The rising star comes from a Nigerian family; father Tunde is a newspaper journalist and mother Buki is earning an herbal medicine degree. Fagbenle has 11 sibs and half-sibs—nine brothers and two sisters, ranging from five to 43 years of age. She is the ninth child in her “sporty” family; and third tallest, after her six-foot-nine and six-foot-seven brothers. (Her parents, at six-feet, two inches and five feet, eight, are not formidably tall.) Born in Baltimore, she grew up mostly in London and has dual citizenship.

Tennis was Fagbenle’s first love (she still plays) and she dreamed of playing professionally, but by age 13, “it wasn’t flowing,” she says. She switched to basketball at 14, and wears uniform number 14 to commemorate that. It was awkward. “You’re rubbish when you first start a sport,” she notes. “I was like a baby deer on the court. I had poor balance and my shots weren’t dropping.” Yet at six feet, three inches, she had already been dubbed the “tallest 13-year-old girl in London.” She also benefited from top-notch coaching at Haringey and helped the club to national titles.

Her coaches had some contacts at American prep schools; Fagbenle chose Blair because “it had the prettiest pictures.” She thought high school in the States would “be a breeze—I got that idea from movies.” Instead, she experienced heavy culture shock and “crashed and burned the first year.” But she soon adapted and began to love school while excelling at basketball: as a senior she led Blair to the Mid-Atlantic Prep League and state prep-school championships, and was named a McDonald’s All-American. In the spring she found time to win state championships in the high jump, javelin, shot put, and discuss. She also performed in two musicals and “enjoyed them thoroughly,” Fagbenle declares.

Culture shock is now a thing of the past; Fagbenle’s current problems involve more practical matters like finding a pair of jeans to fit her frame. (She does have one pair, bought years ago.) She prefers skirts and dresses, but even there, length is a problem, as a dress for a five-foot, two-inch woman, she says, “is a shirt for me! Shopping is a nightmare!”

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This year’s Olympic experience is unlikely to be her last. The popularity of women’s basketball has only begun to grow in the United Kingdom; unlike France, Australia, or Russia, England has not yet become a women’s-hoops power. Though the English national team had a solid pre-Olympic run, besting highly rated teams from France and the Czech Republic, they may have peaked too early; they lost all five of their London contests. Nonetheless, “We did our country proud,” Fagbenle says. “We played with guts in every game and played hard till the buzzer.”

The Crimson hope that her considerable skills will help them break out of a rut of second-place Ivy finishes: Harvard’s last title, shared with Cornell and Dartmouth, came in 2007-’08, and for the last three seasons the Crimson have come in second to Princeton; the Tigers have dropped only one of 42 Ivy games since the 2009-10 season. But Harvard returns several strong players to complement their Olympian, including high-scoring, six-foot forward Victoria Lippert ’13. If Fagbenle can bolster the Crimson’s results the way Allison Feaster did, the competition had best brace itself: beginning with Feaster’s sophomore year, Harvard ran off three straight Ivy League titles.

~Craig Lambert

**ALUMNI**

“The Busiest Man in Poker”

Bernard Lee calls, raises, deals, and explains the booming card game.

In 2003, when a complete amateur named Chris Moneymaker won the $2.5 million first prize at the World Series of Poker (WSOP), the game’s highest-profile event, Bernard Lee ’92 had already been playing poker with buddies in his hometown of Wayland, Massachusetts, for a long time. Moneymaker had earned his WSOP seat by playing online at PokerStars—and Lee and thousands of other nonprofessional players had the same thought: “If he can do it, I can do it!” The poker boom was born.

Lee got his own chance to compete at WSOP in 2005, qualifying on a night when he returned from tennis practice and played online from 11 P.M. until 5:00 A.M. Having read books and worked hard to improve his skills for more than a year, he wept with joy. That summer, when his wife, family physician Kathryn (Higashi) Lee ’92, drove him to the airport to attend the WSOP’s Main Event in Las Vegas, she asked, “If you cash [win prize money], do you want me to throw a party?” Lee’s reply: “If I win six figures, then we party.” Kathryn relaxed; with 5,619 entrants who had each bought $10,000
in chips to enter, the chance of such a large payout was highly unlikely.

Or so she thought. Lee began the tourney with one of his best first days ever, and by day two was one of the top hundred players (in chips amassed) of the 2,000 remaining entrants; nearly two-thirds of those who’d entered had gone broke after their first day of play. Lee had made $35,000 by day three, and the following day he was among the 58 survivors all assured of at least $145,000 in prize money. “You might want to get that party list ready,” he told his wife. He also called his boss at Boston Scientific, where he was a senior marketing manager. (“I didn’t expect to get this deep in the tournament, so I didn’t take enough days off from work,” he explains.) “Every single person here is following you online,” came the reply. “We can’t get any work done.”

Lee’s father, brother, college roommate DooJin Kim ’92, two co-workers, and some poker pals flew to Las Vegas to see him finish thirteenth overall, winning $400,000. (The top prize, won by Joe Hachem, was $7.5 million.) If not for a 1-in-10 chance of a dealt card that didn’t fall Lee’s way, he would have gone even further. But the event changed his life.

The PokerStars online card room, which now has nearly 50 million registered players worldwide, invited Lee to write a blog about his experience; he responded with 25 single-spaced pages that ran as a 10-part series on the website. ESPN produced and aired two profiles of him. The Boston Herald asked him to write a Sunday poker column, which he did and has continued since 2005, alongside columns for ESPN.com and CardPlayer Magazine. Since 2009, he has co-hosted ESPN Inside Deal, a weekly online poker show; he has also hosted The Bernard Lee Poker Show on AM radio for the last five years and was the official spokesperson for the Foxwoods Resort Casino’s Poker Room from 2010 to 2011. And he teaches poker at the WSOP Academy. In other words, Lee embodies his epithet: “the busiest man in poker.”

Now ranked 235th of the 300 players on the Global Poker Index, a weekly rating of the game’s top players worldwide, Lee divides his time about equally between his various media commitments and playing in tournaments. “I have a pretty competitive personality,” he says. “Everything I’ve done has led to this moment.” In his youth he played soccer, basketball, and tennis, and now competes in an adult tennis league and golf; in college he may have played in the most intramural poker contests ever, helped by three post-collegiate years as a resident assistant to then-Quincy House master Michael Shinagel. (All House affiliates may participate in intramurals.)

It was at Harvard that Lee cut his teeth as a poker player in a weekly Quincy House game with one- and five-dollar chips where “winning $500 was a really good night.” His friend Abe Wickelgren ’91, J.D. ’94, Ph.D. ’99, the game’s organizer and one of the best players, became a mentor. “I’m a very observant person,” Lee says. He watched Wickelgren and eventually they took a road trip to Foxwoods for Lee’s first casino action. “Bernie had great discipline,” Wickelgren recalls. “Not having it is the downfall of a lot of poker players: there’s a tendency to want to be involved too much, to want to always be involved in the hand. Bernie had the discipline to fold a hand and sit on the sidelines. He also could think about things analytically and not let his emotions get involved. He was very interested in improving—Bernie read poker books and got better when he was not actually playing.”

A “picture memory” helps Lee remember cards that have been played; he’s also aware of a vast range of odds of cards being dealt. “When you start out, all you do is worry about getting good cards,” he explains. “The better you get, the more it’s situational—you’re playing the player as much as playing the cards. This game is very psychological.” For example, though there’s no obligation to show one’s cards after a hand, sometimes Lee will show what he held after winning a bluff to “destabilize” an opponent. “The best time to get information about another player is when you’re not in the hand,” he says. “After I’ve folded a hand, I’ll intently watch how the other players bet, notice their patterns, see if there are any
He’s come a long way since his father scolded him as a boy for declaring a full house when he actually had four of a kind (thanks to a wild card)—as his dad vociferously declared. (In serious poker, there are no wild cards, which vastly change probabilities.) Lee often sat at the top of the stairs and listened when his dad played poker with friends and family members at Thanksgiving and Christmas. “I’d watch them arguing with each other—‘How could you make that play?’” he recalls. “I thought that was being a man. I learned early on that it was not about luck.”

Lee grew up in a Korean family in Westchester County, north of New York City, attended the Horace Mann School in Riverdale, New York, and studied classical piano at Juilliard on Saturday mornings, eventually winning a piano contest. He entered Brown on an eight-year college/medical-school program, but eventually transferred to Harvard, where he concentrated in biology. After college, he found that he loved business and took an M.B.A. at Babson; he worked at Boston Scientific, a medical-device company, until 2007.

After Lee’s great run at the WSOP in 2005, he was well positioned to take part in the poker boom then in progress. Online play had taken off, and ESPN began broadcasting games using a “hole cam” that allowed spectators to see the players’ cards. The World Poker Tour became the most-watched show on the Travel Channel. (Some of the poker explosion, says Lee, began with the 1998 film Rounders, about the underground world of high-stakes poker, which starred his classmate Matt Damon ’92.)

“It’s ridiculous that I can do this for a living,” he says. “I think about this game all the time and I love it. I was a fan of the world’s top poker stars and now they are my friends.” He launched his Full House Charity Program in 2011, donating $500 to it each time he draws a full house, with a minimum $20,000 annual commitment; Vermont’s Cabot Cheese is the primary sponsor. Last year the charity supported work on autism and provided Christmas packages for children whose families were devastated by storms in Hartford, Connecticut, and Springfield, Massachusetts.

And though his kids don’t yet know how to play poker (they do play Uno, a Crazy Eights-type game, and sometimes even beat their father at it), Lee is known as a family man on the circuit. He places a photo of his children on the table and kisses it before each session of play. “If I’m nervous, I can look down at my son and daughter,” he says. “It reminds me that if I’m knocked out, I go home to them—how bad can this be?”

~Craig Lambert

Aloian Award Winners

In honor of the David and Mimi Aloian Memorial Scholarships’ twenty-fifth anniversary, the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) has chosen four undergraduates to receive the award this year (instead of the usual two). Recipients have demonstrated solid leadership in contributing to the quality of life in the Houses, traits embodied by the Aloians, who led Quincy House from 1981 to 1986. David Aloian ’49 was also executive director of the HAA. This year’s scholars, Matthew Chuchul ’13, of Pforzheimer House, Laura Hinton ’13, of Cabot House, Abiola Laniyonu ’13, of Lowell House, and Meghan Joy Smith ’13, of Leverett House, were honored on September 27.

Chuchul, of New Hyde Park, New York, co-chairs his House committee. Last year, noting a void in “Pfoho’s” history, he teamed up with the Harvard College Women’s Center to launch the “Radcliffe Revolution”—a photographic retrospective and evening of alumnae recollections of the transition to gender-mixed housing—which drew more than 100 people.

Hinton, of Alameda, California, co-chairs her House committee and is a founding team member of the Cabot Café, which serves hundreds of students, tutors, and faculty members a week, fostering a dynamic atmosphere of intellectual and social conversation.

Laniyonu, of Derwood, Maryland, helped modernize the Lowell House library by creating custom software to analyze its more than 10,000 volumes so users may cross-reference their books against other Harvard holdings. A former secretary of the House Committee, he now serves the community through an at-large leadership position created specifically for him.

Smith, of Campbell River, British Columbia, has helped raise awareness of mental-health issues and helped change student culture by normalizing asking for help with them. She has worked closely with student mental-health liaisons and is a drug and alcohol peer adviser. In addition, she is the captain of Leverett’s intramural crew women’s B boat.