Basketball might be Deanna Smith’s favourite sport, but she doesn’t enjoy watching it much. Given a choice between a basketball game or an AFL match featuring her beloved Melbourne Demons, the Sydney Uni Flames guard would probably choose the latter. “I don’t actually watch a lot of basketball,” she laughs. “Some people are really into it and follow every detail, but I just love to play.”

And play she does. She’s just completing her first season with the Flames, but you wouldn’t know it. Having made the move from Perth at the end of last season, the 29-year-old is playing some of the best basketball of her career with her new team; averaging more than 16 points and close to six rebounds per game this season. She’s also twice been named WNBL player of the week.

Despite that, Smith says it has taken her a while to establish herself in a new city, new team and new surroundings.

“It was a big change and I think it took me quite a few games to settle in,” she says. “That’s probably reflected in the stats and what people saw at the start of the season. It’s just taken that time to adjust.”

At Perth, Smith was part of a team that was still developing. Sydney has been different. “It was really challenging for me because my role changed a lot... Obviously I’ve come from Perth where it was a different program and I was captain,” she says. “Now I’m in a Sydney program that’s a bit more professional.”

Basketball might have been Smith’s favourite participation sport since she was a child growing up in Bendigo, but it hasn’t been the only one she’s played. When she was younger, she was happy to try almost anything.

“I played netball, did little athletics, I played tee-ball, softball, tennis; I tried everything,” she says. “I was actually state champion for shot put, and I was so tall and skinny and lanky back then, so it was pretty funny.”

Her family’s sporty too. Deanna’s father played Australian Rules football, and was an assistant coach of Bendigo’s Under-18s team, the Pioneers. Her younger sister Jacklyn followed in her basketball footsteps, and is now a guard with the Bendigo Spirit.

“It’s absolutely amazing,” Smith says. “It’s a great achievement to make it to that level, the top level in Australia, so I’m definitely very proud of her.”

And her mother? She used to take Smith from Bendigo to Melbourne – a three hour round trip on a good day – to train and play. And as if doing that five times a week wasn’t enough, it seems her mother was quite the basketball tactician as well.

“Mum would watch games and then say ‘let’s go and try this move’. She was really good like that,” Smith says. “So a few of the moves that I still use are moves that mum taught me.”

It must have worked. Smith made the Melbourne Tigers WNBL team in 1995, when she was only 15 years old. Her career since has seen her play with the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS), Canberra, Adelaide, Perth and now the Flames. In the 1999/2000 season she was a member of the only AIS team to have ever won the WNBL championship, and the following season she repeated that effort when she was part of the Canberra Capitals team that beat Adelaide in the grand final.

Smith has also played basketball overseas in England, Italy, Portugal and, of all places, Siberia. During her time...
there, the temperature sank as low as -40C, and life was made even harder by the fact that hardly anyone spoke English, including most of her team-mates.

“When I first got there it was totally different to anything I’d experienced. The season before I’d actually played in Madeira which is a Portuguese tropical island off the north-west coast of Africa … it was completely different.”

This season Smith has set about improving a Flames team that missed the finals last year, along with other new recruits including Suzy Batkovic-Brown, Mikaela Dombkins, Natalie Porter and Deanne Butler, the last of whom Smith has known since they played together for the Victoria Country team almost 15 years ago.

The new arrivals, coupled with the young talent the Flames have been nurturing over the past few years, saw Sydney rise as high as second on the table this season.

“Nat Porter just played her 250th game, I’ve played 200, Michaela’s played 150, Deanne’s played 200 and Suzy’s 150 or something, so you’re adding a lot of experience amongst those young players,” Smith says. “And I think it does help. We get into close games and I just know that we have the discipline, we’ve got the game plan, we’ve got that belief in each other; we know when it gets tight we’re going to pull together and come through.”

Smith also credits the Flames’ rise this season to the coaching staff, including full-time coach Karen Dalton and assistants Peter Lonergan and Michael Turton.

“The Flames, and indeed the rest of the league’s championship chances have been made harder by the successful return of Lauren Jackson from overseas. The undisputed world queen of the women’s game, Jackson rejoined her beloved Canberra Capitals team midway through the season.

Prior to her first game back, Canberra had a respectable record of eight wins and five losses. Her return has seen the team embark on an eight-game winning streak that was unbroken when this issue of SAM went to press.

That streak has included a thrilling 81-78 overtime win against the Flames when the teams met in round 15, and after the scores were level at the end of regulation time. With seconds remaining in overtime, Jackson sunk a three-point shot that ultimately proved the difference between the two sides.

“It adds an extra challenge. She’s an amazing player and everybody knows that,” Smith says. “No doubt she helps her team immensely and everyone knows that but for us, we focus a lot on what we’re doing and making sure that everything we do at practice is based on us improving each week.”

It’s clear that Jackson’s impact on a team is enormous, but according to Smith that shouldn’t be seen as a bad thing.

“Not at all. It’s really, really good for the WNBL to have a player of Lauren’s calibre back in the league. It’s drawing in crowds, it’s giving it recognition and it’s great to see a female basketballer with that profile in Australia because we don’t get many,” she says.

“They [Canberra] aren’t a one-player team by any means. They’ve got a lot of quality players around her that you’ve got to respect as well.”

So would Canberra have won so many games in a row without her? “I think they have the team to do so,” Smith says. “She just enhances them.”

Smith played alongside Jackson at the AIS in 1999/2000 and then with the Canberra Capitals the season after. She describes Jackson as an ideal champion. “She’s tall, she’s athletic and she can play pretty much any position,” she says. “She’s very humble and she’s really nice.”

But Smith’s life doesn’t just revolve around basketball and finding ways to defeat the Jackson-led Capitals or tearaway competition leaders, Bulleen. She recently completed her training to become a primary school teacher, which she describes as her second passion.

One of the first things she did after arriving in Sydney was complete her professional internship at St Aloysius College Junior School. She wants to continue with basketball and teaching, even though she concedes it can be difficult juggling both.

“It is, because I’m someone who puts my all into something. When it’s something that you love, you don’t want to just do it half heartedly.”

While life after basketball is taken care of by a teaching career she loves, Smith still has goals left to achieve in basketball. She’s has been a member of the Australian Opals squad since 2005, and her focus is firmly on playing more games for her country.

“When you’ve been playing for a while you start to think, ‘well what can I achieve next?’” she says. “Obviously playing for the Australian team at the world championships is a big goal of mine… I’m hoping training and playing well will help me develop to become a member of the team rather than a member of the squad.”

So Smith isn’t ready to retire just yet.

“I think a lot depends on how your body feels and where you’re at in your life. At the moment I’m probably in the best shape I’ve been in my whole life, playing the best basketball I have, and I’m just really enjoying things,” she says.

“I don’t want to let that go.”