
The SERVICE LINE

Volleyball News from the MSU SideOut Club
Vol. III No. 3
November 1997

A Topsy-Turvy Big Ten Season

It seems as though every weekend has brought a new surprise this year in Big Ten women's volleyball. In recent years, the conference standings have usually been pretty clear-cut and predictable, but 1997 has featured some eye-opening matches.

► The Spartans have certainly had their share of surprising matches, both good and bad.

The highlight of the first half had to be the victory over Minnesota, where the Spartans held the Gophers to only 12 points for the match, one of the lowest total scores seen in the conference this year. Six days later, MSU provided some last-minute excitement at Indiana, where the Hoosiers took a two-game to nothing lead, only to see the Spartans storm back to win the last three games and the match.

The bad surprises would have to include the match in Ann Arbor when the Spartans just laid down and played dead. Also on the debit side was the trip to Columbus, where MSU outscored Ohio State 53-51 for the match, but lost 3-1. Incredibly, MSU also out-hit the Buckeyes .232 to .189, out-dug them 85-74, and out-blocked them as well. This match proved that the number of good plays you make may not be as important as when you make them.

(continued on next page)

CONTENTS

A Topsy-Turvy Big Ten Season	1
Luncheon with the Coach is a Must-Attend for All Spartan Fans	1
Team Notes	2
The Referee's Stand	3
More Accurate Team Rankings?	4
More Changes in NCAA Playoffs	5
SideOut Club Report	5
1997 Schedule and Results	6

Luncheon with the Coach is a Must-Attend for All Spartan Fans

Wouldn't you like to learn more about the inner workings of the MSU volleyball program, to hear the coach's evaluation of his own team as well as the opponents? You still have two more chances this season to do this, as you're invited to lunch with Coach Chuck Erbe on game day.

The two remaining dates are Saturday, November 8, the day of the Purdue match, and Friday, November 28, preceding the Penn State match. The luncheons are held at Reno's East (on Abbott Road just north of Saginaw) in East Lansing, starting at 11:45 a.m. The cost is \$8 per person, for a buffet-style meal that includes tossed salad, some of the best pizza in town, and a choice of beverage.

Those who have attended the two previous luncheons this season have found them absolutely fascinating. Chuck is an excellent speaker, and doesn't pull any punches. His luncheon talks reveal information that you won't find in **THE SERVICE LINE** and you won't hear on *The Chuck Erbe Show*.

A highlight of the last luncheon was Chuck's lengthy narrative about the recruiting wars, which focused on a particular (unnamed) set of this year's high school seniors. It was fascinating to hear how the coaches jockey for position in their attempts to build the team they want, while the recruits do the same thing to find the best school and playing situation (i.e., four-year starter) for themselves.

Unfortunately, attendance at the luncheons so far has been disappointing, for reasons that are hard to understand. Let's make sure that the next two luncheons have a good turnout of fans to show our strong interest and support of the program.

► Penn State started the season as the Big Ten favorite, with a number 2 pre-season national ranking. After defeating Stanford in the opening tournament, the Lions moved into first place, and held onto that spot through the first half of the Big Ten schedule.

They remained undefeated through their first 21 matches, and the conventional wisdom started saying that they were unstoppable. This was further reinforced when they did the unthinkable, defeating the U.S. women's national team 3-1, a feat that had never been accomplished by a college team.

So then what do they do—two weeks later they barely eke out a conference victory over tenth-place Northwestern, winning 16-14 in the rally-scoring fifth game! Fast forward another two weeks, and they lose their first match of the season to Wisconsin, leaving the two teams tied for the Big Ten lead. This was Wisconsin's first-ever victory over Penn State, after 16 consecutive losses.

► Speaking of Northwestern, their play has also been an anomaly. Although their record has improved under first-year head coach Kevin Renshler, they remain near the bottom of the Big Ten, and at mid-season they were the only team to have lost to last-place Purdue.

Yet the Wildcats shocked Penn State, nearly beating them in a five-game match, something that Stanford

(twice), Brigham Young, Texas, and Nebraska had failed to do. On Halloween, they repeated this feat against MSU, again losing in the fifth game by a score of 16-14. This was despite the fact that the match was in Jenison Field House, and that MSU had earlier defeated the Wildcats more easily on their home court in Evanston.

► Michigan has certainly been the surprise team of the conference this year. They ranked seventh in the preseason Big Ten coaches' poll, after finishing 1996 in sixth place. Through the first half of the conference season, they were solidly in third place, with losses only to Penn State, Wisconsin, and Ohio State, with two of those being away from home.

The Wolverines savored a 3-1 upset victory over the Spartans, who were ranked 16th in the nation at the time. They could be on the verge of their first-ever national ranking, garnering enough votes to come in just below the top 25 for several weeks in a row.

Team Notes

► The Spartans had an unusual streak near the end of October, when they played nine consecutive games with no substitutions. Vicki Basil, Veronica Morales, Lindsey Clayton, Christy Landry, Jenna Wrobel, and Jessie Sanborn were the six players who accomplished this feat.

The lack of substitutions was understandable in the dominating performance against Minnesota October 18. It was more unusual at Indiana October 24, when the Spartans lost the first two games, yet Chuck left all six players in the game. The same lineup continued against Penn State the following day, but only until game two, when Tammy Vonderheide and Corie Richard entered the match.

► The win over Michigan on November 2 was the 100th for Chuck Erbe since coming to Michigan State in 1993. The Spartans' prior 100 wins took exactly ten seasons to accomplish, from 1983 to 1992.

► Jenny Whitehead is out for the season with a broken leg. The freak injury occurred in practice October 7 while she was going after a ball. She slipped on a wet spot on the court, and then came to an abrupt stop when her foot reached the dry

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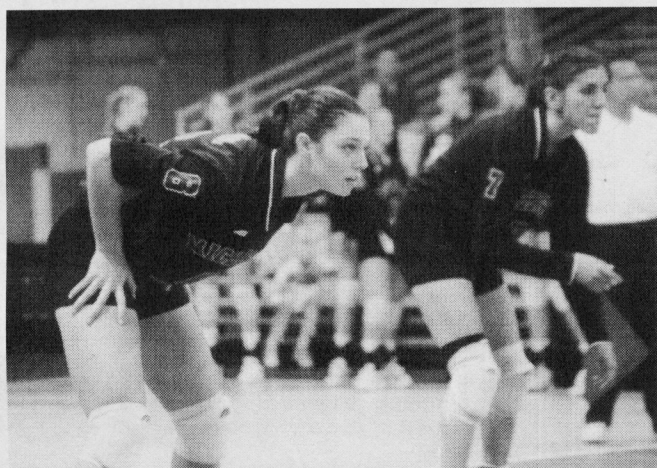
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area. Her fibula fractured in two places, requiring surgical repair. She is out of action until next year.

► Veronica Morales has a chance to become MSU's all-time leader in digs. It will be tough for her to do it in the regular season, but two or three matches of post-season play would probably give her the record, to go along with her spot atop the list of MSU's all-time kill leaders.



Jenna Wrobel and Veronica Morales (photo: Andy Kurtz)

► Jenna Wrobel earned honors as the co-Big Ten Player of the Week for her performances against Minnesota and Iowa. For the weekend, she had 50 kills while hitting .389. She also had 18 digs and seven blocks. Against Minnesota, she had 13 kills with no errors in her first twenty attempts.

► Four more regular-season Spartan matches will be televised this year. The Ohio State match will be locally broadcast on TCI channel 13, Media One channel 6 or 17, and Horizon channel 11. The full schedule is as follows (all times Eastern):

Date	Match	Cable	Time
11/7	Ohio State	Local	7:00 pm
11/14	@ Illinois	ESPN2	9:00 pm
11/16	@ Wisconsin	SC	5:00 pm
11/28	Penn State (tape delay)	ESPN2	TBA

The Referee's Stand

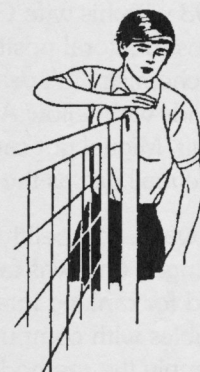
For the most part in volleyball, in order for a player to legally play a ball, the ball must be at least partially on

that player's side of the net. The one exception to this occurs when blocking. Under several specific circumstances, a blocker may reach across the net and block a ball that is entirely over the opponent's court.

► If the opponents have completed their third hit of the ball, a player may reach beyond the plane of the net to block the ball. A player may never, however, attack the ball on the opponent's side. This is a judgment call on the part of the referee, as to whether the player's action is a block or an attack. Referees generally give the player the benefit of the doubt, so you will very rarely see an over-the-net attack violation called after the opponents have taken their third hit.

(There has been discussion internationally about changing the rules to define any attempt at the net to play a ball coming from the opponents as a block. This would eliminate the distinction that referees currently must make as to whether the player was making a blocking or an attacking motion.)

In the situation described, the third contact by the opponents must be made before the blocker touches the ball. If the blocker touches the ball on the opponent's side of the net simultaneously with the attacker, it is an illegal block.



The signal for illegally blocking (or attacking) across the net is to hold the forearm, palm down, across the top of the net.

► A block across the net is also allowed under certain circumstances even when the opponents have not completed their third contact. If, in the judgment of the referee, the first or second contact is an attack toward the opponent's side, a blocker can legally reach over the net to block it.

Of course, if the first or second contact is not an attack, but rather a pass or an attempt to set a teammate, the blocker must not interfere on the other side of the net. When the ball is passed close to the net, and a team has a front-row setter, it can be very tricky for the blocker to decide how aggressively to block. If the setter is about to attack, the blocker wants to reach over and shut her down. If the play turns into a set, she must not touch it. This is one reason that a strong-attacking setter is so valuable to the offense.

Finally, if the first or second contact is not an attack, but travels near the net, and, in the judgment of the referee, no other player on that team was near enough to have another play on it, again the blocker may reach over to block the ball. If there was a chance for the opponents to make another hit, a block would be ruled illegal, since it would constitute interference.

More Accurate Team Rankings?

One of the most common topics of conversation for sports fans is how their favorite teams compare with others around the nation. Women's college volleyball has both the AVCA/USA Today Coaches' Poll and the Volleyball Magazine rankings to tell us each week how the "experts" rate the teams. But in this age of statistics, many feel that there should be a way to objectively rank the teams based on the outcomes of matches. For the last several years, a SideOut Club member has been developing such a system.

Miguel Ballicora came to MSU from Buenos Aires in 1993 with his wife Gabriela, after accepting an offer of a post-doctoral position in the Department of Biochemistry. A year later, they met and became friends with fellow Argentinian Veronica Morales. As a result, Miguel got caught up in the whirlwind of MSU volleyball just as the team began its rise in the rankings.

He was a competitive chess player when he was younger, and was familiar with the numerical system used for ranking international chess players. He also dabbles with computers, so he decided it would be fun to apply the methodology used in the chess world to create a ranking system for volleyball.

The computations take into account the strength of each opponent a team plays, and how many games they win and lose against that opponent. Miguel downloads all the scores each week from the AVCA Online Division I web site, processes them on his computer, and then publishes them for the world to see on the rec.sport.volleyball Internet newsgroup.

In both 1995 and 1996, his computer rankings predicted the eventual national champion, while the AVCA poll failed to do so. In 1995, the coaches' poll had Stanford at #1, but they lost in the semi-finals. The top spot in his computer rankings belonged to Nebraska, who went on to win the tournament. Similarly, in 1996, Florida lost in the semis after topping the final regular season AVCA poll. Stanford won it all, as predicted by the computer rankings.

Looking at all forty-seven matches played in the 1996 NCAA tournament, Miguel's system correctly predicted the winner in all but four contests. Those four featured opponents with very close computer scores, so the matches could have been expected to go either way.

This year, through matches of November 2, the computer rankings are as follows, with the AVCA Coaches' Poll rankings included for comparison:

Computer Rank	School	Points	AVCA Rank
1	Long Beach State	2975	1
2	Stanford	2965	3
3	Penn State	2885	2
4	Florida	2870	4
5	Wisconsin	2865	5
6	UC Santa Barbara	2835	6
7	Brigham Young	2825	9
8	Texas	2815	8
9	USC	2785	7
10	Washington State	2735	10
23	Michigan State	2635	24

There is agreement on the top six teams, with only Penn State and Stanford swapping spots. In some ways, it's surprising that a computerized system and a poll give such close results. This could be taken to mean that the coaches unconsciously use some of the same rating methods that are built into the program.

Differences of less than 15 or 20 points can be considered insignificant. Even up to a difference of 40 or 50 points, probabilities make it difficult to predict a winner with certainty. Looking at the numbers above shows that Long Beach and Stanford are quite close in score, followed by a large gap between them and the next group of Penn State, Florida, and Wisconsin.

Miguel's calculation based on last year's Big Ten matches showed that playing at home effectively adds about 60 points to a team's rating, confirming the conventional wisdom of a "home-court advantage".

On the subject of Spartan volleyball, Miguel has an amusing story to tell about his family's living quarters. When they arrived in 1993, they moved into an apartment in University Village. The previous resident worked at MSU and had been living in the apartment temporarily while looking for more permanent housing. The previous resident's name?—Chuck Erbe!

More Changes in NCAA Playoffs

In order to bring high-level tournament action to different locations in the country, the NCAA Women's Volleyball Committee has made a new ruling about post-season play. For 1997 and 1998, any school that has hosted one of the four regional tournaments for two years in a row will be ineligible to host for a third consecutive year.

Many have observed that the regionals have tended to be awarded repeatedly to the same small set of schools, which may hurt the development of a fan base in other areas. The ruling would have an immediate effect, because the same four schools—Florida, Stanford, Hawai'i, and Nebraska—hosted regionals in both 1995 and 1996. For 1997, none of them will be eligible to host.

The ruling will be re-evaluated after 1998 to decide whether it is successful in achieving the Committee's goals.

As reported in the last issue, the first and second rounds of the tournament will also have a different look, as the field is expanded from 48 to 56 teams.

The top eight seeds will each host a three-team, two day tournament. The host will have a bye, with the other two teams playing each other the first day for the right to play against the host on day two to determine the champion.

Seeds nine through sixteen will host a four-team two-day tournament consisting of two semi-finals and a championship. The eight winners will join the eight mentioned above to complete the sixteen teams needed for the regionals.

One effect of this change is to reduce the number who will host. In the format used for the last three years, the first round matches were held at lower-ranked schools. Those matches will now be combined with the second-round matches, eliminating those schools as hosts.

Another expected result is reduced attendance in the first round at the three-team sites. At these locations, the first day of play will involve only visiting teams, which is not expected to draw many local fans.

SideOut Club Report

Thanks to Special Members

As you've probably noticed, the MSU SideOut Club offers several categories of membership for those who want to go beyond the standard level of contribution. The SideOut Club would like to publicly recognize these members, and thank them for their extra support of Michigan State women's volleyball. (This list is current as of October 30, 1997.)

Lifetime Members

Chuck and Becky Erbe
Al Jacobs
Mick Kelly
David Kirkby
Bob and Kathy Lovell
Tom Minnema
Lyle, Jeanne and Cindy Montgomery
Jim and Betsy Pifer
Mike Ward

1997-98 Supporting Members

Mary Jo Hardy, Bruce, Ben and Emily Alexander
Tom and Ann Clifford
Jim Johncox
Althea Phillips
Tom Law and Rita Richardson
Kate Weldon

SideOut Club Calendar

Date	Event
Saturday, November 8	Coach's Luncheon
Friday, November 28	Coach's Luncheon

Luncheons are held at Reno's East, 1310 Abbott Road in East Lansing. The starting time is 11:45 a.m.

We do not have information yet about the date or location of the Spartan Volleyball Banquet, but we hope to have it for the next issue.

1997 Schedule and Results

(All home matches are played in Jenison Field House)

8/29	W Duke	8-15, 15-12, 12-15, 15-3, 16-14
8/30	W Xavier	15-1, 15-9, 15-4
8/30	L USC	5-15, 15-12, 4-15, 7-15
9/5	W Drake	15-9, 15-9, 15-11
9/6	W Duquesne	10-15, 15-6, 15-7, 15-5
9/6	W BGSU	15-1, 15-5, 11-15, 15-8
9/9	L Russia (exhib.)	6-15, 2-15, 15-7, 15-17
9/12	L South Florida	13-15, 7-15, 12-15
9/12	L UCSB	15-12, 12-15, 6-15, 4-15
9/13	W LMU	15-8, 15-8, 15-11
9/13	W Portland St	15-13, 15-10, 13-15, 15-11
9/19	W Eastern Illinois	15-6, 15-9, 15-8
9/20	W Butler	15-10, 15-6, 15-7
9/20	W Kentucky	15-4, 15-9, 15-11
9/26	L WISCONSIN	15-10, 4-15, 17-19, 3-15
9/28	W ILLINOIS	15-5, 13-15, 15-13, 15-12
10/3	L Michigan	15-13, 9-15, 3-15, 9-15
10/5	W Northwestern	15-6, 12-15, 15-10, 15-6

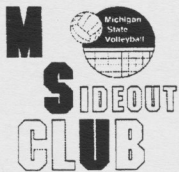
10/10	W Purdue	15-8, 15-6, 15-8
10/11	L Ohio State	11-15, 13-15, 15-5, 14-16
10/17	W IOWA	15-6, 15-7, 15-8
10/18	W MINNESOTA	15-1, 15-3, 15-8
10/24	W Indiana	13-15, 11-15, 15-10, 15-9, 15-12
10/25	L Penn State	9-15, 6-15, 9-15
10/31	W NORTHWESTERN	17-15, 15-7, 8-15, 13-15, 16-14
11/2	W MICHIGAN	15-13, 15-3, 8-15, 15-12
11/7	OHIO STATE	7:00 pm
11/8	PURDUE	7:00 pm
11/14	@Illinois	8:00 pm
11/16	@Wisconsin	4:00 pm
11/21	@Minnesota	7:00 pm
11/22	@Iowa	7:00 pm
11/28	PENN STATE	7:00 pm
11/29	INDIANA	7:00 pm

12/5-6 NCAA 1st and 2nd round

12/12-13 NCAA Regionals

12/18-20 NCAA Final Four

Washington State University



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