

were capable of.” The freshman on that team went on to make school history. Bonnie Bryce would finish her career with more than 1,200 points, 1,200 rebounds, 500 steals and 300 assists; she was the Arizona Republic 1A-3A Player of the Year in 2000, the only Gila Valley female player to ever win the award.

During the next three years, the Lady ‘Riders raced to the top of 1A, lassoing back-to-back state titles in 2002 and 2003.

### Elemental

His program squarely on solid ground, Hemphill watched as the human element took hold. Friendships bonded into memorable team chemistries, and word got out that the only direction Lady ‘Rider basketball was headed was up.

“Rider tradition is passed down sister to sister,” Hemphill said. “After getting the kind of girls we wanted, the girls just took over; they pass down a winning tradition from class to class. Younger players look up to older players and emulate them, as we usually have a couple of seniors that lead us both on and off the court.”

A winning tradition and team leadership has allowed Hemphill and his coaches to concentrate less on program-building and more on coaching.

“We have to adjust our strategies and tactics accordingly,” Hemphill said. “Some years we have height,

and some we don’t; some years we’re faster and more athletic than other years. We may press and fast break with one group, play half-court offense and defense with the next group. We want to play to our strengths instead of sticking to a particular style of basketball.”

Pima varsity games start at five-thirty, which isn’t unusual at smaller Arizona schools. Girls and boys play the same night in the same gym, the boys following the girls at seven.

“That format allows the boys and girls’ teams to support each other; the sister-brother combinations we have only adds to the feeling of community.

“Unlike what can happen at larger schools that have more players, our school is small enough that the girls know each other off the court. Here, our girls are next-door neighbors; they’ll hang out or go to church together. We’re a small community, and our girls respect and love each other.”

### 2009-2010

The Lady ‘Riders enter this year’s state tournament with an overall record of 24-4. They are led by six-foot center Kitt Bryce and point guard JayAnn Kieffer; Bryce was recently named the 2A East Player of the Year, and Kieffer won the region’s three-point shootout and will represent the region at the State Shootout.

After a tough five-point loss to 3A power Safford on January 7, the Lady ‘Riders have reeled off ten straight wins, including a 52-39 win over ninth-ranked Thatcher. Early in that game, junior Nicole Schmidt hit two three-pointers to put the Lady ‘Riders on top. Kitt Bryce and Shayla Hancock each scored 13, and Kieffer and center Corley Lines each added seven, with Kieffer knocking down five of six free throws. Under Hemphill, the Lady ‘Riders are 17-8 in postseason play; since 2001, every four-year player in the program has played in at least one state championship game.

Though Hemphill’s record stands at an impressive 273-130, it’s not all work all the time. On occasion Hemphill will call a time-out from coaching and teaching English to play rhythm guitar. The band he plays in includes a drummer he knows well, Safford girls’ basketball coach Tad Jacobson.

“We’re fierce competitors on the court,” Hemphill said, “but we’re also good friends.” After 14 years at Pima, Hemphill is already one of Arizona’s most-tenured coaches in the girls’ game, something he would like to see change. “In many respects it’s disappointing,” he said. “I’d like to see more coaches in the state become veteran coaches, see less coaching turnover. I know for me, it’s been a very rewarding experience to coach great girls in a great community.”