

Celebrating a true Tiger champion

This has been an incredible semester of good news for our campus community. From outstanding accreditation visits to national championships in several different departments – and numerous other examples, too many to name – spring 2021 will be remembered as a semester of success and celebration at Fort Hays State University.

One such success story is that of Whitney Randall, a senior on the Tiger women's basketball team, who was named the 2021 MIAA Women's Winter Student-Athlete of the Year. Only one other FHSU student-athlete – All-American Kate Lehman (2011-15) – has won this prestigious award from the MIAA, one of the best NCAA Division II conferences in the country.

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This award is not given on athletic talent alone, although Whitney did earn first-team all-MIAA honors for her success on the court. It is also based on the academic and campus/community service accomplishments of individuals who are a junior or a senior in athletic eligibility and have a grade-point average of at least 3.25.

Whitney shines in all three areas. On the athletic front, she led her team in scoring while providing senior leadership and experience for a young team with eight underclassmen on the 12-player roster. Academically, Whitney – a health and human performance major who wants to teach and coach – has maintained a perfect 4.0 throughout her entire college career. She plays a role in the Christian Challenge ministry through the Celebration Community Church. She has participated in three international mission trips as an FHSU student. And during the summer months, she serves as a sponsor and counselor for youth from her hometown during a week-long Christian church camp.

Whitney is an incredible person, an accomplished student-athlete, and an individual who gives generously to her teammates and her community. I will admit that I am a bit "star-struck" by several of our community members like Whitney. It's always interesting to hear where they got their start. It turns out that Whitney learned about Fort Hays State from her dad – J.P. Randall, a standout defensive player on the Tiger football team in the early 1980s – who talked fondly of his college days at FHSU.

Whitney grew up in Alva, Okla., and began playing recreation league basketball when she was 5 years old. I am pretty sure I had not even seen a basketball when I was 5!

Her success with basketball came early, and she helped lead her high school team to three state championships. That drive to succeed was one of the reasons Whitney chose FHSU – the success of Lady Tiger basketball – coupled with the community support that our university and athletic teams enjoy.

Whitney loves the competitiveness of the game and its fast pace. I also learned about her deep affection for her teammates – or as Whitney would say, her best friends.

“We’re more than just teammates,” she said. “We are a family, and we do everything together. The coaches are very supportive, whether it’s on or off the court. They help us when we need it and always have our backs.”

Whitney’s favorite college basketball memory came in 2019 when Fort Hays State hosted the Central Region tournament, and more than 5,000 raucous, loyal fans came to cheer them on.

“When we walked onto the court with 5 minutes until tip-off, I stood in amazement,” she said. “For an athlete, that’s one thing I would want everyone to experience. It’s a dream to have thousands of people cheer you on in a big moment.”

I still get goosebumps as I recall the loud, packed, high-energy crowd that day. It is a powerful memory. I had to chuckle when Whitney shared, “When I can’t hear Coach Hobson when I’m on the court or even when we’re in a huddle, that’s when I know the fans have really shown up!”

Another highlight for Whitney was the excitement of winning conference titles in 2019 and 2021 and making the NCAA tournament every year she has been at the Fort. As she describes the wins, she always circles back to talking about one of the reasons she chose FHSU – community support.

Whitney really appreciates our Tiger fans. So do I. We have a very loyal fan base that sticks with us in the moments of glory as well the tough losses.

Part of anyone’s history are moments of struggle as well as success. It’s no different for Whitney.

“I would say there are tough spots for every collegiate athlete. My freshman year was when I struggled the most. I learned that everyone has to learn how to balance school, sports, and life,” she said. “I have also learned that there is a time when it is your turn to shine and when it is your turn to cheer on someone else from the bench. That is something that makes you a better teammate as well as a better leader – on and off the court.”

In reminiscing about her time as an athlete, Whitney believes “it takes a lot to be a champion. It’s not just about the sport. It’s about going to classes, showing up on time, sacrificing, and being unselfish. Teams succeed when they have a common goal, and it doesn’t matter who the star is.”

I am so honored to be part of this university and this community, where people connect deeply and sincerely. We have so many “all-stars” in our student body, faculty, staff, and community. That is why we work hard, learn, grow, and celebrate one another.

I cannot wait to see Whitney receive her award this summer and share in this significant accomplishment. I am very proud of Whitney, her coaches, faculty, teammates, family, and friends – all who have shaped her heart and mind, and in the process, loved her into an extraordinary woman of character and a true champion.

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