

How Anaya James and Elizabeth Elliott's intertwining paths led them to Pacific By Matthew Walter

The two sophomores from Inglewood, California have played with or against each since fourth grade and now are trying to take the Tigers to the top of the WCC

Anaya James (left) and Elizabeth Elliott (right) help up a teammate. Photo Credit: Tim Thymes. Playing sports as a kid is something almost everyone does. Fourth-grade basketball is probably something many people do, but it doesn't always leave a lasting impact on them. Maybe for some, it's when they fell in love with the game, maybe they made some lifelong friends, or maybe it meant nothing. For Anaya James and Elizabeth Elliott, playing together on the Iconnies team in fourth grade would start a relationship that would take eight more years to truly blossom into a friendship.

Elliott and James both grew up in Inglewood, California. Both played basketball at a young age and fell in love with the game as they grew up. They played together and against each other throughout elementary, middle and high school. While they had played together, they hadn't been friends since they went to different high schools. Then, without knowing it, they both committed to play at Pacific, which changed things.

The Next and The Equalizer are teaming up

The Next is partnering with The Equalizer to bring more women's sports stories to your inbox. Subscribe to The Next now and receive 50% off your subscription to The Equalizer for 24/7 coverage of women's soccer.

Subscribe to The Next

"I already knew that she had committed, but like I said, we weren't really close enough where I could be like, hey, like the school you're going to is recruiting me and we weren't close like that," Elliott told The Next. "So it was kind of like okay, well I know her, I know of her, so I think I'll be okay going to this school, but I didn't like call her and be like, Hey, I'm coming here."

Elizabeth (Front Row, far left) and Anaya (Front Row, second from the left) on their team together in fourth grade. Photo Credit: Anaya James and Elizabeth Elliott

Coming into their freshman year in 2021, neither knew many others, but they knew each other due to being from the same town. They weren't friends back home, but they became quick friends. They also quickly became the dominant duo on the court. They were the top two scorers and rebounders for the Tigers as freshmen. James led the team in assists and steals, while Elliott led the team in blocks. They won nine of the 15 WCC freshman of the week awards and were named to the WCC all-freshman team. While they dominated the basketball court, they grew as friends.

"I think we had great teammates and coaches that pushed us every day in practice, which kind of helped us prepare for games. I think we learned that there's a next level; we thought we were good. We thought we were doing the best and they pushed us, and they pushed us to the next level. Every day we learn more and more from them," said Elliott.

Before coming to Pacific, James went to West High School in Inglewood, while Elliott went to St. Mary's Academy. They also played together and against each other throughout their club basketball careers. Elliott's high school played James' high school twice during their prep careers, with Elliott's school winning both matchups. For head coach Bradley Davis, the revelation that the two players had a previous relationship was unknown to him until he talked to both players' parents after they had committed. He never saw them play together or against each other in the early part of recruiting them. Then COVID hit and all recruiting turned virtual, but Davis knew the early work would pay off with the two Inglewood players.

"Our assistants and everybody was able to see them early... we were able to get those offers out early in the spring because we were really confident with the group that we had. We were confident that they had a lot of talent and confident that there was gonna be a lot of minutes and they stepped in and took advantage," Davis told The Next. "Liz actually came on an unofficial right before COVID. Then COVID hit and everything is remote and the conversations are happening remotely. The recruitment was happening completely separately, and we didn't know that they knew each other until both had committed."

Anaya James prepares to shoot in a non-conference game against the Rice Owls. Photo Credit: Tim Thymes

It was so important for Davis to secure the commitment of James and Elliott because the Tigers lost a lot going into last season. Pacific graduated a very stout senior class, two of them 1000-point scorers, Brooklyn McDavid and Valerie Higgins. Higgins was the first-ever WNBA draft pick in Tigers history. Also, in the time Higgins and McDavid were playing at Pacific, the Tigers had their best three-year stretch in the Bradley Davis tenure. That class's departure left a void that Pacific needed to fill and James and Elliott were willing and ready to fill it.

"I think we haven't reached their ceiling yet, to be honest with you. If you've looked at even just the top 10 lists on the WCC, they're both littered throughout there. With shooting percentage, assists turnover ratio and some of those things that really matter and you're like whoa, a freshman did that," Davis said. Anaya was one of 29 people get a triple-double last year in the country. So there's a, there's a high ceiling for them to reach and I think we're just we're just getting going."

The Next, a 24/7/365 women's basketball newsroom

The Next: A basketball newsroom brought to you by The IX. 24/7/365 women's basketball coverage, written, edited and photographed by our young, diverse staff and dedicated to breaking news, analysis, historical deep dives and projections about the game we love.

Become a paid subscriber to The Next!

One of the main reasons James and Elliott were so successful together so quickly was that they play complimentary positions. James is a heady, quick point guard who can score at three levels. She is also one of the few players in college basketball last season who had a triple-double, which she accomplished in a win against WCC foe Santa Clara Elliott, a big body post who can bury her opponents down low and finish with an array of post moves. Playing those different positions allows them both to be on the floor and work together to put the Tigers in a

position to win. James and Elliott both feel they know exactly where the other is on the floor and that one can ask the other for a screen at any point in a game.

While James and Elliott had a phenomenal freshman season, the Tigers struggled as a team. Pacific went 6-23 overall and 3-14 in conference play and had the worst defense of any team in the WCC. As great of scorers James and Elliott are, they could care less about the stats and individual accolades. They, more than anything, want to win and bring the Tigers back to where they were when Higgins and McDavid were at Pacific.

“A lot of times when your star players, your best players, your statistically best players. Sometimes they can be very selfish and these two are just not that they absolutely aren’t,” Davis said. “They are not really concerned with getting the individual goals. They come because they aren’t concerned with getting them and that’s what you love about coaching these two is that they are very selfless. They’re very competitive and that is awesome because that really has fueled this huge growth in their leadership.”

Elizabeth Elliott goes in for a layup against the Stanford Cardinal. Photo Credit: Tim Thymes
The Tigers are off to a strong start this year. They’ve already won five games, just one less than they won all of last year. That includes a victory over reigning Mountain West champion UNLV in which James had 21 points, eight rebounds and seven assists. In a win over Nevada earlier in the year, Elliott put up 17 and 13, her first double-double. James and Elliott have shown early in the year they are ready to build on last season and prove their team is better than their preseason projection of 9th in the WCC.

At the end of the day, what Elliott and James have found in each other is an incredible bond. Two kids from the same town who knew of each other committed to the same school to play basketball and became best friends. Where one goes, the other one isn’t far behind. The two of them are very different. According to Elliott, Anaya is a quiet person at first, but once people get to know her, she is an outgoing music lover and someone who really cares for others. James sees Elizabeth as a people person who is incredibly funny and a very loving person. Despite their differences, they have bonded through the turbulence of college basketball and are ready to make a mark on Pacific and the WCC.

“We’re definitely way closer; we’ve lived together for almost two years now. I don’t know; we’re just we’re like sisters now,” James told The Next.

“We do everything together. Everybody sees me and they’re like, where’s Anaya? They see her, they’re like, where’s Liz? Yeah, two peas in a pod,” Elliott added. “I think we’ve leaned on each other a lot. We’re just so similar in so many ways. So it just was natural for us to kind of like go to each other for, you know, more personal things outside of basketball.”

Written by Matthew Walter

Matthew Walter covers the Las Vegas Aces, the Pac-12 and the WCC for the Next. He is a former Director of Basketball Operations and Video Coordinator at three different Division I women's basketball programs.

© 2023 The Next
Howard Megdal, LLC

All Rights Reserved.