
The Service Line

Volleyball News from the MSU SideOut Club

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Spartans Regroup for Second Half

Battling For a Post-Season Bid

With sixty percent of the Big Ten season complete, the MSU Spartans are not where they had hoped to be.

Their conference won-lost record stands at .500, and they sit in sixth place, almost exactly the way they finished the season in 1999. All of their wins are against the bottom half of the conference, with not a single victory over a team above them in the standings.

Possibly the biggest factor in this lower-than expected standing is the strength of the conference this year. As of October 23, the Big Ten had four teams (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ohio State and Penn State) in spots six through thirteen of the AVCA coaches' poll. At the same point in 1999, the conference had only one team (#1 Penn State) in the top twenty. The Spartans could be more talented than last year, but it's hard to see it when everyone else is so much better.

Obviously injuries are part of the problem. We'll never know how things would have been different if the team had been able to play at full strength for

the entire season. However, all of the regular starters played against Ohio State where they managed to win only one game, so it's hard to blame other losses on who's on the floor any particular night.

Head Coach Chuck Erbe puts it very plainly, "Yes, we've lost some players to injury, but the others just have to step up and play at a higher level. We recognize that we're out of the Big Ten championship race; now we're battling just to get an NCAA tournament bid."

Unfortunately, losing players to injury hurts not only on Friday and Saturday nights. Having fewer players and less talent is also a detriment during practice sessions, making it harder to prepare for the weekend.

More Aggressive Serving

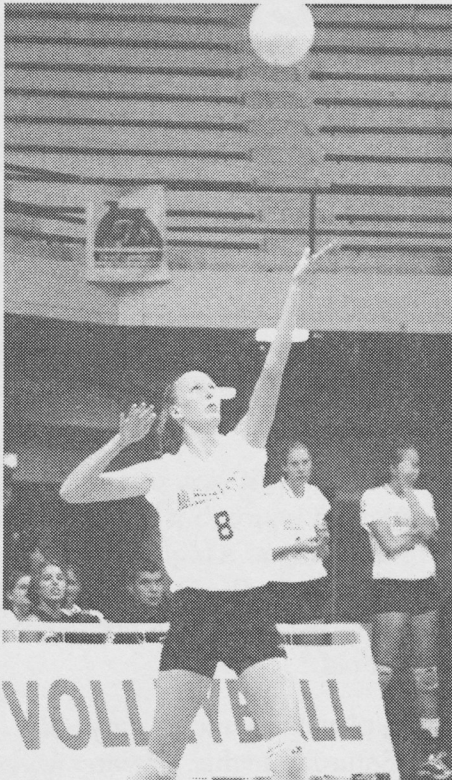
So how can the team break into the upper half of the conference this year? One of Chuck's immediate reactions was to adopt a more aggressive service strategy.

The most visible change was that several Spartans have started jump serving. However, all of our players, even those who use the float serve, have gotten more daring. The serves have more velocity, and are attacking vulnerable areas of the court.

In the first two weeks of this, the results were mixed. Against Minnesota, MSU had what was probably a team-record 27 service errors, with only seven aces to show for it. The following night was much better, with nine aces versus eleven errors against Iowa. It paid off in spades against Indiana, earning accolades from Indiana coach Katie Weismiller: "They flat out beat us from the

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Jenny Rood had four aces against Minnesota

Photo: Chris Wolf

service line tonight. We were not able to pass the ball and therefore were unable to get our offense running.”

Overall during this four-match series, the team upped its aces-per-game rate by 50% compared with the first eight Big Ten matches. During the same period, service errors per game went up 27%.

Chuck acknowledges that the strategy is risky, but says that fans will just have to get used to more missed serves. In addition, he acknowledges that jump serving can be hard on the legs, and tiring during long matches.

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One advantage of aggressive serving is that it creates a mindset for players to take control of the game. Too many times the MSU players have appeared to sit back and wait for things to happen instead of actively pursuing a win. Chuck hopes that they can learn to change this behavior.

Along the same lines, practice drills have been changed to be more competitive, so that every drill has winners and losers. This makes practices more match-like, so the team is more accustomed to performing under pressure.

Event-Filled Weekend Planned for Season-End

The closing weekend of the volleyball season this year has been dubbed Parent's Weekend, and will be highlighted by the Spartan Volleyball Banquet.

The weekend starts November 24 with Parent's Night—Friday's match against Northwestern. For this special event, each player will be introduced before the game, accompanied by her parents.

Saturday will have the Coach's luncheon at Buddies at 11:30. The Saturday evening match against Wisconsin is designated Senior Night, for which the seniors on the team will be honored in pre-game ceremonies.

Sunday November 26 features the Spartan Volleyball Banquet, to be held again at Hawk Hollow Golf Course in the early afternoon. SideOut Club members will receive a separate mailing about this soon.

Sunday evening, SideOut Club members are invited to Damon's where the team will watch the NCAA tournament selection broadcast live via satellite feed. The scheduled time for this was not available at press time.

The new date for the Banquet was chosen this year especially to help out the parents who are coming from far-flung areas. We currently have players from Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, California (two players), Nebraska

(two players), and Manitoba. Their parents have to make quite a long trip to MSU, and it's hard for them to attend both Parent's night in November and the Banquet in January. In fact, the parents of some of our seniors have not yet attended a Banquet because of the travel difficulties.

Head Coach Chuck Erbe acknowledged that the date might be inconvenient for some fans, if they are traveling for the Thanksgiving holiday, but felt it was a worthwhile change to accommodate the parents. He added "Most other sports have their banquets right at the end of the season, rather than waiting until two months later. We're considering this as possibly a permanent change."

If so, the banquet would have to be scheduled a week earlier during alternate years when we close the season on the road, since Parent's night would be held the next-to-last weekend of the season. This would, however, have the advantage of not conflicting with Thanksgiving.

Statistics Primer—Kills and Hitting Percentage

One of the most published statistics in volleyball is the hitting percentage (sometimes called kill efficiency or attack percentage), which is expressed as a three digit decimal like a baseball batting average. The calculation of this is pretty simple—take a player's total kills, subtract her number of errors, and divide by her total attack attempts, expressed as $(K-E)/A$.

For example, a player who gets 20 kills during 40 attempts with no errors, would have a hitting percentage of $(20-0)/40$, or .500. If she had the same number of kills and attempts, but had 8 errors, her hitting percentage would go down to $(20-8)/40$, or .300.

So how does the statistician determine the numbers that go into the formula?

Attack Attempts (also known as attempts)

An attack attempt occurs when a player tries to hit the ball over the net in an effort to score a point or

sideout. Notice that the player's aggressive intent is crucial—if the ball is played over the net simply to keep it in play, it is not an attack attempt. Thus, a volleyball statistician must always be judging intent when tallying attacks.

Some examples of hits that are *not* attack attempts:

–A serve reception (pass) that crosses the net and goes out of bounds or is kept in play by the serving team

–A hit resulting from a bad set, where the hitter is only trying to keep the ball in play

–A broken play where no set is made, and the final hit over the net is a free ball

Kills

A player gets a kill any time a ball played over the net earns a point or sideout for the player's team, as a direct outcome of the hit itself. This specifically includes any situation where the opponents commit a fault in trying to block the hit.

Some examples of kills:

–A hit that goes off a blocker or digger and goes out of bounds

–A hit that is dug but not kept under control, where the team has to scramble to try to keep it in play and ultimately fails to get it back over the net

–A hit where one of the blockers touches the net or crosses the center line

Any time a player is awarded a kill she is also awarded an attack attempt, even if the play otherwise might not have qualified as an attempt. For example, in 1998 a Wisconsin player hit a hard attack down the line that bounced off Christie Landry's shoulder, went over the net and landed in the Wisconsin court for a point. If Wisconsin had kept that ball in play, Christie's play would not have been counted as an attempt, since she was not trying to score a point when she played it. However, because it did result in a point, it was a kill, and thus automatically became an attempt.

Errors

An attack error is the opposite of a kill—an attack attempt that results in a point or sideout for the opponents. This can happen in one of two ways:

–The player making an attack attempt commits a fault of any kind, such as hitting the ball out of bounds, touching the net, hitting the ball into the net, or carrying the ball

–An attack is blocked by the opponents and as a result cannot be kept in play by the attacker's team

Notice that errors are subtracted from kills in the computation of hitting percentage. This means that unlike a batting average, a hitting percentage can be negative. Going back to our hypothetical player with 40 attempts, suppose she had ten kills, but also had twelve errors. Her hitting percentage would be $(10-12)/40$ or $-.050$. (Of course, this would tell us that her setter wasn't paying attention during the match; if the hitter was having that much trouble on offense, she never should have gotten 40 sets!)

Neutral Attacks

Any attack attempt that is not a kill or an error is considered a neutral attack. Neutral attacks don't enter directly into the calculation of hitting percentage, but they sort of "complete the picture". They are all of the attacks that are kept in play, usually by a dig that keeps the ball under control or by a block back into the attacker's court that is kept in play. Roughly 45% of all attacks are neutral attacks.

Injury Update

MSU has lost more starters to injuries this year than in any previous season.

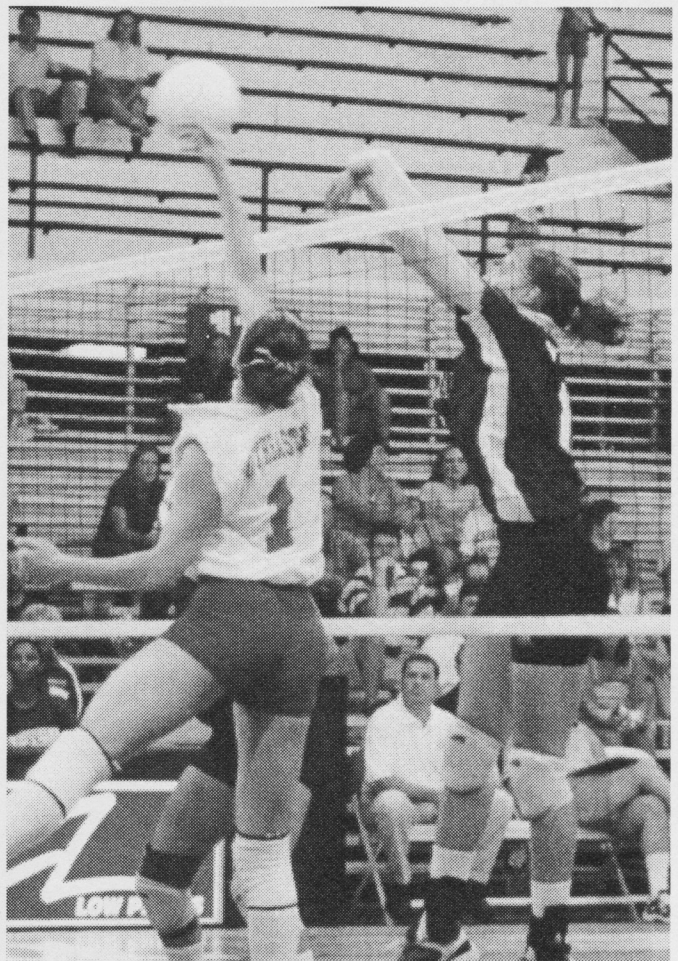
■ Sarah Gustin started the season with an abdominal strain that kept her from any hitting role for four of the first five matches.

■ Amy Sibbersen sprained her ankle October 5 in practice when she landed on another player's foot while blocking. According to Chuck "The fact that she was wearing an Active Ankle saved her from a

much worse injury". She returned to play two weeks later, but was not playing at her full ability. Chuck later acknowledged that it was a premature return.

■ While hitting during warmups at Northwestern on October 14, Jessica Sanborn felt a pop in her left foot, but went ahead and started the match. By early in game two it was hurting so much that she took herself out. It was later diagnosed as a fractured fifth metatarsal that could keep her sidelined for the rest of the regular season. She had surgery on the foot only days after the injury.

■ Five days later, Sarah, now fully recovered from her abdominal injury, collided with another player during practice and sprained a ligament in her foot. She was expected to be out for two to four weeks.



Maren Witzel has replaced the injured Jessica Sanborn, giving her lots of opportunities for block like this. Photo: Chris Wolf

■ It was also discovered a couple of weeks ago that middle blocker Naomi Taylor had incurred a rotator-cuff injury, probably prior to the start of the season. She felt something wasn't right in her shoulder, but tried to just practice through it rather than seeking help from a trainer. When the problem was finally diagnosed, she was scheduled for surgery to repair it.

At the moment, the Spartans really have no one available on the bench to play middle. When Jess was injured, Chuck replaced her with Maren Witzel who had been playing outside hitter since last year, but was originally recruited as a middle hitter. He also started talking about the possibility of switching Jenny Rood to the middle, perhaps trying to be prepared for anything.

Maren herself has been playing with some aches and pains, including both her foot and back. MSU is not the only Big Ten team with a depleted roster either. Illinois has lost three outside hitters to knee injuries this season.

Verbal Commitments Reported From Three Recruits

According to press reports, the MSU volleyball program has landed at least three top recruits for 2001. (MSU officials cannot announce any recruits until they sign letters of intent, which is not allowed until November 8. This is a new, earlier signing date than in previous years.)

The Sarasota (Florida) Herald-Tribune reported on September 14 that Megan Wallin of Cardinal Mooney High School has verbally committed to attend Michigan State. Wallin is a 6-foot-2 middle hitter, who topped her team in kills and blocks last year and was named first-team All-State. The Cougars made their way to the state semi-finals last year, and are ranked third in the state this season.

Wallin visited campus during the L&L tournament this year. She decided she loved the coaching staff, she was impressed with the academics, and she

was convinced the Big Ten is the best volleyball conference in the country. She expects to be red-shirted her first season, to allow her more time to build up her strength and get ready for the college game.

Two other high school players—Mickey Davis and Diana Stepyk—are listed as headed to MSU on highwired.com's list of volleyball recruits. They are both listed as outside hitters, from Park Hills, Ohio and Libertyville, Illinois respectively. Stepyk won all-state honors last year and has a younger sister Hayley who plays on the same team with her. Her verbal commitment was reported very early, in May of this year.

MSU Volleyball on the Airwaves

Local Cable

AT&T Cable will televise three more MSU home volleyball matches this season on channel 17 in Lansing and channel 13 in East Lansing/Meridian Township. This will include the Illinois and Purdue matches November 3 and 4, and the Ohio State match on November 11. Each match will be televised live, and then will be replayed several times during the following week.

Radio

WVFN AM 730 will also produce live broadcasts of the Illinois and Ohio State matches, as well as the road trip to Michigan on November 8. The radio feed can also be heard live on the Internet at www.msuspartans.com.

ESPN2

ESPN2 will televise one of the most important second-half Big Ten matches—Penn State at Minnesota on November 4, to be shown November 7 at 1:00 pm. The final ESPN2 broadcast will be Purdue at Wisconsin on November 18, aired November 19 at 2:30 pm.

Revised Match Time

Don't forget that one more home match, Ohio State on November 11, will start late, at 8:00 pm.

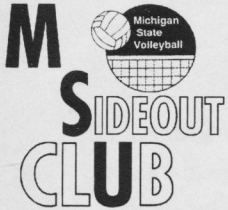
2000 Schedule and Results

(All home matches are played in Jenison Field House. All times listed are Eastern.)

9/1	W	RUTGERS	15-11, 15-7, 15-11
9/2	W	NORTHEASTERN	15-2, 15-3, 15-7
9/2	W	EASTERN WASHINGTON	15-5, 15-5, 15-10
9/8	L	UCLA	15-13, 12-15, 11-15, 7-15
9/9	L	Nebraska	3-15, 3-15, 4-15
9/10	W	Notre Dame	12-15, 15-7, 15-12, 12-15, 15-10
9/15	W	Hofstra	15-11, 13-15, 15-5, 15-11
9/16	W	Georgetown	15-10, 15-1, 15-11
9/16	W	San Diego	15-10, 15-8, 15-10
9/20	W	MICHIGAN	11-15, 15-11, 15-13, 6-15, 15-5
9/22	L	@Ohio State	15-11, 5-15, 7-15, 11-15
9/29	W	@Purdue	15-5, 15-6, 15-8
9/30	W	@Illinois	15-2, 4-15, 15-13, 6-15, 15-12
10/6	L	PENN STATE	15-11, 6-15, 10-15, 7-15
10/7	W	INDIANA	15-3, 15-4, 15-2

10/13	L	@Wisconsin	9-15, 15-12, 13-15, 6-15
10/14	W	@Northwestern	7-15, 15-10, 15-10, 15-8
10/20	L	MINNESOTA	15-6, 8-15, 11-15, 4-15
10/21	L	IOWA	15-1, 15-12, 10-15, 13-15, 11-15
10/27	W	@Indiana	15-5, 15-9, 15-12
10/28	L	@Penn State	7-15, 5-15, 7-15
11/3		ILLINOIS	7:00 pm
11/4		PURDUE	7:00 pm
11/8		@Michigan	7:00 pm
11/11		OHIO STATE	8:00 pm
11/17		@Iowa	8:00 pm
11/18		@Minnesota	8:00 pm
11/24		NORTHWESTERN	7:00 pm
11/25		WISCONSIN	7:00 pm

12/2-3		NCAA - 1st and 2nd Round
12/9-10		NCAA Regionals
12/14-16		NCAA Championships in Richmond, Virginia



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