

## Creating her own shots

*Dawn Evans joins a new team to fight an incurable kidney disease* BY DAVID DRIVER



**D**awn Evans is a fighter. This may not be immediately apparent when the senior point guard runs onto the court during team introductions, but ask any player who's tried to guard her. Or ask her fans and friends about the incurable kidney disease that she battles every day. Yet JMU's all-time leading scorer has shattered many other JMU women's basketball records.

She made history this year as the Colonial Athletic Association's all-time leading scorer with 2,667 points, and she was named 2011 CAA Player of the Year.

The fact that she wasn't chosen during April's point-guard-heavy WNBA Draft was a shock to teammates, Dukes fans and JMU women's basketball coach Kenny Brooks ('92). "Some things make no sense at all," Brooks wrote via Twitter.

Yet, Evans takes it all in stride. "I don't plan on quitting," she says. Exactly what you'd expect to hear from a natural leader. When she's not creating plays on the court, Evans is leading the charge to find a cure for Focal Segmental Glomerulosclerosis, an incurable kidney disease that attacks the filtering system of the kidney. She was diagnosed in 2009, early in her junior season and just one day after scoring a school-record 38 points to lead the Dukes to an upset at 14th-ranked Virginia.

Evans was told that FSGS is untreatable and that her kidneys were in Stage 4, with about 20 percent of normal efficiency. When her kidney function reaches 15 percent, a transplant will be necessary. The diagnosis explained her frequent headaches and extreme fatigue but threatened her basketball career — even her ability to live a normal life.

"I remember Dawn coming to my office, and I didn't know what to say," recalls Brooks. "It's not like she had a sprained ankle. All I could do was hug her and cry."

Many players might have called it quits, or at least sat out the season. After spending a week in the hospital for tests, Evans hit the hardwood 10 days later with her teammates and scored a game-high 31 points versus Duke University.

Despite the fatigue, Evans missed only two games that season and started garnering national media attention. In March 2010, she was named the Most Outstanding Player of the CAA tournament and helped JMU take its first CAA title since 1989.

The NephCure Foundation, an organization funding research to find a cure for FSGS, picked up on Evans' media draw. They recruited her to help bring attention to the foundation and its work.

**Virginia Sports Information Directors Association's 2011 Virginia Player of the Year, Dawn Evans (inset and No. 23) shares the 2011 CAA title moment with teammates.**

## DUKESTURF

“Once I figured out what it was all about, I was all in,” says Evans, who is fighting the disease with the same determination she brings to the court. Evans exchanged e-mails with former NBA Miami Heat All-Star Alonzo Mourning, a NephCure ambassador who returned to his sport after a kidney transplant. She learned that FSGS affects people of African descent at five times the frequency of the general population. “I’ve been able to do something at JMU to create a name for myself,” she says. “And since my diagnosis, I am able to use that to do something good ... not just for myself or my team but for people I don’t even know.”

With NephCure’s help, Evans launched “Sign on for Dawn,” a fundraising website created to raise \$10,000 for FSGS research. When JMU sponsored “NephCure Night” at its Dec. 22 home game against U.Va., Evans appropriately scored a school-record 42 points (one of her 53 JMU records).

Yet some of Evans’ most meaningful moments on the court have come in the quieter moments after the games. That’s when the NephCure ambassador visits with FSGS patient families, which frequently include small children.

“Dawn is an amazing person, very bright, very smart, ... an incredible athlete,” says Michael Levine, who brought his 8-year-old son Matthew to meet Evans at the Dukes’ game at Hofstra University. “It’s important for Matthew to see a role model ... somebody battling the disease and who is excelling in her sport.”

“Dawn is very gracious,” notes Brooks. “She is not about getting personal publicity. It’s phenomenal the way she has handled this whole experience. Her approach is, ‘I am going to fight it and bring awareness to NephCure.’”

Evans calls the post-game encounters “an honor and inspiration. I tell kids that, even after we lose a game, we’ve got to keep going. Nothing can hold you back. If you can fight this disease, then you can fight anything in life.”

Among the first coaches to contribute to the NephCure cause was Wendy Larry of longtime Colonial Athletic Association rival Old Dominion University.

“On the court it is war, but this just goes to show how good people are,” Evans says. “When we played ODU in January, I gave Coach Larry a big hug before the game. She got the ball rolling.” Tina Martin, veteran coach at CAA foe Delaware, has also contrib-



**The V Foundation for Cancer Research, one of the nation’s leading cancer research fundraising organizations, named NephCure ambassador Dawn Evans the 2011 V Foundation Comeback Award winner. The annual award is given by The V Foundation for Cancer Research and ESPN.**

Evans and her family eventually decided to return to Tennessee, where she could focus on basketball and academics. While playing AAU ball in high school Evans attracted the attention of Brooks and his coaching staff. “They were one of the first teams to recruit me,” Evans recalls.

“I watched her play half a game,” says Brooks, who soon realized Evans would be a great fit at JMU. “We had a pool of four point guards we were recruiting; Dawn was the one we wanted.”

Evans fell in love with JMU and turned down opportunities to play closer to home at Tennessee-Chattanooga, Belmont in Nashville and Louisville. Her father regularly made the nine-hour drive from Clarksville to Harrisonburg to see her play at the Convo.

Evans helped lead the Dukes to their second CAA title in March and to the NCAA play-offs for the second straight year. “She is very good with the basketball in her hands,” says Delaware coach Tina Martin. “She can create her own shots.”

Though the WNBA may have dropped the ball in this year’s draft, many have lauded Evans’ future, including *Sports Illustrated*, *USA Today*, *ESPN*, the Associated Press and *NCAA.com*.

Wherever life takes Evans — the WNBA, playing pro ball overseas or Hollywood — one constant is a guarantee. She’ll devise her own game plan. In fact, she’s already doing it. Instead of losing herself to kidney disease, she found a way to fight back and help others do the same. ❧

\* Get on the ball and “Sign on for Dawn” by donating to NephCure Foundation at [www.signonfordawn.org](http://www.signonfordawn.org). More about Evans at [www.jmu.edu/bethechange/stories/evansDawn.shtml](http://www.jmu.edu/bethechange/stories/evansDawn.shtml).

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