

Following the 63-62 loss to Wisconsin in the final regular season game, coach Katie Gerald described the 2021-2022 Purdue women's basketball team as, "a group of fighters." Gerald, in her first year coaching the team, called them "A group of young women who don't want to give up playing basketball." While they may have a fighting spirit in common, their paths to Purdue were quite different.



I was fortunate enough to interview senior Ajah Stallings, senior Rokia Doumbia and junior Abbey Ellis. Stallings and Doumbia were right out of senior day celebrations. They all started playing basketball in elementary school. Basketball is very popular in Stallings' hometown of Indianapolis, but plays second fiddle to soccer in Doumbia's hometown of Bamako, Mali. Men's and women's basketball is quite popular in Melbourne where Ellis is from.



Growing up Stallings didn't watch much basketball but played because she loved the game. Doumbia didn't get much coverage of basketball in west Africa. She aspired to play for her national team. Ellis went to a WNBA game and watched Skylar Diggins-Smith play. She thought that Skylar Diggins-Smith was the coolest point guard because of her speed and toughness. From then on she wanted to play like Skylar Diggins-Smith.



Stallings first heard of Purdue in elementary school and wanted to go there. Doumbia heard of Purdue through AAU programs she played in. Ellis found out about Purdue when she was 16 watching Carsen Edwards play in March Madness. She then came to Purdue as a transfer from Cal Poly. They're favorite spots on campus are the lark apartments, where she can rest and recover for the next basketball game, for Stallings, the Brees Center [for Academic Excellence] for Doumbia and Chick-fil-A for Ellis.

The paths to Purdue were different but still had many similarities. They love playing basketball and are committed to this team together. Coach Gerald says that this team always fights back and will find a way to win. It will be fun to watch them progress in the Big Ten tournament and see how far they go in the NCAA tournament.