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Growing pains

Freshmen make an impact, but still have a lot to learn

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The question seemed simple enough. A quick glance at the schedule would reveal the answer. Most of those involved couldn't come up with it, though.

"Before we started conference, I asked our freshmen how many conference games we played," Texas coach **Jody Conratt** said. "None of them knew. They know nothing."

That's a lot of nothing. It seems as if Texas has almost as many freshmen as it has conference games. The Longhorns' seven newcomers is the largest rookie class Conratt has had during her 29-year tenure in Austin.

Conratt has likened her responsibilities to that of someone trying to keep up with a litter of active puppies. Except now Conratt is trying to nurse most of them back to health. Three freshmen have been sidelined by injury and other have been plagued by a nick here and a sprain there.

Those injuries and youth have hurt Texas in more ways than one. The Longhorns are 1-2 in conference play and haven't beat a ranked opponent this season. As a result, they've fallen from the rankings.

Other teams have fared a little better with their newcomers, but few of them have had to rely on freshmen as heavily as the Longhorns have. In fact, three of the top four teams in the [SI.com power rankings](#) have a rookie in the starting lineup or playing significant minutes off the bench.

"[Freshmen are] more prepared now," Duke coach **Gail Goestenkers** said. "The game keeps improving, and the quality of players coming out of high school is better."

Of course, freshmen are not prepared for everything. Duke guard **Abby Waner**, whose sister **Emily** played a year at Colorado before transferring to Duke, knew the athletes would be quicker and stronger. Abby also understood that balancing



Duke freshman Abby Waner (left) gained valuable experience with Team USA this summer, but she's still adjusting to the rigors of the college game.

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studies with a heavier basketball schedule would be a bigger challenge, but the idea of taking a day off didn't quite sink in at first.

"I hate feeling like there is something I could be doing to get an edge," she says.

By refusing to rest, she might have been hurting herself. The college season is longer and more strenuous than a high school schedule. If the Blue Devils reach the Final Four, their season will extend into April.

Waner, who has started all but one game for Duke, was already starting to feel the effects early on. Her legs were sore and her body was tired. After finding her rookie guard in the gym during an off day, Goestenkers decided it was time for a chat.

"She would never take the day off," Goestenkers said. "Her body started to break down a little bit. She didn't understand that when she had a day to rest, she needed to take it."

Time off is especially important for Waner, who decided against taking a break over the summer so that she could play for Team USA, which was coached by Goestenkers. "It was great because we knew each other in terms of her coaching style and my playing style," Waner said. "I already had a relationship with her, so it really eased my nerves with that first big game."

But coaches realize that newcomers have a lot to learn. Goestenkers said Waner, who has the benefit of veteran leadership around her, sometimes needs to slow down and take fewer risks.

Baylor coach **Kim Mulkey-Robertson** tries to simplify things when her freshmen take the court. That happens often since the Bears have just 10 players on their roster.

"You want to keep it simple and make them comfortable with what you're doing," Mulkey-Robertson said. "You don't want them to have to think so much."

It seems to be working. Baylor has three freshmen who are averaging at least 13 minutes a game. But as simple as coaches and teammates try to make things, mistakes will still be made.

Baylor senior **Chameka Scott** recalls a game in which freshman **Rachel Allison** threw a pass from the block. The ball flew straight to the Baylor bench.

"She threw the ball to nobody," Scott said. "Our bench was wide open, but they couldn't play."

Whether they're there for the pass or not, Scott said it's up to everyone to be there for the newcomers.

"Sometimes, there's so much information, they look at you with this blank look, and you just shake your head," Scott said. "You know they aren't listening, but you understand. You've been there, and it's a lot to take in. It's on our shoulders to show them how to be prepared."

Five fabulous freshmen

Marissa Coleman, Maryland, 6-1, G/F -- She has earned rookie of the week honors three times and is making a push for ACC Freshman of the Year.

Rashanda McCants, North Carolina, 6-1, F -- Brother Rashad was a star for the Tar Heels, and Rashanda will be too. She's the Heels' top scorer off the bench, with 8.9 points per game.

Courtney Paris, Oklahoma, 6-4, C -- She is ranked second in the nation in rebounding (14.7 per game) sixth in scoring (21.4) and 12th in field goal percentage (.612).

Candace Parker, Tennessee, 6-3, F -- The much-awaited return of Parker, a redshirt freshman, is a major reason why the Lady Vols are the favorites to win the national title.

Abby Waner, Duke, 5-10, G -- A versatile contributor who can play either guard spot, she leads the Blue Devils with 2.6 steals a game.

Safe at home

Kansas had the right idea. With 11 non-conference home games, the Jayhawks built a perfect record and a lot of confidence. That even carried over to a victory in their Big 12 opener. Kansas upset Texas, beating the Longhorns for the first time in seven tries. The 12th consecutive victory was also a school record.

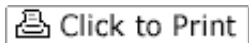
The only problem is you can't play them all at home. As soon as the Jayhawks left Allen Fieldhouse, they lost two straight.

Stronger than expected

Many expected Michigan State to struggle a bit in the paint with the graduation of **Kelly Roehrig**, who provided muscle on the block. But forward **Liz Shimek** seems to be doing just fine. She leads the Big Ten in scoring with 19.6 points a game and is also averaging 8.8 rebounds -- tied for first in the league. In December, the WBCA chose her as co-player of the month. She shared the honor with Oklahoma's Courtney Paris.

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