

Pickard picks hoops over prom

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Riverview basketball standout plays in Canadian all-star game today in Toronto

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You can't doubt Vanessa Pickard's passion and dedication for basketball.

 ENLARGE PHOTO



Photo contributed

Vanessa Pickard of Riverview, seen here playing for the Canadian cadette national basketball team, will suit up in the All-Canada Classic high school basketball game today in Toronto.

The Riverview High Royals standout will hit the court at Toronto's Air Canada Centre today, the home of the NBA's Toronto Raptors,

She's one of 20 players - and the lone from Atlantic Canada - to be selected to play in today's All-Canada Classic, a basketball showdown featuring the top senior girls high school players from across the country.

The only problem? She's missing her high school prom to do it.

The Riverview High prom goes tonight, just a few hours after the afternoon all-star basketball game in downtown Toronto.

Pickard found a compromising solution.

She'll play in the game, head quickly to the airport for an evening flight home. She should be back in Riverview by around midnight, just in time to meet her friends at Riverview High School's safe grad event.

"It was an extremely hard decision, but when I look back at my life in 10 years I can say I played in the All-Canada Classic and that put things into perspective for me," said Pickard, a past member of the Canadian cadette national basketball team.

"I took a couple of days to think about it and it was a tough call, but basketball has been such a huge part of my life and I just couldn't pass up an opportunity like this."

Pickard, 18, who graduates next week and will join the St. Francis Xavier X-Women in the Atlantic University Sport women's basketball conference next season, has enjoyed a tremendous high school career at Riverview High.

She led the Royals to New Brunswick senior girls AAA high school championships in each of the past three seasons. She lost just three games during the past three seasons. Off the court, she is an honour roll student.

The 5-foot-11 guard also played for the Canadian cadette team at an Americas under-16 qualifying tournament in Mexico in 2009 and at the world under-17 women's championship in France last summer.

A selection to the All-Canada Classic is the latest feather in her cap.

The 42 girls and boys players - a boys all-star game is also part of the event - that make up the rosters for the All-Canada Classic are all Canadian high school-aged athletes that have been identified by a committee to participate in the national all-star event.

"It's a pretty big honour to be chosen for something like this. It's pretty exciting," Pickard said.

"It's a chance to see some old teammates from the national team and I'm looking forward to playing against all the girls in this game. It's a huge honour and a great opportunity."

The girls game also features several former Canadian cadette team players, such as Nirra Field, a guard from Quebec who plays at powerhouse Oak Hill Academy in Virginia, Victoria post Shalie Dheensaw, who is headed to Washington State University next season, Karly Roser, a Hamilton, Ont., guard who has committed to playing at Northwestern University next season, and Burnaby, B.C., post Lexie Der, who is soon bringing her talents to Boise State University.

"I think it's going to be a great game," said Pickard. "You're going to have some of the top 20 girls in the country and it should be a really high calibre and it should be a lot of fun."

Riverview High head coach Greg Gould enjoyed a front-row seat for Pickard's four-year run with the Royals.

"Vanessa is everything you want in a basketball player. She has all kinds of offensive skill, she's a great ball handler and she played every position for us," said Gould, who has retired from a 41-year basketball coaching career.

"She's a hard-working girl and she's very focused on trying to improve and be the best player she can be. Those kind of players don't come around all that often. You might see one or two in your career as a coach if you stay around long enough. She's pretty special."

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