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John Gage a big force for Vashon / Prep Boys Basketball

At 6 feet 9 and with basketball skills that landed him a scholarship to Stanford, John Gage stands out for the Vashon Pirates, defending 1A basketball champs.

By **Mason Kelley**
Seattle Times staff reporter

VASHON — When John Gage was born, the odds of him growing up to be a 6-foot-9 basketball standout were slim.

After all, his parents both come up shy of the 6-foot mark.

So, when asked to describe what it's like to become one of the state's best high-school big men, Gage said he got lucky.

"I won the genetic lottery," he said.

While the 17-year-old Stanford-bound senior was blessed with size and a smooth jump shot, Vashon coach Andy Sears takes it a step further.

"He's 6-9, but he also brings a great work ethic," Sears said. "He's a great kid. He's a great student. He plays hard. He practices hard. John won the lottery, but he also has a lot of things that a lot of 6-9 guys don't have."

Gage is the centerpiece of a program working to defend its 1A state title — the tournament runs March 3-6 at the SunDome in Yakima. He is the Pirates' senior leader. An unassuming teenager, who unleashes his aggression on the floor with a double-double (20 points, 14 rebounds) average.

"We make fun of him a lot outside of school for being soft, but really, when he gets on the court, he knows what to do," Pirates junior Alex Wegner said. "He's got soft touch, everything you need to be a good basketball player."

Bellevue point guard Aaron Bright plays with Gage on the AAU team Friends of Hoop. The duo will reunite again next season with Stanford and Bright joked that Gage is a "book worm" off the floor. He quickly countered that Vashon's star is a player with immense potential.

"I really think John can be a great college player," Bright said. "I know he's trying really hard to get stronger, because the next level is really physical. He has a great IQ for the game. He's really versatile for being a big man. A lot of guys his size are just a low-post presence, but he can play the high-post, he can shoot the three, he can go down inside. Once he gets that extra bulk, I think he'll really be something special."

However, before Gage gets back in the weight room, there is still a season to finish. The Pirates are 19-3, with losses to Squalicum, ranked No. 1 in 2A, and Cascade Christian (twice).

This weekend, the Pirates face a determine-your-own-fate scenario in the Tri-District 1A Tournament where they need one victory to play their way to Yakima.



John Gage averages 20 points and 14 rebounds.

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"You just get that fire. Now it's like, 'Not again,'" Gage said.

Whatever happens, Gage said he's content with everything he's accomplished in four years as the big man on the island.

"You're overcome a little bit," said his coach, Sears, "that I'm 30 years old and this might be the best player I'll ever coach. That can be a little bit daunting sometimes, but you're thankful you got to coach a guy of that caliber."

Mason Kelley: 206-464-8277 or mkelley@seattletimes.com

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