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FINAL EDITION

**Unalakleet girl at East thinks big;
TWETO: Effervescent East senior wants to be famous, and she has the sass,
smarts and skills to do it.**

BYLINE: By **BRIAN SINGLER** Anchorage Daily News

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The East High basketball team doesn't need Saturday Night Live.

The Best of Ariel **Tweto** plays nightly -- on the court and off.

Just listen.

The point guard's biggest hoops strength?

"I'm loud."

Her heritage?

Mom is Inupiaq Eskimo and "Dad is Norwegian and all that European whiteness."

Her future?

"The world's never seen a native Katie Couric."

That's just a whiff of the biggest breath of fresh air in Alaska high school basketball, a 5-foot-4, 100-pound ball of bubbly blown straight from Unalakleet to Anchorage.

The 18-year-old senior has talent, whether she's scoring baskets or roles on TV.

Tweto's tale ranges from auditioning for major films to appearing on a cable TV show. Her repertoire of stories seem straight out of Hollywood, which is where she wants to live anyway.

But most came from a fishing village of 710 people near the Arctic Circle best known as an Iditarod checkpoint.

COMPETITIVE EDGE

Television discovered **Tweto** in 2002.

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As an eighth-grader, she switched lives for a week with a girl from Hawaii for a reality show on Nickelodeon, the cable channel. The girl from Hawaii got to mush sled dogs in Unalakleet while **Tweto** learned to surf in Oahu. She even entered a surfing competition.

"I won most improved," **Tweto** said with a big grin that quickly turned sour. "But I lost."

Tweto traces her drive to win to mushing dogs, a way of life for her family, which owns 20 animals and three sleds. She remembers making pancakes at all hours for mushers on their way to Nome during the Iditarod and routinely racing for small sums of cash in community races.

"Everybody says I cried when I lost, but I don't remember that," she said. "It is how I got competitive. I still miss that."

As for her high-energy, quirky personality, she credits her mom, Ferno.

Mom's quiriness can be found in her daughter's name. When **Tweto** was born, Ferno gave her two Eskimo names instead of the traditional one.

The result?

Ariel Eva Tundraq Atauchaq **Tweto**.

"She's crazier than I am," **Tweto** said. "Which is hard to imagine."

DRAMATIC CHANGE

When Ariel **Tweto** turned 16, her life changed dramatically.

Her diet went from fish eyes to McDonald's.

She left her family and a town where she knew everybody to live alone in a condo in a city of 280,000.

Spare time once spent on the runners of a dog sled is now time spent at Barnes and Noble.

She went from flying airplanes with her dad -- part-owner of Hageland Aviation and so in love with flying he named his daughter Ariel -- to riding around on People Mover buses.

The 2003 school year was a couple months old when **Tweto** left the Unalakleet volleyball team and showed up unannounced in Anchorage for basketball tryouts at East. The move came two days before Unalakleet's regional tournament and left the team without its setter.

"I basically left them," she said. "It was so sad."

She came looking for bigger challenges in the classroom and on the basketball court.

"It was for academics and then basketball," she said. "I could have stayed and scored 30-40 points a night, but I wanted a challenge.

"I came with a backpack and a little bag."

Her family bought her a condo near UAA, sends her checks and flies to town about once a week to visit.

Tweto said she liked the freedom of living alone and being responsible for herself. But it does get lonely sometimes.

"If I watch a scary movie, I have to call coach," **Tweto** said.

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That would be Dorena Bingham, who has run the girls basketball program at East for 13 years and produced numerous Division I talents like Stanford's Azella Perryman and Arizona's Natalie Jones.

At East, **Tweto** is one of 2,239 students and part of a diverse student body. In Unalakleet, 57 attend high school and 90 percent are Alaska Native.

"Everything is so crowded at East. When the bell rings you get smashed, and my books get knocked out," **Tweto** said. "I learned to find the Samoans and walk behind them."

Even after two years in Anchorage, **Tweto** still encounters things she never saw in the Bush.

"The other day she met a guy with lazy eye and kept demanding that he look at her," said Stearns, a senior forward on the basketball team. "She had never seen that before. It was so funny. It was embarrassing too."

Bingham likes to tell about **Tweto's** introduction to East's annual Turkey Shoot, a free-throw fundraiser.

"She gets all excited and asks, 'What kind of gun are we using?' " Bingham said.

"I said, 'We're in Anchorage. We're not in Unalakleet. We're not shooting anything.' "

Tweto made 59 out of 60 free throws anyway.

UP TO THE CHALLENGE

Ariel **Tweto** should be too small to be a good basketball player.

She is easily the skinniest player on East and nearly the shortest.

"I add three inches to my resume," said **Tweto**, who argues with Bingham over whether she looks 10 or 12 years old.

Her size has its disadvantages. **Tweto** "gets swatted" when she plays in Lower 48 tournaments, Stearns said.

And getting beaten up is a nightly occurrence at East.

"Her legs are bruised, her ribs are cracked, her shoulder pops out," Stearns said.

To compensate, **Tweto** has tried to bulk up with weights. She averages nearly 12 points a contest and has learned a more disciplined style of play -- something seldom seen in the Bush.

"It (was) so much more scrappy. I used to bowl people over. People would tackle me at half court. We didn't run plays. We played street ball," **Tweto** said. "I miss that."

She also had to learn how to execute planned plays from the point and adapt to Bingham's legendary, grueling workouts, which, **Tweto** says, require a warmup for warmups.

"That first year she was in shock," Bingham said.

"You know I attempt to kill these girls every day. You are not here on time. You are here a half hour early. This is your seventh class."

Tweto has what Stearns calls a scoop layup, which starts with her sweeping the ball around her feet and ends with her putting it in the basket.

She's a deadly shooter, the result of taking tens of thousands of shots in her lifetime. In Unalakleet, **Tweto** said, she

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played up to seven hours a day -- two hours before school, a couple more after school, and then a couple more later at night when the adults play.

"That's the reputation of rural girls," Stearns said. "They can drain shots from half court, one after another. Ariel's lights out."

One of Stearns's best on-court memories of **Tweto** is of a game two years ago when East played Dimond and the Lynx keyed on the more visible East stars.

Tweto camped out in her favorite spot, the left baseline about 12 feet from the basket, and drained shots all night.

By the end of the game, **Tweto** had Dimond's attention and 24 points.

Tweto's love of basketball is so strong she turned down a full academic scholarship to the University of Minnesota because she knows she couldn't play on its Division I basketball team.

She decided instead to take her 4.3 GPA to Emerson College, a small Division III school in the heart of Boston. She's going to study broadcast journalism and shoot for internships at places like MTV, VH1, BET, NBC and even Nickelodeon.

Then she wants to move to Los Angeles or New York.

"I don't know why I want to be famous," **Tweto** said. "I just want to be someone when I am older. Then, I can come back to Unalakleet when I am 70 and have my grandmother's jam."

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INSIDE

CIC TOURNEY: The Dimond boys edge Eagle River while the West Eagles play like South stole something from them.

SUPER SISTERS: Lillian and Sylvia Bullock give the Service Cougars an inside-outside combination that is tough to stop.

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Ariel **Tweto** enjoys a digital slide show tribute to East's seniors Tuesday following a 57-33 Thunderbirds win over Bartlett at East High.

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