

Hahn is big star for Cyclones at 5-foot-6

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kristen Hahn dreamed about playing softball at Iowa State University when she was a young girl growing up in northeast Cedar Rapids.

Right college, wrong sport.

Hahn, 20, has developed into an outstanding volleyball player for the Cyclones, a 5-foot-6 libero in a game normally dominated by players a half-foot taller.

Sometimes, she has trouble celebrating a big point with her taller teammates. The high-fives are a little too high for her, even on tippy-toes.

"Sometimes I get locked out behind all those arms," she confessed, laughing.

Hahn never gets locked out of the action, however. She was honored as the Big 12 Libero of the Year last season as a sophomore and surpassed 1,000 career digs last Wednesday when Iowa State defeated West Virginia.

In a remarkable achievement, she was named the Big 12 Defensive Player of the Week four straight times this season before the streak ended this week.

"The fourth week was kind of a shock," she said. "I figured after three weeks, the Big 12 would expect me to be good."

Hahn had a good excuse for not winning the award for a fifth straight time this week. The 22nd-ranked Cyclones are coming off a bye week heading into Wednesday night's match at No. 8 Texas.

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"It was kind of hard to win it with a bye week," she noted.

Hahn thought softball would be her best sport, the one she might be able to play in college. She played for the Kennedy varsity softball team as a graduated eighth grader and was way ahead of the curve on a ballfield.

Then she fell in love with volleyball and things changed.

"I wanted to play softball at Iowa State since I was little," she said. "I didn't think about volleyball and I didn't think it was an option."

She played on Kennedy's sophomore volleyball team as a freshman, then cracked the varsity as a sophomore. She got hooked.

"I love the speed of the game. How fast the play is," she said.

Softball is a team game, but she felt like an isolated individual as the catcher. Volleyball is also a team game, but she feels like an integral part of one unit on the court, functioning together in search of success.

"There's no better feeling than getting a great dig and making a great play and getting my teammates a chance to get a kill off it," she said. "It's the most exciting feeling. The celebration ... you don't get that in softball."

Hahn knew she wanted to attend Iowa State. That was a given. Both of her parents, Marcia and Jesse, are ISU grads. So is her older brother, Kaleb.

"I kind of grew up into a Cyclone. I love it," she said.

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Hahn also played basketball at Kennedy and collected nine varsity letters as a three-sport athlete for the Cougars. She likes coming back to Cedar Rapids and visiting with old friends, especially the ones who are 5-foot-3 and 5-foot-4.

"I always feel tall," she said, laughing.

Hahn has two kills for the Cyclones this season, which is impressive for somebody who is 5-foot-6.

"I don't have a bad vertical, actually," she said. "If I was a couple of inches taller, it probably would make a little difference.

"I wish I could have been a hitter, because I feel like I have that aggressive spirit. But it all worked out and I couldn't be happier."

Hahn was an Honorable Mention All-American last year and was named Academic All-Big 12. She was selected as the Big 12 Defensive Player of the Week four times last season, giving her eight of those awards now with 1 1/2 years to go.

Hahn is a kinesiology and health major at ISU. She'd love to play pro volleyball in Europe after she graduates and would like to get into coaching some day.

For now, she's delighted to be an important member of her team, even if it isn't the sport she imagined as a kid. The switch to volleyball, and all the hard work, has paid off.

"It's one of the best decisions I've made in my life," she said.