives with Steele at Saint Mary's: "She will be awesome there. I know Coach Thomas and the Saint Mary's program well. As a fifth-year player, Clair will come in and use her experience. I know the Gaels have a lot of good shooters and Clair, who can also score and who takes a lot of pride in being able to distribute the ball, will be a great addition to the team."

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