



West Platte's Winning Program Helps Sisters Build A Winning Relationship

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"When sisters stand shoulder to shoulder, who stands a chance against us?"

– Pam Brown, Australian Poet

Junior Samantha Comer thought she'd be reduced to a puddle of tears when the West Platte volleyball team celebrated "Senior Night" Oct. 12.

“I’ll be bawling my eyes out,” she said the night before, while sitting in a nearly empty North Platte gymnasium.

The Lady Jays had just chalked up a non-conference win over North Platte, with Samantha – the always steady, occasionally spectacular setter – orchestrating the team’s attack. In less than 24 hours, they’d be taking the court for their 2010 home finale against Nodaway-Holt, but not before saluting the team’s four seniors.

And why would “Senior Night” stir such strong emotions in Samantha, *just a junior*?

Though she will be back next year, she knows playing for West Platte in 2011 won’t be quite the same experience it has been in 2010 or ’09. Next year, she’ll no longer be standing shoulder to shoulder with her sister, Tarah. When this season’s final match-point is played, they will be instantly transformed into former teammates.

Tarah, an all-district middle hitter, is one of those Lady Jay seniors set to graduate next spring. Samantha managed to remain stoic during the pre-match ceremony in which Tarah and the other Lady Jay seniors – Lauren Rhodes, Courtney Sorensen and Whitney Taylor – presented roses to their parents. Her big sister, however, cried as the realization hit her she was about to play the last home match of a stellar high school career that began with her earning a varsity roster spot as a freshman. Tarah remained red-faced and weepy-eyed throughout the 25-12, 25-14 sweep of Nodaway-Holt.

No matter how far West Platte may advance as district play – and the *one-loss-and-you’re-done* anxiety that goes with it – begins next week, the end is drawing near on this season. Tarah and Samantha’s shared experience of playing together as sibling *allies* rather than rivals will soon be over.

“We *really* want to keep this season going,” said Tarah, seated next to her sister on those North Platte bleachers. “I think we can make it out of districts, at least.”

Samantha ups the ante, declaring, “Let’s shoot for State!”

Part Of A Winning Tradition

Through playing volleyball at West Platte, Samantha and Tarah have already come a long way. Donning the Lady Jays’ blue-and-black uniforms and being teammates will, they believe, have an enduring impact on their lifelong bond as sisters.

Prior to joining forces on the same side of the net, the relationship between Michelle and Jeff Comer’s only children was often testy. The two sisters described having the kind of frequent spats that inspired *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz to once observe, “Big sisters are the crabgrass in the lawn of life.”

Tarah admitted, “Punches were thrown, sometimes.”

“Just *sometimes*,” stressed Samantha.

Now the two are more inclined to give each other a pat on the back. Being a part of West Platte’s ongoing victorious volleyball tradition has helped the sisters, born just a year apart, grow closer. They’re leading contributors on a team that posted a 17-10 record last year and stood at 18-7 this fall after topping Lawson 25-13, 25-13 last Thursday.

A high winning percentage – on average around .667 per season – has become synonymous with the Lady Jays during Cindy Bond’s 18 years as head coach. Bond has earned a reputation for molding teams that are both fundamentally sound and truly close-knit. Playing in an environment that emphasizes unity has changed the way Tarah and Samantha relate to one another.

“I’ve coached a lot of sisters over the years,” said Bond. “Sometimes you have some tension. Most generally, though, they look out for each other. In the past, Tarah might have been the big sister who picked on her little sister – the one who had to be the boss. Now she and Samantha get along better. They really enjoy being teammates.”

From the volleyball court to the home front “things have gotten a lot better,” according to Tarah. Samantha, who tends to be the quieter one, nodded in agreement.

“At home I’m still mean to her,” joked Tarah, sparking a laugh from Samantha before adding, “On the court, it’s different. We’re teammates out there.”

Mutual Respect

“Out there,” the two girls respect one another’s skills and dedication to keeping West Platte a perennial winner in the sport they love.

Her 5-foot-10 height combined with an ability to elevate off the floor makes Tarah an imposing problem at the net for any opponent. She plays the game high above the net-cord, getting on top of the ball and slamming it down with killer intent. She’s a fearsome spiker, an intimidating blocker.

When she shifts to the back row, the opposition doesn’t catch a break, either – not with 6-foot junior Lexi Collier, an equally tenacious middle hitter/blocker, rotating to the front line. Also, Tarah can still make big plays from the back row, digging the ball out, passing it cleanly to Samantha for the set or, like Collier, giving the Lady Jays’ a spiking threat from behind the center line.

“Hit, block, pass, dig and serve. Tarah does it all,” said Bond.

Tarah appreciates how much a volleyball team’s success hinges on the one element Bond didn’t mention. It’s the facet of the game casual fans often overlook – sort of like the pin-point pass that makes a basketball alley-hoop dunk possible. Setting.

Samantha operates as a setter like a crafty chess master moving pieces around the board. She keeps the team across the net disoriented, guessing whom she will be setting the ball for next. Tarah? Collier? Soresen, West Platte’s other 6-footer? The 5-4 Rhodes, who plays a TALL game thanks to what must be spring-loaded sneakers, or 5-9 junior Emily Driskell?

West Platte simply has a lot of talented hitters. Samantha brings out the best in them. At 5-8, she can hold her own at the net, too, utilizing a delicate dink (volleyball’s equivalent of a tennis drop-shot) when it is least expected.

“Samantha is a leader out there,” said Tarah. “She moves the ball around among all our hitters. She knows where you like to have the ball placed, and she puts it right where you want it.”

Samantha shrugged.

“I love being the setter on this team,” she said. “Every point, I’ve got all these great hitters I can set for, and each of them knows how to go up and put the ball down.”

Putting the ball down with authority will be paramount to the Lady Jays’ quest to extend their season beyond next week’s district tournament. They lost last year’s Class 2 District 15 final to Lee’s Summit Community Christian.

Tarah and Samantha will continue playing volleyball through the winter. Won’t be the same, though. They will be on different club teams, competing in separate age divisions.

Being teammates for their high school team, representing their community with “LADY JAYS” across the back of their jerseys, is what has made this all-too-brief moment in their lives so special.

“This is something we’ll be talking about the rest of our lives,” said Tarah, hoping to delay for as long as possible the inevitable end to West Platte’s 2010 season so that she can continue playing alongside Samantha – and all their other Lady Jay “sisters.”