

Go Gamecocks

Swat team: Elem Ibiam closing in on school block record

By DAVID CLONINGER

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Elem Ibiam

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- **BLOCKED SHOT RECORDS**

USC senior center Elem Ibiam is second in career blocked shots. Her best game was seven blocks against Mississippi State in 2014, and she has seven games with five or more blocks. USC's top five in blocks:

Player	Blocks (Years)
1. Lakesha Tolliver	177 (2004-07)
2. Elem Ibiam	151 (2012-15)
3. Michelle Murray	148 (1989-93)
4. Petra Ujhelyi	143 (2000-03)
5. Demetress Adams	140 (2005-09)

- **ALABAMA (12-10, 1-6 SEC) at NO. 1 SOUTH CAROLINA (19-0, 7-0)**

When: 7 p.m. Thursday

Where: Colonial Life Arena, Columbia

TV: SEC Network Plus

Tickets: Available at the box office

Alabama's probable starters: G Hannah Cook 6-0 Fr. (9.2 ppg, 3.0 rpg); G Karyla Middlebrook 5-7 Fr. (6.7 ppg, 2.9 rpg); F Nikki Hegstetter 6-2 Jr. (5.7 ppg, 5.8 rpg); F Ashley Williams 6-0 So. (13.6 ppg, 6.2 rpg); F Briana Hutchen 6-1 Sr. (6.7 ppg, 5.8 rpg)

South Carolina's probable starters: G Khadijah Sessions 5-8 Jr. (3.8 ppg, 2.7 rpg); G Tiffany Mitchell 5-9 Jr. (15.3 ppg, 2.7 rpg); G Asia Dozier 6-0 Jr. (4.5 ppg, 0.8 rpg); F Aleighsa Welch 6-0 Sr. (9.6 ppg, 5.7 rpg); C Elem Ibiam 6-4 Sr. (7.1 ppg, 4.4 rpg)

Next game: USC tips off at Ole Miss at 4:30 p.m. on Sunday.

She remembers one of the early ones, maybe the first. It was a while ago.

"In middle school, there was one that was really dramatic," South Carolina senior Elem Ibiam said. "Everybody went, 'Ohhhhhhh!' "

Ibiam, already a head taller than the teens in Fayetteville, Ga., planted herself in the paint. The shot went up, Ibiam leaped and swatted the basketball nearly to midcourt.

She didn't have much time to process it. The game was still on.

Her coaches wrote it in their notebooks with underlines and asterisks – "Shot-blocker. Could be special."

"After that, we started working on it," Ibiam said. "I think it just came to me naturally because I was so much taller than everybody in high school."

Midway through her senior year at USC, Ibiam is 26 away from tying the school record for career blocks. Lakesha Tolliver had 177 from 2004-08, and with Ibiam already breaking Tolliver's record for single-season blocks (83, surpassing 60), the Gamecocks' 6-foot-4 center has her eye on another spot in the record book.

Her name is already listed in several places. Ibiam's 151 career blocks are second, her single-season blocks, block average, blocks in SEC play and block average in SEC play first. She and Tolliver are tied for second in single-game blocks with seven. Ibiam also holds the single-game block record in an SEC game (seven against Mississippi State last year) and is tied for second (six, against Kentucky last year).

Ibiam said she was unaware of how close she was to the career record, but knowing it makes her greedy. She's not content to leave as a key piece of the Gamecocks' rise from good program to elite team; she wants her name as an undisputed superior.

"It's something that I think Elle should shoot for," coach Dawn Staley said. "It's only going to help us for her to get those blocked shots. She's someone that buys into playing that second or third line of defense for us, and she's been very, very good at it."

It started like most do – coaches put the tall girl in the middle and let her learn. Ibiam quickly took to it – like fellow USC shot-blockers A'ja Wilson and Alaina Coates, a background in volleyball helped – and when that middle-school shot was rejected through the jump circle, she began refining it.

Ibiam positioned herself on the block with a plastic figurine in front of her. A shooter stood behind the figure, launching jumpers while Ibiam worked on leaping and extending, not lunging.

"If I touched the figurine, it was a foul," she explained. "We did that drill for hours."

Already 6-0 to 6-1 in high school while her competition was 5-8 to 5-9, Ibiam blossomed into a prospect. Staley played her in 25 games as a freshman; other stats didn't leap off the page but Ibiam blocked 17 shots while playing less than eight minutes per night.

The blocks swelled to 30 and 83 when Ibiam became a starter as a junior, and Staley added height around her. This year, the Gamecocks rank 10th in the country with 6.3 blocks per game, with Wilson leading the team with 31 while Coates has 28 and Aleighsa Welch has 24.

Ibiam doesn't mind being fourth on her own team after setting the record last year. "It's actually more fun with them," she said. "This year, we've been blocking shots together. I've never had it where we're both blocking shots together."

Staley's defense is designed to drive opponents into the height. Playing Alabama, a team USC routed 102-59 three weeks ago, seems a grand opportunity for Ibiam to add a few blocks to her total. She had zero last time.

She doesn't go back through her game tape, challenge Wilson, Coates and Welch for theirs to be added to her total or rank the 151 she already has – although the swat she had against two-time SEC Player of the Year A'dia Mathies was special. Knowing she's that close to the No. 1 career spot is fueling the blaze she has to keep the Gamecocks on top of the league.

"Since we are getting close to the postseason, I have to be a little bit more careful and not get into foul trouble," Ibiam said. "I definitely want to go get it."

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