



West Platte volleyball coach Amber Guthrie knows her dad is watching—and she wants to make him proud

By **JOE LOUDON**
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He'd be proud.

With her December graduation from Northwest Missouri State University fast approaching, Fred Guthrie's daughter—his "little girl"—is a young woman eager to find a job. But not just any job. She wants to secure a teaching position that will allow her to "give back" to Weston, a community that has, over the last 14 months, opened its heart to her and her family.

"We couldn't have made it this last year without having our whole community behind us," said Amber Guthrie, recalling the outpouring of support given her, her mother and her two brothers ever since the tragic news broke Aug. 1, 2011, that flood waters swept away Fred, a Missouri State Trooper, and his K-9 partner, Reed.

Since her father's passing—his death was officially announced Sept. 28, 2011, and his body was recovered Jan. 12—Guthrie has asked herself one question prior to each action she takes: "Is this something Dad would be proud of?"

The answer, she knew, would be a resounding "YES," when she decided while student-teaching this fall she could also take on the responsibilities of a part-time job. But not just any part-time job. 2012 marks Amber Guthrie's first season as the West Platte head volleyball coach—six years after she last wore Bluejay blue-and-black as a standout for West Platte's 2006 KCI championship team.

Among Fred's greatest joys had been coaching the youth basketball teams Amber and her brothers, Dylan and Cody, played for.

"In a way, the passion he had for coaching is something I'm trying to carry on," said Coach Guthrie, after the Lady Jays moved to 14-1 with a sweep of Mid-Buchanan last Thursday. "He'd be so excited right now. I think about him looking down and seeing me doing this, being the head volleyball coach at West Platte. Knowing he's watching every game is a big motivator for me."

A Source Of Civic Pride

So is carrying on the tradition her former coach Cindy Bond established during her 300-plus wins leading the West Platte program.

The local high school volleyball team's perennial competitiveness has evolved into a source of civic pride in Weston. Almost as certain as the leaves falling each autumn, West Platte seemed to always be in contention for KCI and district volleyball titles during Bond's 19-year tenure as head coach.

One glance at the VOLLEYBALL banner hanging in the gym tells a part of the success story Bond authored: nine conference championships between 1994 and 2006, 10 district crowns won between 1993 and 2010. The Lady Jays added another KCI title during a 29-4 run last season.

When Bond decided in the spring to retire as a coach—with 399 career wins (most of them at West Platte, though she also coached briefly at Plattsburg)—she thought Guthrie would be an ideal successor. After excelling as a Lady Jay, Guthrie went on to be an outside hitter at Highland Community College and then for the Northwest Bearcats.

"Cindy was the one who encouraged Amber to apply for the job," West Platte Athletic Director Brad Basel said. He coached Guthrie in basketball, a sport in which she earned all-district honors. "So I know Cindy was thrilled Amber got the job. Cindy and I both knew Amber was a hard worker as a high school athlete, someone who kept working to get better and better.

"We both know what kind of girl she is—someone who'd be a great role model for our kids."

Basel and Bond both can't resist still referring to Guthrie as a "girl."

"Amber always had a positive attitude," said Bond, who still teaches at West Platte. "She always cared more about the team than herself, always came to practice to work. That's not as easy to find in athletes today as it once was."

'Jumping In'

More than once this season Guthrie—just five years removed from her high school graduation—has been mistaken for being a West Platte player rather than the head coach. She loves to still play and frequently joins the Lady Jays on the court for serving or hitting drills—or even for a scrimmage.

"I do try to jump in during practice," Guthrie said. "Sometimes I can't resist. Sometimes, the girls have to see how it's done, not just hear about it."

Trying to dig out their coach's serves and spikes can lead to practices almost as intense, if not more intense, than some matches. It's obvious to the Lady Jays that their coach is someone who did and still could play at the next level.

“It’s a pretty big deal having a coach who played in college,” West Platte defensive specialist Brooke Horseman pointed out. “When she gets out there and plays with us, we know if we can get clean passes off her serves and hits, we’ll be OK in most matches. There’s no one at our level who can hit like she does.”

Guthrie praises Horseman and the other three seniors on her roster—Chloe Faris, Jordan Bialek and Jana Hochard—for their leadership and “making my first year as a head coach easy.” She inherited from Bond “as good a group as any coach could want.”



How many additional years will Guthrie have as West Platte’s head coach? That depends on whether or not she can secure a full-time elementary school teaching position with the district or at another district near-by.

‘This Is Where I Want To Be’

Like any good coach, Guthrie knows not to look too far ahead.

Hopefully, there’s a lot more volleyball to be played this season. When the last match is eventually contested, she’ll immediately turn her attention to being the Lady Jays’ assistant basketball coach. After graduating from Northwest, she’ll work as a substitute teacher and wait to see what full-time faculty vacancies might open in West Platte next spring.

She’s also going to enjoy watching her “little brothers”—Dylan, a senior, and Cody, a sophomore and the most gregarious of the Guthrie kids—playing football and basketball for West Platte. “Dad would be so proud of his boys,” said Amber. “They’re great kids. They’ve had to step up, and they really have.”

But they haven’t started calling her Coach Guthrie yet—just “sis.” Getting a student-teaching assignment at West Platte has allowed Guthrie to again live with her brothers and her mother, Teresa.

“I thought after being on my own the last few years, it’d be difficult, but I love being with my family again,” she said. “With all that was happening with my dad last fall, being away at Northwest was so hard.”

She added, "I never thought I'd end up back at West Platte coaching, but now I know this is where I have so much support. It's wonderful being back here. This is where I want to be. I hope to be coaching here a long, long time.

"This is home."