

Rain or shine, Solon's Modkins to hoop with Flashes

By **TONY LANGE**

Solon rising senior Mariah Modkins wasn't promised sunshine in the daily forecast before making her verbal commitment in early May to continue her basketball career with the Golden Flashes at Kent State University.

High school recruits, of course, love to hear about all the glitz, glam and glory that await their escape from childhood, but the sophisticated lass didn't want to be fed all the fairy tales when making her decision, she said.

Kent State head women's basketball coach Todd Starkey and his staff kept it real, and that's exactly what Modkins appreciated, she said. During his first year at the helm this past season, Starkey led the Golden Flashes to a 19-13 record with a 13-5 mark in the Mid-American Conference.

"It's just the way I interacted with the coaches and my (future) teammates," Modkins said of her visit to Kent. "You know, they can sweet talk you all day long, but, if you don't feel right being there or having conversations and stuff, then it's no good."

"They complimented my game and stuff, but they definitely highlighted that all the days at Kent aren't going to be sunshine and flowers. There's going to be bad days and stuff, and that's what I liked, because normally when you go they only talk about the sunshine, and they don't talk about the rainy days. So, that's what really stood out."

As for the weather itself, when the 5-foot-1 point guard first began her college search, she imagined walking a campus that was conducive to shorts and flip-flops during winter months rather than trudging through snow, she said. But the people she surrounds herself with took priority, she said.

And while it doesn't appear that Modkins is branching out too far from her nest in Solon, Kent is actually some 1,400 miles from Albuquerque, N.M., as the crow flies, which is the city she first called home.

"Yeah, originally, I wanted to go away, out of Ohio," she said. "But, with my dad's job, I've been able to live pretty much on the East Coast, the West Coast, Midwest, South – I've been living everywhere. So, it didn't really matter where I ended up, even though I originally wanted somewhere with a warmer climate."

Her dad, Curtis Modkins, 46, was a three-year starting running back at Texas Christian University who rushed 2,700-plus yards for the Horned Frogs during his college career. He has been a running backs coach and offensive coordinator in the NFL for the past decade.

After getting his coaching start at the college level in 1996, first at TCU and then at the University of New Mexico and Georgia Tech, Modkins began his NFL tenure with the Kansas City Chiefs in 2008, then with the Arizona Cardinals in 2009, the Buffalo Bills from 2010 to 2012, the Detroit Lions from 2013 to 2015, the San Francisco 49ers in 2016 and now with Chicago Bears for this upcoming season.

"So, I was born in Albuquerque, and I moved to Atlanta, Kansas City, Phoenix, Buffalo, Detroit and here," Modkins said about finally settling in Solon for her sophomore year of high school in 2015, when her dad was still with the Detroit Lions. She also visited him out in San Francisco this past year and now will start making regular trips to Chicago.

"I've lived in seven states, but it kind of feels like nine," she said. "When I was younger, it was really hard for me to deal with, because I didn't understand. I didn't understand why we had to move, and I didn't understand anything. But now that I got older, I've matured, and it made me understand that you've got to do what you've got to do."

"And now I appreciate it a lot more. I don't see how people live in one spot, because I've lived everywhere. I don't know what it'd be like to just live in one place."

Throughout her nomadic childhood, there was a definite constant in Modkins' life – basketball. Staying connected to the Amateur Athletic Union, Modkins said she's played for some of the best programs in each state where she's lived.



Photo by Philip Botta

Solon 5-foot-1 rising senior Mariah Modkins (right) tests the perimeter defense of Huber Heights Wayne freshman Nyla Hampton during the Classic in the Country on Jan. 15, 2017 at Berlin Hiland High School in Holmes County. Modkins made her verbal commitment in early May to continue her basketball career at Kent State University.



Photo courtesy of Modkins family

Solon rising senior Mariah Modkins (center) hits it off with the Kent State women's basketball staff, including head coach Todd Starkey (right), during her college recruiting visit.

And during her summers, Modkins has also done some training at IMG Academy in Bradenton, Fla., an institute that attracts more than 12,000 athletes from about 80 countries every year.

"That's really intense down there," Modkins said. "It definitely brings you to realize what the next level would be as an athlete and student-athlete. And I've also had shooting coaches and trainers in each state I've been in, but also my coaches have been really good that sometimes I don't need trainers."

When Modkins moved to Solon for the 2015-16 season, head coach Trish Kruse and the Lady Comets were coming off a 24-4 Division I state semifinal campaign with three returning starters – Dee Bekelja, Alexis Stover and Valencia Myers.

The speedy, relentless guard made her presence known as a ferocious on-ball defender whose gritty play earned her a starting role from the get-go.

"Well, when you're little, you can't play little," Modkins said. "You've got to play big. And you've got to be annoying. You have to be a pest. So, it's definitely something that's helped me get notices by colleges. But I love playing defense and being annoying."

Modkins averaged 25 minutes per game that season and drained 34 percent of her shots from downtown to help propel the Lady Comets to a repeat Final Four berth for the first time in program history.

Solon entered the playoffs at 14-8 that year, amidst a foot injury to 6-foot-2 post Myers in the regular season, but everything started to click in the postseason.

"That year was definitely different, because my dad wasn't around," Modkins said about her father coaching in Detroit. "But from a basketball standpoint, I loved it. I had never really been on a team that won like that. So, coming into a team that your expectations are high, coming off a state qualification, it wasn't pressure, but it was definitely something to

be excited about."

With all five starters returning this past season, including fellow 2018 classmate Gabby Mitchell, Modkins averaged 5.4 points, 2.8 rebounds, 3.7 assists and 2.1 steals per game to help lead Solon to a 24-3 campaign.

The Lady Comets were undefeated against Ohio teams entering the playoffs, before finishing Division I regional runners-up to Canton McKinley, 51-49.

"In the postseason, yeah, it was a hard pill to swallow," Modkins said of the loss. "But, you know, you've got to be grateful for making it that far, because anybody would just wish to play in a game like that. But I think this past season was definitely something to be proud of. It didn't end the way that we would have liked it to, but I'm grateful to be a part of a team like that, be able to experience something like that."

While Modkins has hung her hat at the defensive end of the floor during the last two seasons at Solon, her scoring production was mixed in an offense that was centered around Associated Press all-Ohioids Bekelja and Myers, who combined for 33 points per game last season. Bekelja is now at DePaul, and rising senior Myers is a top recruit in the country.

Despite her height, Modkins is a player who can use her speed and misdirection to get to the rim, pull up for running floaters and drill outside shots. While some pessimists have voiced their doubts about a 5-foot-1 guard making an impact in a Division I collegiate program, Modkins chooses to block out such malarkey.

"I get that all the time. But, you know, it's your choice if you want to hear it or not," she said. "When you're smaller, you have to do things almost perfect. You've got to do everything to a T. And that's what I've learned. And some coaches don't care what size you are, but some coaches do care. Kent just saw something in me, and I took the opportunity."

Although there are no palm trees or beaches in Kent, the scenery doesn't matter when surrounding oneself by good people, Modkins said.

"I just felt like I was wanted there, and I really felt like, when I went there to visit, I was fitting in, and it just felt right," she said. "I just wanted a team-oriented, family-oriented situation. That's really what it is. Also, the coaches, I could tell that they're truly in it for each and every one on the team."

"And I just thought, you know, 'Why waste time? Why not commit now?' It felt perfect and it still feels perfect. So, I think I made the right decision, and I'm happy with it."