
THE SERVICE LINE

Volleyball News from the MSU SideOut Club

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Big Win Over Wisconsin Ends First Half

Just before the halfway weekend of the Big Ten season, Chuck Erbe wasn't looking backwards. "We've had a couple of disappointing losses, but this is a young team that has the potential to bounce back quickly."

Bounce back they certainly did, defeating fifth-ranked Wisconsin on Saturday, October 24, in an action-packed five game match. This was the



Jenna Wrobel, AVCA Division I Player of the Week

Spartans' most important victory since defeating Long Beach State in the NCAA regional semi-final in 1996. As such it could represent a psychological breakthrough for the team. The freshmen and sophomores on this team had never before had the experience of winning over a nationally-ranked top ten team.

For the second time in her career, Jenna Wrobel was named AVCA Division I Player of the Week for her dominating performance against the Badgers. Jenna becomes the first player in Spartan history to earn this honor twice. Fittingly, in the same match, Jenna had a career-high 35 kills and became MSU's all-time leader in kills, surpassing Veronica Morales' record of 2,006.

Against Wisconsin Jenna played the classic role of the go-to hitter, and came through every time she was needed. You could see the frustration on the faces of the Badgers as she racked up kill after kill, even when they knew the set was going to her.

The Spartans still had some lapses in concentration, such as the period in game three where Wisconsin scored ten unanswered points. A couple of MSU players had sub-par hitting performances, as the Badgers actually out-hit and out-scored us. But the whole team was on the ball when they really had to be, so in the crucial moments there was always someone ready to make the big play. This is the type of play we haven't seen often from this team.

Afterward, Chuck congratulated them, but warned "You can either let this be one fleeting moment of success, or you can use it to build on. It's up to you."

Schedule Notes

Don't forget that the Indiana match on October 31 will start later than usual, at 8:00 pm. Also notice that the Ohio State match has been changed from a Saturday to Sunday, November 22 at 1:30 pm.

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Switching Places

The on-court Spartans took on a subtly different look at the midpoint of the season, with the switch of left-side hitters Jenna Wrobel and Erin Hartley.

In Coach Erbe's terminology, the two left-side hitter positions are referred to as L1 and L2. L1 plays next to the setter, following her in service order. L2 is two positions ahead of the setter in service order. For the first sixteen matches of the season, Jenna was our L1, while Erin was L2.

There are several significant differences in the roles played by the L1 and L2 players.

For three of a team's six rotations, the setter is in the front row, leaving only two front-row hitters. In these rotations, a team will often rely most heavily on its left-side hitter. Because L1 plays next to the setter, the L1 player will be in the front row during two of these three rotations. For this reason, it can be advantageous to have your L1 be the stronger side-out attacker or "go-to" player.

However, the three front-row-setter rotations are also the ones where it is most advantageous to have a back-row hitter, to diversify what can otherwise be a predictable two-hitter offense.

The ideal situation is to use the player opposite the setter, the right-side hitter, for the back-row attack. The advantage of this arrangement is that when the setter is in the front row, the opposite player is always

in the back row. Unfortunately, MSU does not have a player at opposite who has a strong back-row attack.

The next-best choice is to use L2 as the back-row attacker. L2 is in the back row twice while the setter is in the front row. In addition, these two rotations have the L2 passing from the right side of the back row, which is the best location for the back-row attack.

L1 and L2 also differ in their side-out hitting zones. When in the front row, the L2 player hits on the left side of the court in all three service reception patterns. In contrast, the L1 player hits on the left only twice. When the setter is in the back right position, the L1 player hits on the right side.

So, why the switch at the current time? Chuck feels that Erin has an approach that is potentially advantageous for the right-side hit, so L1 may suit her. He sees Jenna as the team's best back-row attacker, so the team could be stronger with her in L2.

The first match in which he tried this combination was against Iowa, with mixed success. Although the Spartans won the match, their overall performance was less than stellar. Both Jenna and Erin had good hitting performances, but it's possible that the positional change caused some confusion in blocking, digging and passing, since it changes which players are side-by-side on the court.

Against Wisconsin, the switch seemed to pay off, at least for Jenna. Christie was able to set her in five of six rotations, providing more back-row attacks than in previous matches. Based on this success, we'll probably see this lineup continue for some time.

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Newsletter Editor:	Chris Wolf	(517) 332-4353
President:	Dave Martz	(517) 521-4907
Vice-president:	Jenny Bond	(517) 676-2676
Secretary:	Joy Jacobs	(517) 675-5590
Treasurer:	Jim Ellis	(517) 323-3566

MSU SideOut Club
P.O. Box 80491
Lansing MI 48908

Email: jimandeileenellis@prodigy.net
Web site: kurtz.tcimet.net/sideout

Big Ten Notebook

It looks as though this is the year the Big Ten will be recognized as the premier volleyball conference in the country. For the week of October 19, the coaches' poll had two Big Ten teams in the top five and six in the top 25, more than any other conference. The Sagarin ratings were very similar, with two in the top five and five in the top 25.

However, the reputation of the conference was really cemented by the Sagarin ratings computed for each conference. This showed the Big Ten in first place, with a rating of 90.2, compared with the second-place Big 12's rating of 86.8. The much-celebrated PAC-10

fell into third place with an 81.0.

At the halfway point, the Big Ten standings are very similar to the rankings made by the coaches prior to the start of the season. The following are profiles of selected teams in the conference:

The Leaders ...

It's hard to believe from **Penn State's** record (10-0, 20-0) that Terry Zemaitis, perhaps the most acclaimed player in PSU history, is actually gone. Somehow, the Nittany Lions seem to have grown stronger since her departure. In 1998, they are undefeated in 20 matches, having lost only 3 individual games along the way. They are one of only three undefeated teams in the country, Nebraska and Long Beach State being the other two. Going back a little further, they are 61-1 in their last 62 regular-season matches.

The team leads the nation in hitting percentage at .364 and has been totally dominating most opponents, holding them to a percentage of .079. A Nittany Lion tops the national standings in hitting, but it's the last player you might expect. That's right, the number one hitting percentage in the country belongs to PSU setter Bonnie Bremner. On top of that, Bremner has more attempts and more kills than one of her own middle hitters, Emily Stout, whose hitting puts her at number six in the country!

Their teammate Lauren Cacciamani makes it to the sixteenth slot in hitting percentage, which means that Penn State's opponents almost have to commit a blocker to the setter or middle every time, opening things up for their outside hitters.

The one time Penn State looked vulnerable was at Urbana-Champaign where they opened up a 2-0 lead in games, only to lose the next two to a fiery Illinois squad. They managed to hang on to win 15-12, but the match gave hope to other opponents.

Last year's **Wisconsin** Badgers nearly made it to the Final Four, losing to underdog Florida 2-3 in the regional final. This year (8-2, 18-3) they hope to do better under the leadership of senior setter Colleen Neels, in spite of the loss of All-American Amy Lee and All-Big-Ten Heather Dodaro.

Lefty Kate Fitzgerald converted from the left to the

right to fill Lee's shoes so well that you'd never know she played anywhere else. In the middle, freshman Sherisa Livingston has a huge jump that allows her to hit over almost anyone. In her first collegiate match, against USC, she didn't have a single kill, but she has since developed into a feared hitter.

One thing that sets the Badgers apart from other teams is that their kill leader, at 3.69 kills per game, is middle blocker Kelly Kennedy. Outside hitters almost always get the most sets, and have correspondingly more kills. To have a middle leading in kills tells us that the Badgers have very good passing and setting that allow them to get the ball to the middle more often than most teams.

Another unusual strength of the team is that coach John Cook has three solid left-side hitters to choose from. Senior Marisa Mackey, a four-year starter, was paired with sophomore Keylee Wright at the beginning of the season, until Wright sprained her ankle. While Wright missed five matches, junior Allyson Ross stepped in for her, and immediately led the team in kills for four matches.

...and Some Surprises

Selected fourth by the coaches in the pre-season poll, **Illinois'** strong second-place showing (8-2, 15-5) is something of a surprise. The Illini definitely surprised MSU at home, coming back from a 2-11 deficit in game two and eventually staving off seven game points to win 16-14. They won the match 3-1, with two Illinois players, Marshall and Coleman racking up 20 digs each, an almost unheard-of accomplishment for two players on the same team.

The distinguishing characteristic of Illinois is that they lost no starters from last season. Their starting lineup features the talents of two seniors and three juniors, all of whom are well-rounded athletes.

In the off-season, the entire squad traveled to the Netherlands to play. During May and June they competed in a number of tournaments there, winding up with an 8-3 record and some valuable experience.

The Boilermakers of **Purdue** (5-5, 11-8) were picked by the coaches for a tenth-place finish, so they must be extremely pleased to find themselves in fifth place. They did not look impressive in East Lansing, but

their new quick playing style with multiple attackers has been effective against other Big Ten opponents.

The coaches did not have high expectations for **Ohio State**, placing them sixth, but the reality (3-7, 10-9) has been even more disappointing.

They started out strongly, defeating both Florida and UCLA in their first tournament appearance.

However, early in the season, the Buckeyes lost starting middle blocker Brianne Spiers to a stress fracture of the leg. Spiers had already sat out the entire 1997 season after tearing an ACL.

In an unusual move, Jen Flynn who was recruited as a hitter, and was later named an honorable mention All-Big Ten selection as the Buckeyes' setter, has played both positions at different times this year.

Where Are They Now?

In the last issue, you read about some of MSU's volleyball "alumni" who have left the area. There are also a number of more recent players who are still around, and whom you have probably seen at matches this year.

Lindsey Clayton is taking 18 credits this semester in preparation for her graduation next May with two bachelor's degrees. One will be in Human Resource Management in the Eli Broad College of Business College and the other in Human Resources and Society in the College of Social Science. She plans a career in the human resource field, and hopes to stay within driving distance of her family in Marysville.

She stayed on campus for the summer taking classes, but made the trip home often to go boating with her family. Lindsey has been a frequent spectator at MSU soccer matches this fall, supporting her roommate Beth Merkle who plays on the team.

Veronica Morales is also still in school, but will complete her B.A. in Telecommunications in December. Then it's right back to the books, as she will continue on at MSU for an M.A. in Information Technologies and Services.

She spent the summer in San Francisco working for Hispanic & Asian Marketing Communication Research, Inc. Veronica was a project manager at H&AMCR, which specializes in surveys, focus

groups, attitude studies and similar research on the Hispanic/Latino, Portuguese and Asian markets.

She's not playing volleyball much, but has been coaching at LAVA clinics, which she is enthusiastic about: "I enjoy that a lot, especially because it lets me give something back to the community that gave me so much when I was playing at MSU."

Chris Dejarlais graduated with honors in May, 1998 in Chemical Engineering, but is still in the area. She currently works with SECOR International Incorporated in Okemos. SECOR is an environmental engineering consulting firm, where she is enjoying her work and learning something new every day.

She will help a friend coach the varsity volleyball team at Lakeside Christian School in East Lansing this winter. Chris says she hasn't really played volleyball since the season ended last year, and really misses everyone on the team. She still lives in Perry with husband (and true love) Mitch.

Julie Pavlus is now pursuing an M.S. degree in Professional Accounting with concentrations in Information Systems and Supply Chain Management. She is in a combined bachelor's/master's program, which she will finish in May, 1999.

Last summer she interned at PricewaterhouseCoopers in Chicago in a group called Operational Systems Risk Management. She had a very eventful summer traveling to different client locations and learning about the profession. She says "I may accept a job with PricewaterhouseCoopers, but I'm going to interview with a couple of other firms before making the big decision." She is considering living in either Chicago or Denver.

Julie has been giving volleyball pointers to her sister Jill, who is a junior at Byron High School. Like Julie and their two older sisters, Jill is a setter.

Julie reports that her back is significantly better than it was when she was playing, but she has yet to return to the active lifestyle she would like to live. Trainer Tory Lindley has been working with her on a rehab plan that they hope will do the trick.

Corie Richard's ideal would be a career in marketing and administration for a professional sports team (football, hockey or baseball) so that she can

stay within the athletic area. This semester she is working for the Roberts Sinto Corporation as a sales and marketing intern. She will be taking one class in the spring and will graduate in May with a BA in kinesiology, and an emphasis in marketing and administration.

For the first seven weeks of the summer she worked in the new Clara Bell Smith Student-Athlete Academic Center, while taking a marketing class. The second part of the summer she worked at the MSU volleyball camps in Jenison Field House. And when she had spare time, Corie reports "I would usually go up north to my parents' cottage in Muskegon with my boyfriend Billy."

The Sagarin Power Ratings— Volleyball Rankings by Computer

For years, fans of women's Division I volleyball have looked to two national ranking systems to find out which are the strongest teams in the country. Now, thanks to the American Volleyball Coaches' Association, we have a third ranking to consider, and it has proven to be one of the hot topics of conversation this season.

The newcomer is the Sagarin Power Ratings, the brainchild of Jeff Sagarin, who has a degree in mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an MBA from Indiana University. His computed ratings are actually very similar in concept to those of SideOut Club member Miguel Ballicora, which we described for you in November 1997. The Sagarin Ratings can be found online at <http://www.avca.org/collegiate/di.html>, while Miguel's are at <http://www.msu.edu/~ballicor/vb/rank.htm>.

Sagarin is best known for the power ratings he has supplied to *USA Today* since 1985. He has applied his system to sports as diverse as NBA basketball, college football, pro hockey, major league soccer, NASCAR stock car racing, and Indiana high school football. He has also developed techniques for rating individual players in team sports, which he has applied primarily to baseball. Until now, his only ventures into women's sports were ratings for college golf and soccer.

This year the AVCA asked him to rank Division I

volleyball teams, taking into account the unique nature of volleyball scoring. A team's rating is based on the number of individual games they win and lose, the score by which they win or lose each game, as well as the match outcome. The value of a win to a team's rating is proportional to the opponent's rating, i.e. beating a good team boosts your rating more than beating a poor team.

Match location also enters into the ratings. Since teams usually play better at home, a victory on the road is worth more than a victory against the same team at home.

Compared with the Traditional Polls

The other two national rankings are the AVCA/USA Today Coaches' Poll and the Volleyball Magazine rankings.

The Volleyball Magazine list has not had a lot of respect over the years, primarily because it has always been the opinion of a single person. It has been useful as a counterpoint, but with the advent of the Sagarin ratings, the magazine will probably have to rework it if they want it to regain importance. The ideal situation would be to turn it into a volleyball writers' poll, but there may not be enough sports writers around the country who are knowledgeable about volleyball to make this idea workable.

The AVCA Coaches' Poll is, as the name implies, a composite of the views of sixty Division I coaches. There are also fifteen alternates whose votes are used when any of the regular members do not submit a vote during a given week.

The list of coaches changes each year, with an attempt made to keep all conferences represented. There are four Big Ten coaches among the primary voters this year. Chuck Erbe has been a voter in the past, but is not this year.

(One interesting name found on this year's list is that of Ellen Dempsey. Ellen played volleyball at MSU in the early 80's and got her bachelor's in natural resources. She was head coach at Lansing Community College for a couple of years, before going to Northern Michigan where she was an assistant coach while earning her master's degree. She is now the head coach at Ohio University.)

One of the criticisms of the coaches' poll is that it is very difficult for coaches to stay knowledgeable about volleyball across the country. Since the game is rarely televised, most coaches only have the opportunity to see teams within their own area. This may mean that some votes are cast on the basis of hearsay and past reputation rather than current performance.

Features of the Sagarin Ratings

I find four things particularly interesting about Sagarin's ratings. First, and most obvious, is their role as a counterpoint to the coaches' poll. Fans can compare the two to see how computed ratings differ from the opinions of the coaches.

Considering the radical difference in how they are derived, it's surprising how similar the Sagarin ratings are to the coaches' poll. For example, for the week of October 19, only three teams in the top twenty rank more than three places apart in the two listings.

Arizona serves as a good example of the difference between the two systems, ranking 17th in the poll, but falling to 27th in the power ratings. For a voting coach who looked casually at their program, they appeared to be strong, with a 14-2 overall record, and a third-place standing in the PAC-10, an historically strong conference. However, their power rating was hurt by beating only one team in the top 25, losing two matches at home, losing too many individual games, and allowing too many points.

A second interesting feature is that, unlike the coaches' poll, the numerical ratings of the teams quantify the strength differences between them.

Again using the October 19 rankings, the three top teams—Nebraska, Penn State, and Long Beach State—had ratings of 126, 125 and 120, a separation of only 6 points. Then there is an 11-point gap and we find the fourth through eleventh bunched within a range of only five points. This indicates that the top three teams are significantly better than everyone else, while the next group of eight teams are very close in strength.

Sagarin's system also calculates a home-advantage rating each week. This number is typically around four points. To use it, you add it to the rating of the home team before comparing the ratings of two

teams that will be playing each other.

Third, the mathematical basis of Sagarin's ratings allows him to provide probability charts for each match. To use them, you first calculate the difference between the ratings of the two teams playing, with the home-advantage figure included. Then you look up this difference in his charts to see what to expect. See the sidebar on the next page for an illustration of how to do this calculation.

Finally, the Sagarin ratings provide an overall ranking of each team's strength of schedule. A team that has played very strong opponents will rank quite highly in this respect, while a cream-puff schedule will show up as a low number.

Through October 19, the three toughest schedules in the country belonged to UCLA, Texas, and Illinois, whose opponents had an average rating of about 90. Each of these teams had played half or more of their matches against top-25 opponents. In contrast, the Spartans' schedule ranking was 22nd in the country, with an average rating of 77 for their opponents. Number two Penn State had one of the weakest schedules among the top 25, ranking 55th overall, with a numerical rating of only 70 for their opponents.

What Do They Do For (And To) The Game?

While all this is entertaining and informative for fans, it's unclear just what effects the Sagarin ratings will have on women's volleyball.

One criticism of the Sagarin ratings is that they penalize coaches who prefer to play their backup players whenever possible. A team that is playing a weak opponent can boost its power rating by playing all six starters for the entire match, to guarantee a 3-0 win and give up as few points as possible. If, instead, the coach uses such matches as opportunities to give playing time to non-starters, the team's power rating will probably go down, because the opponents will score more points, and might even win a game.

Chuck Erbe says that coaches are recognizing this fact, and may alter their substitution patterns because of it. "It's happening already", he says. "When Russ Rose and I talked before our match at Penn State, the Sagarin ratings were part of the conversation. Russ had seen his team's rating fall after beating Illinois, because they gave up two games. Then what

happens that night? Penn State was beating us handily in front of their home crowd, yet Russ didn't bring in a single one of his second-string players!"

Jeff Sagarin takes issue with this, saying it might work in the short term, but would fail over the course of a season. "If you never develop your reserves, then they won't be ready when you need them in a match against another good team", he insists.

He also defends his methodology: "If you examine thousands of scores, you'll see that the good teams tend to win by larger margins than do poorer teams. In all the other sports I do involving scores, it turns out that you get better predictive accuracy if you pay attention to score margins rather than discounting them."

Nevertheless, some coaches might take the risk, especially if they perceive that it could improve their tournament seeding. For example, a number one seeded team will play a much easier schedule in the playoffs than will a number four seed. When rankings are very close, a coach might bet on a higher Sagarin ranking to make the difference. Similarly, a team in the top 16 seeds will host the first two rounds of the tournament, so the extra boost given by an improved Sagarin rating might gain the team that significant home advantage.

Officially, the NCAA says that the Division I Women's Volleyball Committee does not use a poll in the championship tournament selection process. However, it seems unrealistic to think that the committee members do not look at the coaches' poll, and that they will not also be influenced by the Sagarin ratings. Coaches will be watching carefully to see what happens with this year's selections.

The Sagarin ratings also have the potential of "contaminating" the coaches' poll itself. Many, if not

all, of the voting coaches must be looking at the ratings, and could certainly be influenced by them. It would be a shame if the coaches' poll were to simply mirror the computerized rankings. The sport is better off having the Sagarin ratings as a supplement to an independent "opinion" poll.

Overall, most observers think the Sagarin ratings are a welcome addition to women's volleyball. Some feel that it adds recognition to the sport to have Sagarin's name, so closely associated with major sports, on a volleyball rating system. Sagarin's computations are far from infallible, but it's certainly helpful to have an alternative ranking system.

Putting the Sagarin Power Ratings to Use

Let's look at MSU's road matches for 10/16 and 17 as examples of how to use the power ratings.

MSU's rating that week was 91.15, and the home advantage was 4.21 in favor of their opponents. Ohio State's rating was barely higher than MSU's, at 91.24, but the home advantage bumped the difference between the two to 4.3 points. Sagarin's charts showed this to predict a 65% probability of a win for Ohio State, which is only a marginal advantage. One way to look at this is that if the teams were to play three times, Ohio State would win two out of three matches. Of course the Spartans won this particular match 3-1, resulting in a mild upset.

In contrast, Penn State had a lofty rating of 122.04 that week, so adding in the home advantage opened a gap of 35.1 points over MSU. Sagarin's probability charts show this as a 99.9% likely win for Penn State. They held true to form, winning 3-0 and holding MSU to only 16 points for the match.

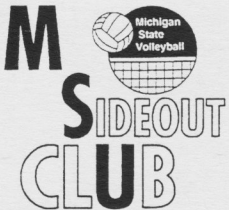
SideOut Club Calendar for 1998

Date	Event	Location	Time
Saturday, October 31	Coach's Luncheon	Reno's East, East Lansing	11:30 am
Wednesday, November 4	Coach's Luncheon	Reno's East, East Lansing	11:30 am
Saturday, November 21	Coach's Luncheon	Reno's East, East Lansing	11:30 am
Sunday, January 24	Spartan Volleyball Banquet	Hawk Hollow Golf Course	TBD

1998 Schedule and Results

(All home matches are played in Jenison Field House)

9/4	W	Eastern Michigan	15-6, 15-7, 15-11	10/23	W	IOWA	15-11, 15-9, 15-8
9/5	W	Central Michigan	15-5, 15-5, 15-9	10/24	W	WISCONSIN	9-15, 15-13, 5-15, 15-13, 15-12
	W	Pittsburgh	15-13, 15-3, 11-15, 15-4	10/28		Western Michigan	7:00 pm
9/11	L	Louisville	15-13, 4-15, 4-15, 15-9, 10-15			(at Van Andel Arena, Grand Rapids)	
9/12	W	Murray State	15-5, 8-15, 15-4, 15-9	10/30		NORTHWESTERN	7:00 pm
		MCSA Russia (exhibition, loss 0-3)		10/31		INDIANA	8:00 pm
9/18	W	Utah	15-12, 15-9, 16-14	11/4		MICHIGAN	7:00 pm
9/19	W	New Hampshire	15-7, 15-4, 15-10	11/6		@Minnesota	7:00 pm
9/19	W	Notre Dame	15-6, 15-13, 15-11	11/12		@Purdue	7:30 pm
9/25	L	ILLINOIS	7-15, 14-16, 15-11, 2-15	11/14		@Illinois	7:00 pm
9/26	W	PURDUE	15-12, 15-7, 15-7	11/20		PENN STATE	7:00 pm
10/2	L	@Indiana	12-15, 15-11, 13-15, 13-15	11/22		OHIO STATE	1:30 pm
10/3	W	@Northwestern	15-7, 15-8, 15-4	11/27		@Wisconsin	7:00 pm
10/7	W	@Michigan	15-10, 15-12, 15-5	11/28		@Iowa	7:00 pm
10/10	W	MINNESOTA	15-10, 15-5, 15-13	12/3-6		NCAA - 1 st and 2 nd Round	
10/16	W	@Ohio State	15-9, 15-10, 14-16, 15-9	12/10-13		NCAA Regionals	
10/17	L	@Penn State	3-15, 7-15, 6-15	12/17-19		NCAA Final Four in Madison, Wisconsin	



P.O. Box 80491
Lansing MI 48908