

# Mercedes Russell

## POWERING FORWARD

Springfield High School is saying goodbye to the number one women's basketball recruit in the nation, as determined by both ESPN and Gatorade, as she finishes her final year and prepares for college life and a competitive NCAA program.

At 6' 5", Mercedes Russell is a presence both on and off the court. Next season, the Springfield Millers' power forward is transplanting her roots across the country to play for the University of Tennessee Lady Volunteers, one of the top collegiate women's basketball programs in the country. "I'm excited. I've lived here all my life so it'll be different for me and I'll get away from the West Coast," Russell says. "I'm ready for a change."

The Tennessee program is a prominent one to say the least, having been a contender in every single NCAA Women's Division I Championship tournament since the early '80s. Russell will join an entire cast of skilled players.

"What separates her from a lot of other players is her work ethic and how much she dedicates herself to the game," says Springfield Head Coach Bill Wagner. "I just see her taking off and I think she'll be a game changer in the women's game."

This past season, the Millers rounded out the season with a 24-4 overall record, finishing sixth in the state. During a 5A semifinal game against Hermiston, Russell recorded a triple-double, with 32 points, 14 rebounds and 12 blocks.

Wagner says Russell has made an impression beyond the court. "Mercedes is a person of such a high standard of character," he adds. "Here at school she's so well liked just because of how she interacts with people."

Russell says that she loves the competition of playing, especially in front of a crowd. "Ever since I was little I've looked up to Candace Parker and her game and how hard she works," she says. Parker plays for the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks.

The excitement of leaving for college and the NCAA intensifies as the date draws near, but Russell says she'll miss her hometown. "It's bittersweet," she says. "I'm excited to be done and get ready to leave for college, but I'm also sad that I'm leaving all of my friends." — *Kevin Piaskowski*



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