

# Unselfish guard drives Redbirds

By **SAM KING**

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Illinois State junior point guard Kristi Cirone walked unnoticed through Mackey Arena Saturday.

While Tennessee's Candace Parker and Oklahoma's Courtney Paris are the superstars at the opening round of the NCAA tournament at Mackey Arena, Cirone may be the best player no one's heard of in women's basketball.

Most women's basketball fans will get their first glimpse when the Redbirds face Paris' Sooners at noon today, the Redbirds' first NCAA appearance since 2005.

"She is the engine that makes our team go," ISU coach Robin Pingeton said.

Now on a national stage, Cirone has a chance to show why she is a two-time Missouri Valley Conference Player of the Year and a finalist for the Nancy Lieberman Award as the nation's top point guard. In her first season at the Normal, Ill., campus in 2005-06, she won the league's top freshman honor.

Oklahoma coach Sherri Coale knows exactly why.

"She plays at the right pace," Coale said. "I think a lot of kids try to play at a pace that is not really conducive to their skill level. And she can shoot, there's no doubt about that."

She can score and pass, too. Entering today's game, Cirone is averaging 16.6 points and 5.3 assists. But there is more to her game than her stats. She also tops Division I in assists-to-turnover ratio (3.0).

"What she does for our team, as good as her stat lines are, doesn't show up statistically," Pingeton said. "She has a great relationship with her teammates, she's been a tremendous leader."

Cirone has numerous individual awards and accomplishments, many showing her all-around game. Aside from her offense, she has been named to the MVC All-Defense team in consecutive seasons.

Cirone quickly brushes off

any credit for the awards.

"I am not going to say that the individual honors aren't great, but I consider them team honors because I couldn't have done it without my teammates or without any of my coaches," she said. "I have great teammates around me that make my job as point guard so much easier. Getting them passes, I know they are going to knock down those shots."

That unselfishness has earned the respect of her teammates and is the main reason Illinois State is in West Lafayette this week. Cirone even admits getting more pleasure out of setting up a teammate for a basket rather than score one herself.

That's what makes her so great, according to senior Tiffany Hudson, one of only three Redbirds to play in the NCAA tournament before today's game.

"She makes everybody else around her better," Hudson said. "That's real important when you are a point guard. That makes you a great leader."

Since arriving on campus, Cirone has done exactly what Pingeton expected. Pingeton recruited the 5-foot-8 Chicago native to build ISU into a Top 25 team. Cirone was willing to do that, shunning Marquette to play college basketball in her home state. On Jan. 28 this year, the Redbirds peaked at No. 24 in the Associated Press poll.

Pingeton knows that Illinois State's 26-6 record reflects what Cirone has brought to the program in three years.

"There's been games in her three-year career here that we've won just because she's willed us to win," Pingeton said. "(She does) whatever it takes, whether it is a defensive stop or a tough shot at the end of the shot clock. She is truly a special player."

If Illinois State, the region's 13 seed, upsets No. 4 Oklahoma, Cirone will no longer roam Mackey Arena unnoticed. She'll be gearing up for a repeat on Tuesday.