

Caleb Allen has wanted to be a college basketball player for as long as he can remember.

The 2022 Edgewood High School graduate will admit he didn't see it happening here in the Magnolia State, more than 600 miles from home in northwest Mississippi. Allen said he's a little homesick at times, but he's settled into the world of NCAA Division II basketball at Delta State University and even recently got engaged.

"I love it here," Allen said. "You can tell people I'm doing great. It's awesome."

The 6-foot-4, 200-pound shooting guard is a sophomore starter for the Statesmen, who compete in the Gulf South Conference. He's averaging 10.2 points and 2.7 rebounds per game and is a high-level 3-point shooter, ranking second in the GSC with his 42.2 percent shooting from deep.

Delta State coach Mike Nienaber, one of the winningest active D-II coaches in the country, said Allen has gone from being an up-and-down contributor as a freshman to being one of the better players in the conference this season.

"He's just been a really good all-around player," Nienaber said. "He rebounds. He plays hard on defense. He's making shots. He's doing everything you could hope to get from a sophomore at this point in his career. And on top of that, he's a great kid. An old coach like me wants to have guys you really like who are fun to coach. He's one of those kind of guys."

"Caleb was still kind of finding his way last year. He was the Freshman of the Week a couple of times and you could see flashes of the potential greatness there, but he was a freshman and there were games where he disappeared a little bit. But he has stepped up and been one of our most consistent players this year. He's the best we have at attacking the offensive boards."

It's been an interesting road for Allen to get here. He sank 147 treys during his prep career at Edgewood and played for the Shining Stars AAU program, but he wasn't wading in collegiate offers. Indeed, Allen said Delta State was the only offer he ultimately got.

Nienaber is a Cincinnati guy, a 1973 La Salle High School graduate and former point guard for the Lancers. He's close with Shining Stars and Oak Hills coach Mike Price and loves to get Cincinnati kids on his roster, and the two coaches talk regularly about prospects.

Nienaber has three Cincinnati kids at Delta State right now with Allen, junior guard Kelen Dietrich from Oak Hills and freshman guard Sam Whitmer from Elder. They all played for Price with the Shining Stars.

This is Nienaber's fifth year at the DSU helm, and he was the head coach for 36 seasons between Bethel College (now Bethel University) and Christian Brothers University in Tennessee. Nienaber estimates that 70-75 Cincinnati guys have played for him through the years.

"I get up to Cincinnati and see kids play every summer," he said. "A lot of kids we've gotten over the years are kids that other people miss out on. If they're being recruited somewhere up there, they're probably not coming here. We have to find the diamonds in the rough, and we've had quite a few good ones over the years.

"We were fortunate on Caleb because we didn't get on him early. We had a kid transfer on us and it was late, and all of a sudden I had a spot. I called Mike and Caleb was available, and one thing led to another and now he's here. I feel really blessed. Sometimes you work all year to get a player and do everything you can and work your hardest to get him, then at the last minute, you lose him. That's where there's some divine intervention. You get this guy that turns out to be better than the guy you were recruiting all year."

Allen finished his senior season at Edgewood and still didn't know what his basketball future held. He took a little time off and had left knee surgery. He got a call from Nienaber, made a visit to Delta State, and loved it.

Kentucky Wesleyan, another D-II program, also showed some interest but never reached the offer stage.

"After I took my visit here, they were going to have me come for a visit," Allen said. "I wasn't playing at the time because of my knees and it ended up all kind of fizzling out. When Coach Nienaber called, I didn't really have any plans at that point."

Allen is a Christian and said his faith is everything. In his eyes, ending up at Delta State was something that was simply meant to happen.

"Jesus has worked a ton of miracles in my life," Allen said. "The story about how I ended up here, it was all Him. I had nowhere to go and my parents were praying for me, and God just opened up a perfect window for me to come down here."

His game has strengthened in his time with the Statesmen. Allen averaged 5.2 points and 1.6 boards per game as a freshman, playing very little early in the year and moving into the starting lineup in the second half of the season due to an injury. He said he hoped to make more of an impact, "but for a freshman season, it wasn't horrible."

Allen's role is very clear on this team. He lives on the 3-point line on offense. In two years at Delta State, he's attempted 191 treys and just 43 shots from inside the arc.

"From high school to college, I've become a lot more of a dead 3-point shooter," said Allen, conceding that he'd prefer to be a bit more well-rounded offensively. "I don't like it very much and that's not necessarily what the coach wants for me either, but that's kind of what I've become. It's a lot harder to drive and get inside in college than it is in high school."

I like more of a mixed game, but I'll do whatever the job is. I want to win. I don't set too many personal goals."

Allen said he's something of a gym rat and works on his shooting, so he's not surprised to be doing so well from 3-point range. He said confidence is the No. 1 thing he needs to work on.

That may seem strange, especially for Edgewood fans who watched him scorch the nets during his prep days (he scored a school-record 47 points against Monroe as a junior). But Allen said it's an ongoing challenge.

Nienaber said no disrespect to the Southwest Ohio Conference, but he felt like Allen's transition to college was a little more difficult because he didn't play in the Greater Miami Conference like Dietrich or the Greater Catholic League South Division like Whitmer.

"When you're on the floor in high school and every team's got 2-3 college-level players, it does impact your transition into college," Nienaber said. "Caleb grew a lot as a freshman, and this year he's just blossomed. I would not trade Caleb Allen for any wing in the league, and I know what kind of person he is. I love having him here."

Delta State is 12-11 overall and 10-9 in the GSC, sitting in seventh place in the 13-team loop. Last season, the Statesmen were 7-20, 6-18.

Allen got hit by the flu several weeks ago, missing one game entirely and playing at less than full strength in two others. Nienaber thought Allen looked a little hesitant when he finally got healthy, and he's only totaled 28 points in his last five games.

Allen said he mostly feels fine. Knee discomfort is a persistent issue, but it's not nearly bad enough to keep him off the court.

"It's a lot of work. In some ways there's pressure for sure. But coach put a lot more trust in me this season," Allen said. "It seems like it's been a lot of ups and downs, but it's been a

way better season than last season. We're a great team. I don't think the standings show how good we are."

Allen said he has very fond memories of his time at Edgewood. He was in the Fairfield system as a youngster and became a student in the Edgewood district as a sixth-grader.

"We're really proud of Caleb to go down to Delta State and represent our program like he is," Edgewood coach Jason Osterman said. "He always seemed like he would be a college player. He was our go-to guy. When we needed something, even just to settle us down, he was just a floor-general kid that we knew would go play at the next level."

Basketball has always had a hold on Allen. He played baseball and soccer for a while before dropping them to focus on the hardwood.

"Baseball was too slow," Allen said. "Soccer was a ton of fun. I just always loved basketball more. In high school I decided to quit soccer to work on basketball more so I could play in college."

Allen likes the atmosphere at Delta State. He likes playing at Walter Sillers Coliseum. There may not always be huge crowds, but the fan base is enthusiastic.

"This town really supports Delta State," Nienaber said. "We're the team here. It's a really neat little place to play and coach in."

The future looks bright for the Statesmen. Most of the team will return next season. Delta State has five regular-season games remaining, starting with Thursday night's trip to Shorter (Ga.), and hopes to advance to the eight-team GSC tournament.

Allen is majoring in business and has a goal of having his own business someday. He may only be 20 years old, but he's engaged to Delta State senior Dani Solkow, a D-II All-American swimmer at DSU and a native of South Africa. They got engaged in December and are planning a June wedding.

“A lot of people can’t believe I’m getting married,” Allen said. “I thought that’s what God wanted, I prayed about it, and it just felt right. When you find the right one, you’ve got to lock her up.”

For now, Allen is focused on his studies and finishing the season in strong fashion. Then it’s marriage and two more years of eligibility with the Statesmen.

“I’ve had a lot more fun than I expected coming here,” Allen said. “The competition is better than I expected. I love it.”