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She's got the range: Liebschwager nation's 3-point champ

It didn't quite reach the level of Rodney Dangerfield's familiar lament, but Furman's Melissa Liebschwager definitely wasn't feeling the respect when she showed up in Detroit April 2 to compete in ESPN's 21st Annual College Basketball 3-Point Shooting Championship.

She was the nation's top 3-point shooter during the 2008-09 season, hitting 47 percent of her shots from beyond the arc, but the other contestants from the country's major conferences didn't quite know what to make of her.

Where is Furman, they asked? Do you play in Division I?

The ESPN crew didn't help things. Before the competition, they pulled aside the women from the major conferences — ACC, Big Ten, Big East and Big 12 — and gave them the run-down about what to expect in the competition. They talked to Liebschwager and a competitor from the Mid-American Conference last, and in a fraction of the time. Among the questions to Liebschwager: What conference is Furman in and how do you spell your last name?

At that point Liebschwager decided, as she explained to a gathering of the Furman board of trustees a few weeks later, "I would kick these girls' butts." And kick them, she did.

In front of 20,000 people who had gathered in the Palace, Liebschwager routed her seven opponents in the first and second rounds before burying Arizona State's Briann January in the final. She even pushed the University of Miami's Jack McClinton, the men's winner and the Atlantic Coast Conference's all-time leader in 3-point shooting, to the brink before losing the overall title when her final shot barely missed.

"Everybody was nice enough," Liebschwager says, "but I could tell they believed I couldn't possibly win. I wanted to prove them wrong."



It helped that she didn't have much time to be nervous. She learned only a week before the event that she had been invited to join the competition. Her season ended in early March and she hadn't touched a basketball in the ensuing weeks, so she headed back into the Furman gym for a few days to work on her shooting touch.

Sam Dixon, the Lady Paladins' coach, made the trip to Detroit with Liebschwager, as did her mother, sister, aunt and fiancé, Eliot Paschalis '08, a former Paladin soccer player. Her father, who taught her everything she knows about shooting, couldn't make it because of a work conflict but was watching on television.

"The whole day before and the day of the competition, I was really nervous," she says.

"But as soon as I got out on the floor, I felt a lot more comfortable. I was in my element."

Her performance demonstrated as much. The contestants were required to shoot a number of basketballs from different spots on the floor in rapid fire succession, with 20,000 people watching and a TV camera a few feet away. So a good case of nerves would likely show up in a hurry. But Liebschwager was nearly perfect in the first round, not only obliterating her competition but appearing to have the time of her life while doing it.

"I didn't feel much pressure," she says. "Nobody expected me to win, so I just went out there to enjoy myself. But it wasn't like I didn't expect to perform well. I had been making 3-point shots for a long time, and I was confident I could keep doing it."

Liebschwager, a native of Memphis who graduated in May with a double major in biology and health and exercise science, finished her senior season at Furman on a strong note. Her 47 percent average from 3-point range set a Furman season record, and she ranked among the Southern Conference leaders in scoring (12.7), minutes played (36.7), free throw percentage (89), assists (3.2), assist/turnover ratio (1.4) and blocked shots (1).

She was also named to the league's Academic Honor Roll three times. She planned to enroll in pharmacy school at the University of Tennessee at Memphis this fall.

As for being the 2008-09 women's 3-point champion, Liebschwager received a trophy and "bragging rights" for a year. And where can friends and family find the trophy?

"It's in the attic of my new apartment in Memphis," she says. "I didn't know where else to put it."

— VINCE MOORE