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Drexel's Givens has heart of a dragon

Bernard Fernandez, Daily News Sports Writer
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It's strange how people are sometimes perceived because of their physical characteristics. At 6-5 and 220 pounds, Samme Givens towers above most of his fellow students at Drexel University. He is, quite literally, a Big Man on Campus.

Even on the basketball court, Givens is as tall or taller as many of the other players. But it is where Givens plays that stamps him as an anomaly. In the low post, where guys 6-8 and above sometimes are classified as "small" forwards, Givens is a power player fighting for rebounds and inside scoring position in what might be described as a constant uphill battle.



Some of Samme Givens' numbers are down this year, but his overall game is much improved. (Yong Kim/Staff Photographer)

"We're used to seeing Sam get shots off over guys 6-9 and 6-10," said Drexel's leading scorer, 6-4 sophomore point guard, Frantz Massenat. "Some of the things he does I could never do, and I'm almost the same height.

"I think Sam is the best 6-5 post player in the country. I watch a lot of basketball, and you just don't see people his size doing what he does. For him to be as dominant an inside player as he is, that's just shocking. It's pretty amazing even for those of us who see him in practice every day. He always goes so hard, it forces all of us to try to match his intensity."

Pretty high praise for someone whose scoring (11.9 ppg) and rebounding (7.3 rpg) statistics are actually down a bit from those he posted last season when he was the only player in the Colonial Athletic Association to average in double figures in both categories. But Givens has worked hard to expand his offensive repertoire, adding a midrange jump shot and dramatically improving his free throw percentage. He is the emotional heart of a very tenacious Drexel outfit that was the preseason choice to win the CAA championship and, just maybe, return to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since the Malik Rose-led Dragons made it to the Big Dance during the 1995-96 season.

"Samme is the best rebounder I've had," said Bruiser Flint, the former Saint Joseph's guard who is in his 11th season as head coach of the Dragons after 5 years as head coach at Massachusetts. "That's always been his thing. But I've been telling him for years that he'd be almost unguardable if he just added a 15-footer. Until this year, he kind of resisted that. And his progress on free throws has been phenomenal."

With eight points and 10 rebounds in Thursday night's nationally televised, 60-53 victory over CAA rival George Mason at the Daskalakis Athletic Center, Givens moved into third place on Drexel's career rebounding list, with 893, climbing past John Rankin. He also boosted his career scoring total to 998 points, and almost certainly will join the 1,000-point club tonight when the Dragons (11-5, 3-2 CAA) play at North Carolina-Wilmington (7-8, 3-2). Barring injury, he has an excellent chance to become only the third Drexel player to reach 1,000 points and 1,000 rebounds, joining a very exclusive club that, for now, consists only of Rose and Bob Stephens.

Then again, padding his personal numbers is not what Samme Givens is about. Late in the second half of the George Mason game, with the outcome still very much in doubt, Givens - who finished with only four field-goal attempts - pulled down an offensive rebound. But instead of whirling and taking it strong to the hoop against an interior defense that had registered 10 blocked shots, he passed the ball to a very hot and very open Damion Lee, who drained a three-pointer from the corner. Not long after that, Drexel players celebrated their ending the Patriots' 18-game CAA winning streak.

To understand the kind of player Givens has become, you have to know where he came from. That would be the Academy of the New Church in Bryn Athyn, Montgomery County, where his father, Kevin Givens, is the coach. "High school was totally different," Givens said. "I was one of the tallest guys on my team. I played center most of the time. Oh, you'd see a team that had a 6-8 or 6-9 guy occasionally, but it wasn't that often."

But while Givens measured up against most opponents then, measuring up against his father - a Division II All-America at West Chester University, and still that school's all-time leading scorer with 2,054 points to go with 991 rebounds - was another matter.

"People think it was easy playing for my dad," Givens said. "Playing for your father isn't easy. He was tough on me, my biggest critic. I wanted to show I could do the things he did, and maybe a little better. For me and my two brothers, we always felt we had something to prove to him." But 6-5 is still 6-5, and the Big East schools took a pass in the recruiting process. But Flint thought he saw something he could work with.

"Bru told me if I played outside more and worked on my jump shot, I could play the 'three' [small forward], maybe even the 'two' [shooting guard]," Givens recalled. "But I excel at rebounding and scoring in the low post, so . . ." So Givens led the CAA in offensive rebounding in his freshman and sophomore seasons, and as a junior, he averaged 12.2 points and 10.1 rebounds. But his jump shot threatened no one, nor did his 52.9 free throw percent.

Givens worked hard over the summer to extend his shooting range, and his improvement at the foul line (to 75 percent) has been a major plus. Opposing teams now specifically game-plan for him, taking away some of his scoring opportunities, but creating chances for other Dragons. The result is generally evident on the scoreboard.

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