

## Van Oort wants J-Hawks to enjoy competing

Written by Sher Jasperse

Sunday, 08 September 2013 17:21 - Last Updated Sunday, 08 September 2013 17:30

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First-year Jefferson volleyball coach Mary Kay Van Oort knows what it's like to be a star and what it's like to be the kid who barely made the cut, and she wants to make sure both kinds of girls feel at home on her team.

"I really care about everybody in the gym," she says. "The star player is no more important than the 12th player on the team. They all contribute to what we're doing. I worry about everybody's experience."

She also wants to make sure a team that struggled through a 4-32 season last year knows the heady, confidence-building feeling of getting a key win. A sweep of Dubuque Senior in the team's first outing this past Tuesday — including a come-from-behind triumph after a deep deficit in the third game — set a nice stage for accomplishing both goals.

It was an early boost for the team and for Van Oort, an accomplished former volleyball player and coach who is returning to the head coaching role after a lengthy hiatus during which she turned her attention to family and career.

A native of Lawrence, Kan., Van Oort (then Mary Kay Waller) developed her volleyball prowess in halting fashion at a high school with a storied program. The Lawrence High School team was on an incredible run, she remembers, winning the state title 19 out of 22 years.

"But I was a late, late bloomer," she says.

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A tall, lanky kid, she was drawn to basketball, where she eventually earned second team all-state honors, but skipped volleyball. “In ninth grade my sister dragged me to (volleyball) preseason. My junior year I almost got cut. I made the JV team and I thanked the coach for giving me a chance.”

She made the most of it, blossoming into an all-state player who won a full-ride scholarship to Notre Dame. Volleyball was a simpler game back then, she laughs. “We were all setters and hitters. I played hitter.”

Her first-year Notre Dame coach had assembled a team of unheralded Midwesterners with limited experience but plenty of potential. “We started as a very mediocre team,” says Van Oort. “By my senior year we made it to the Sweet 16.”

A two-time MVP, Van Oort played a major role in the turnaround. Her senior year, one of her teammates was a talented freshman — “little Margie” — who later married Iowa basketball coach Fran McCaffery. “She was little to me,” jokes the 6-foot Van Oort, “not to people of normal height.”

After earning her degree in marketing in 1989, Van Oort set off on a European adventure — playing pro volleyball for a French team that was based on the border of France, Germany and Switzerland. “It was wonderful, a priceless experience,” she says, despite her lack of French language skills and relative isolation from everything she knew and loved.

During the off-season she returned to the States to help a Notre Dame friend lead a volleyball camp at Southern Illinois University, an assignment that landed her a job offer as an assistant coach at SIU. “My friends were all getting jobs and I thought maybe I should too,” she recalls. She spent two years there and earned her master’s in sports administration.

She also met Doug Van Oort, the head volleyball coach at Mount Mercy University, while he was coaching at a University of Illinois volleyball camp. The two married and settled in Cedar Rapids, where Doug went on to establish the volleyball program at Kirkwood Community College.

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They started a family and Mary Kay left the coaching ranks, other than assisting her husband with summer camps over the years. "I liked coaching, but I wanted to try the business world," she explains. She worked at McLeod Communications from 1994 to 2001, and she and her husband mostly limited their coaching to helping with their sons' basketball teams.

"But there is always a need for volleyball coaches," she says, so over the years she was coaxed into various roles at Taft and Roosevelt schools and the YMCA.

"This came out of the blue," she says of the Jefferson coaching offer. "When the position opened, some friends called and asked if I would apply. A few sleepless nights later," she decided to go for it, and her husband signed on as an assistant coach. Their sons, Jake and Adam, attend Jefferson, and the time seemed right to return to coaching the sport she loves.

"It's a lot to take on, but we felt that if we can be a positive force, it's worth it."

The Van Oorts were also fully aware that they needed to make up ground on an ever-evolving sport. "We've never coached a libero," she points out. "We feel we know the game, but we're not going to be stuck in the past."

Van Oort has been leaning heavily on volleyball coaching friends for assistance in getting up to speed on the nuances of the game, she says.

But her fundamental approach to the game hasn't changed over the years.

"I have always had fun playing volleyball," she emphasizes. "I've had coaches who were in your face and coached through scaring players. I'm a feel-good coach. We need to be focused and have high expectations, but we should all be wanting to be here and doing it together. I believe we can play at a high level, but do it respecting each other and having fun."

She is also "a teacher of technique," she says. "I spend a lot of time going back to the basics."

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She has not spent much time dissecting last year's woes, but is moving players into new positions. "We're feeling good about that," she says. She also likes her team's emerging dynamics. "We have six seniors, and not all of them are starters, but all of them have really pleased me in how they are treating the younger players and being positive role models for them."

Although she has attended the state volleyball tournament nearly every year, Van Oort says, she admits to being "somewhat naïve" going into conference play after an absence from coaching.

"I know the MVC is one of the best conferences in the state, but I'm not intimidated by that at all. I'm just aware that we need to play at a high level to compete. Compared with other teams, we don't have a lot of kids who play club volleyball, so we need to play really good technical volleyball and be confident with the basics. We'll play our own game."

It's an approach that underscores her commitment to making volleyball fun and accessible for everyone, and her passion for making athletics a place where girls can grow a healthy self-esteem.

"I've always thought that was important," says Van Oort, whose grad school thesis was a proposal for a program designed to encourage girls from low-income areas to get involved in sports. "But today in the culture we live in, it's even more important because of the images of girls and women we get in the media."

"I know not everybody can play competitive varsity sports in high school," she says. "But if we can keep them involved as long as possible, they will enjoy being active and know that's what makes them beautiful and strong. I don't know where girls can get that today if they're not in sports. Making sure they have a positive experience is a huge responsibility for high school coaches."