

# DRIVING FORCE

Guard **Diana Taurasi's** gender-bending game and relentless style had UConn streaking toward a record

BY MICHAEL BAMBERGER

**D**IANA TAURASI keeps doing astounding things, and Connecticut keeps winning basketball games, and everywhere the junior guard goes she hears the same thing. *You play like a man.* Which leads to a question: Does she take that as a compliment?

On a recent evening Taurasi is driving her well-traveled 2000 Ford Explorer with fellow junior guard Morgan Valley along the winding and dark roads of Storrs, Conn., heading out on a rare night off. It is just five days after the pulsating, nationally televised game against Tennessee in which Taurasi sank a 60-foot shot at the end of the first half, buried a three-pointer to force a tie in regulation and scored the winning points in overtime, giving No. 2 UConn its 51st straight victory, three shy of the NCAA women's record set by Louisiana Tech in the early 1980s. For games and practices Taurasi's every hair is plastered back tight and held in a softball of a bun, locked into position with a quarter bottle of Rave. But now her hair is down, long and straight and shiny, like the hair in an ad for a shampoo.

"Whaddya think, Mo?" Taurasi asks Val-



ley. "Somebody says, 'You play like a man.' Compliment?"

Mo knows. She knows that Taurasi's childhood heroes were MJ and Magic, not Cynthia Cooper, not Lisa Leslie. She knows Taurasi claims to have read only one book first page to last—*Wooden: A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court*, by John Wooden. She knows that Taurasi came from the town of Chino, in sunny Southern California, to the icy Storrs campus not because she wanted to follow in the footsteps of the great *Lady Huskies* who helped bring two national championships to UConn before she got there but because in the cozy Nutmeg State, Huskies basketball is Showtime, for the men's and women's teams.

Valley, a shy Vermonter, raises her voice above the rap on the car radio and says, "When they say, 'D plays like a dude,' that's the ultimate."

"You got it, Mo," Taurasi says. "You might get some girlie-girl who says, 'You play like a man,' like they're saying, 'Why don't you play in skirts anymore?' Please. You tell me I play like a man, and I'll tell you, 'Hey, thanks.' The best players in the world are men, so why wouldn't you want to play like them?"

The quality Taurasi shares most with, say, Michael Jordan is that she hates to lose. For good or for bad she turns games into wars. You can't readily see it, because she masks her attitude with Magic Johnson's *joie de basketball*. Still, chances are good that you will lose to Diana Taurasi in H-O-R-S-E, or in arm wrestling, or in John Madden 2003 PlayStation football. Pretty much, you're not going to beat her at *anything*. Connecticut is 85-3 since Taurasi's arrival in the fall of 2000.

In the light of a parking lot you can see a few fine scars on her long face, legacies of a childhood spent outdoors. Her father, Mario, a machinist, was born in Italy and raised in Argentina. Her mother, Liliana, a Sizzler's waitress, was born and raised in Argentina. Diana was born in California. Her Spanish, the language of her parents' home, is fluent. Her English is relentless.

"I'm not saying some of these men are the *smartest* guys in the world," she says. "You got some guy, he's not even starting on his college team and he's like, 'I'm going

**TOUGH 'TUDE** When foes overplay her sweet jump shot, Taurasi goes inside, and always her eyes say, I hate to lose.



## Elevating the Game

CONNECTICUT'S hard-charging Diana Taurasi is setting the standard in women's college basketball with her all-out style and her shooting touch. Here are four other players who are raising the level of play in the sport, and the ways in which they're doing so.

### ALANA BEARD, F-G, Duke

**DEFENSIVE INTENSITY:** The 5' 11" junior has used her 76-inch wingspan to become the game's most smothering defender and deftest pickpocket.

### LAURIE KOEHN, G, Kansas State

**RANGE:** The 5' 8" sophomore, who's shooting a giddy 44.1% from beyond the arc, is so feared when firing treys that defenders pick her up at half-court.

### SHAWNTINICE POLK, C, Arizona

**FORCE:** The agile 6' 5", 235-pound freshman is the Shaq of the Pac-10. Polk scores (18.5 points per game), rebounds (11.7), passes (3.7 assists) and dominates.

### NICOLE POWELL, F, Stanford

**ALL-COURT SKILLS:** The 6' 2" junior is queen of the triple double, owning six of the 12 in PAC-10 history.

—Kelli Anderson



League.' 'Oh, yeah—the NBA is just *wait-in'* on you.' Ridiculous confidence. But then the girls are just the opposite. Some girl will say to me, 'Your shot is so perfect, what camps did you go to to learn it?'

Taurasi's in-traffic jumper is textbook: elbows in, shoulders square, hands high, John Wooden stuff. "Camps? No camps," she says. "Driveway basketball, playing against the boys, watching Magic and Michael."

One of the methods of her coach, Geno

her listed six feet. At 170 pounds she's 10 pounds lighter than in her senior year of high school. She has thick legs, thick arms and a perpetually sore right ankle about which she never complains.

She's not fast. Her touch, though, is spectacular. At week's end she was shooting a stellar 36.5% from three-point range and 51.5% from the field and had made 84.1% of her free throws. She's so strong, she makes fadeaway and off-balance jumpers

inexperienced, won their first 11 games, against mostly submissive teams.

Then came Jan. 4, at the Hartford Civic Center, and their first real test, against Tennessee. The teams were tied at 26 with two seconds left in the first half when Taurasi let loose a shot from beyond half-court. She holed the bomb. "Look at that," Taurasi says, watching a tape of the game in the tidy four-bedroom apartment she shares with three other players, locker room nameplates above their bedroom doors. "Elbows in. It was not a crazy fling. It was a shot."

She had the ball again with nine seconds left in regulation and the Huskies trailing by three. She was falling backward, getting herself into three-point territory, when she let the ball go. Drains. She began thumping her chest, euphoric. "I celebrate, like Magic," she says, providing her own commentary over Lisa Leslie's on CBS. "I want the ball, like Michael." In overtime, with UConn down 62-61, Taurasi drove the lane, stopped and swished the game-winner, a 10-foot leaner with 51.6 seconds left.

Four days later came another test, back at the Civic Center, against Rutgers. Taurasi played 38 minutes and scored 24 points. Though UConn won 67-62, the game felt like a loss. Afterward Auriemma was fuming. "We won because we have Diana and nobody else does," he said. "Our press offense would be really good if D could inbound the ball to herself."

On Sunday afternoon, keyed by Taurasi's 18 points, Connecticut extended its streak to 53 with a 69-57 victory over Virginia Tech, on campus, at Gampel Pavilion. With a game scheduled at Seton Hall on Jan. 15 and a matchup with Georgetown at the Civic Center on Saturday the Huskies were

## "You tell me I play like a man, and I'll tell you, 'Hey, thanks.' Why wouldn't you want to play like one?"

Auriemma, is to have his women play against men. Every year he assembles about a dozen male students—some former high school players, most fast and strong, several quite tall—and has them scrimmage against the women. The women are better. Taurasi, by far, is the best. "She dominates you," says practice player Chris Strother. "You get a hand on her shot, she has enough strength to get the ball up some other way. Underneath the boards she beats you."

Taurasi is at least an inch shorter than

in ways you seldom see women do. Her head is strong too. "Coach does most of his screaming at Diana, because he knows she can challenge the other players," Strother says. "She's chill with it. She knows what she has to do."

What Taurasi has to do is carry a team that has no seniors. Last season, the Huskies won all 39 of their games and took the NCAA title. Going into this season, Taurasi was the only returning starter. The 2002-03 Huskies, though lumbering and

now two victories away from setting the women's mark. Four games after that, on Feb. 1, looms a showdown with No. 1 Duke.

The prospect of breaking the record didn't seem to mean much to Taurasi. The winning streak she is interested in belongs to UCLA and dates back to the early 1970s, when the Bruins' men's team, coached by Wooden, won 88 straight. "Now that's playing," she says. "That's a streak." To Diana Taurasi, that's not the men's record. It's *the* record. It's the one she wants.