

# Kepua Lee '07, NAIA Division II All-American

by Chris Giovannetti

**MENLO COLLEGE GUARD KEPUA LEE** made her debut for the Oaks during the 2004-05 season to a team-leading 12.7 points per game average and California Pacific Conference Freshman of the Year honors, so it's a stretch to say that her follow-up, record-smashing sophomore campaign was a breakout year.

Or is it?

During the Oaks' run to the 2005-06 Cal Pac regular season and tournament titles and the program's first appearance at the NAIA Division II National Championships in six years, Lee set single-season Menlo records for points (491), scoring average (17.5) and tied the mark for rebounds (196). In addition, Lee paced Menlo in rebounds (7.0) and minutes per game (28.1), field goals (203), free throws (71), and steals (42) to win Cal Pac Player of the Year honors.

The versatile Lee did it all after changing her offensive approach in the offseason.

"My role just changed this year, and I took it upon myself to be the go-to player. When the clock is running down, I want the ball," said Lee, a native of Honolulu. "I went home, worked hard in the offseason and didn't let myself slack. Gradually, I got to where I am now."

Lee was primarily a slasher during her rookie year, using quickness and agility to blow past would-be defenders to the hoop. With guard **Maria Gomez**, then the program's all-time leading scorer, departing however, Lee's game underwent a makeover. She returned from the islands with aplomb and a midrange game, and was able to pull up and hit a jumper just as easily as going to the lane.

Still, head coach **Caitlin Collier** considers Lee's biggest transformation to be her decision making.

"Her most important improvement has been in her ability to read defenses. She now knows when to attack, how to get the ball to open teammates and when to go inside," said Collier, the reigning Cal Pac Coach of the Year. "Kepua came back



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hungrier and set herself up for this type of season. Her goal from the onset was to be the Cal Pac Player of the Year. That sort of ambition was huge in helping us win."

Win Menlo did as Lee's changes paid dividends for the Oaks immediately. She led Menlo in scoring five times as the Oaks leaped out to a 6-2 start before falling to San Rafael's Dominican University, 47-42, Dec. 18. It would be the last loss Menlo would endure for nearly three months.

Teaming with seniors **Nicole Johnson** (9.2 points per game), **Shannon Riley** (7.9 ppg) and **Ashlynn Dolcini** (7.0 rebounds per game), Lee and the Oaks won their next 19 games, including a 65-53 decision in the Cal Pac Tournament title tilt that gave Menlo an automatic bid into the 32-team, single-elimination national championships in Sioux City, Iowa. Two weeks later, Menlo downed

Davenport University (Mich.) in the opening round to claim the program's first victory at the national championship level.

"Maybe we were overachievers, but we were also greedy. After losing in the Cal Pac Tournament championship a year ago, we wanted the conference title and to go to the national championships," said Lee, who twice this season scored a career-high 29 points. "We were so deep and talented it got to the point where we didn't think any team could beat us."

Unfortunately, the Oaks' winning streak and season ended to Indiana's St. Francis University in the national tournament round of 16—the farthest any Menlo squad had gone in postseason play. The Oaks finished 25-4 and set program records for wins, winning percentage (.862), fewest losses, went undefeated at Haynes-Prim Pavilion (12-0) and were ranked 11th nationally heading into the NAIA tournament.

Menlo finished the year first among Division II clubs in scoring defense (47.7 points per game), rebound margin (15.7) and field goal defense (.332).

All the while, Lee enjoyed one of the

greatest seasons by any Menlo athlete in any sport. She tallied eight double-doubles, 11 games of 20-plus points, 20 games of 15-plus points, 24 double-figure scoring outings and 19 contests where she has led Menlo in scoring. For her efforts, the NAIA selected Lee to the Division II All-America third team, just the second Menlo player to earn that distinction.

With Menlo graduating five seniors and no juniors returning, Lee will again be counted on to shoulder the Oaks' offensive load. That suits the captain-in-waiting just fine.

"There's always room for improvement: records to break, playing time, new levels for us to reach and just getting better in every aspect," Lee said. "Next year, we'll be a young team, and it'll take a lot of work. We'll be the team to beat. It'll be a rebuilding year and a time for new players to step up."

And a returning one as well. **M**