

Published July 11th , 2018

On her way to Lehigh, Claire Steele stands tall on and off the court

By Jon Kingdon



Claire Steele Photo Gint Federas

Like so many others in the Lamorinda area, Claire Steele began her athletic career at a young age participating in a number of sports. Steele began playing basketball in kindergarten with the Orinda Youth Association, she enjoyed it so much that "my mom (Mary) signed me up for the CYO league."

Steele also played soccer, water polo and competitive swimming but quit all of that in the seventh grade so she could focus on basketball. As a four-year letterman for the Miramonte High School basketball team, Steele played in 154 games and was on the winning side 140 times, which includes a 26-6 record in the various league, county and state basketball tournaments. This year she was named Cal-Hi Sports second team All-State - a four-time All-Diablo Athletic League selection.

Though she enjoyed all sports, it was soon evident to Steele that basketball was her main focus: "I always loved basketball. I even looked forward to basketball practice, which was not the case with my other sports."

With a 4.2 GPA at Miramonte, there was obviously more to her high school experience than basketball. Says Steele: "Miramonte is an incredible school which I loved. I had a great group of friends and awesome teachers that were always supportive of me as a student and as an athlete."

With so many practices and night games that extended into the evening, balancing this with academics required true organization, according to Steele: "It was hard. It took a lot of time management. On the days that I had a game, I would have to plan ahead and do the homework the night before. I had my pregame routines so I would plan ahead for a couple of days."

Steele will be attending Lehigh University next year and is expecting to major in engineering. Steele chose this field due to two of her math teachers at Miramonte, Mary Ann Whitaker and Mike Plant. "They were incredible teachers that inspired me to love math so I was looking for some kind of hands-on major and my father (John) talked to me about engineering as well."

Though only 5 feet 5 inches tall, Steele has been able to stand tall in a sport that puts a premium on height by conceding nothing to her opponents. "My height is not an issue. I'm not afraid of anyone. I'm the most competitive person anywhere. I've patterned my game after Allan Iverson because he was always tenacious, fearless and not too big and he played with a huge heart. I know what it's like to lose so having that in the back of my mind, I did not want to do that again. Even with 140 wins, I can remember every single one of the 14 losses."

As co-captain of the team her last two years, Steele readily took on the leadership role in games and in practice. "I loved being a leader, being there for them and picking them up after they fell. I wanted to be the first one to give my teammates a high five after they made a great play. (Coach) Kelly (Sopak) let me lead on the floor. I wasn't afraid to call people out if they made a mistake and I knew they could do better."

Miramonte head coach Kelly Sopak was Steele's coach since the first grade in CYO and knew how special she would be even as a freshman: "Claire was just so competitive. I kept telling the reporters about this really good freshman player on the team but it fell on deaf ears. Late in the season when we beat Bishop O'Dowd with Claire hitting two to three big 3-point shots, everyone was asking me where she came from."

Sopak also speaks highly of the intangibles that Steele brought to the court: "Claire has great vision and instincts and is a true student of the game. She always understood how we tried to attack an opponent and why we were making adjustments. She is very focused on the court and in her school work. She compares with what the great players have - their biggest concern is on winning and not their stats."

Steele speaks appreciatively of Sopak as well: "Kelly was always there for me. He taught me so much. He just made basketball fun. He created such an amazing culture with our team but he never wanted us to stop having fun in the games. I loved playing for him. He has a great ability to anticipate things before they happened."

Steele also cites her Cal Stars club coach Bernard Barnes who "was always on me and loved to yell at me."

He helped me get stronger and was always pushing me to make the right play, and Teohn Conner, my trainer since the seventh grade who was awesome skill-wise and gave me a sense of confidence that allowed me to not be intimidated."

Playing at Miramonte, Steele was able to learn from her teammates as well, particularly Sabrina Ionescu who was named USA Today Player of the Year as a senior at Miramonte and was most recently named first team All-American following her sophomore year at the University of Oregon. Says Steele: "I began playing with Sabrina in the fifth grade. It was awesome being able to learn from her. She was hard on me but looking back on it, she made me a better player. She was a great leader that demanded excellence from you. I loved playing with her. We were good friends off the court as well which helped our chemistry."

Besides Lehigh, Steele had been considering Long Beach State, Portland State and West Point but the academics and the opportunity to continue playing basketball figured heavily in her final decision: "Lehigh offered me the balance of an amazing education along with playing basketball at a high level. My visit was great and I got along with everyone and I knew that this was the place for me. The weather will be an adjustment but it's also the first time I've ever moved so just leaving Orinda is a major change as well. I'm excited and I'm ready to do it."

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[back](#)

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