

Sports opened doors for Krista Johnson

Written by Tom Fruehling

Sunday, 13 October 2013 22:19 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 October 2013 23:19



It's long been a tradition at the all-day Westside Volleyball tournament at Cedar Rapids Jefferson High School for each of the 20-some teams to set up camp on the floor throughout the hallways.

Trophy cases line both sides of the hall outside the old east gym. And it was by sheer coincidence Saturday that the Cedar Rapids Xavier girls spread blankets and stacked supplies right under a display honoring the 1996 J-Hawk volleyball squad.

Behind the glass is a big trophy the team earned by finishing runner-up to powerful Dubuque Wahlert in the state tournament and a large color photo of the smiling players.

Standing tall above the rest in the back row of the picture is Krista Johnson, a star junior outside hitter and now the first-year coach of the Class 4A fourth-ranked Xavier Saints.

The meet on Saturday was a homecoming of sorts for the 33-year-old Johnson, her first time coaching a team from a rival school on the very floor where she started her career.

In her mind, she wasn't all that good back then, certainly not as talented as the girls she coaches who have been on club teams and attended camps since grade school.

"I've always been tall and with huge feet," says the 5-foot-11 Johnson. "That's why I was

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always in the back row in pictures.

“I was pretty athletic. I could jump high and could block. And I was always very competitive in whatever I did. I'm kind of quiet about it, but I've never wanted to lose.”

She also was a sprinter and high jumper on legendary Bill Calloway's record-breaking Jefferson track teams for four years. She won a medal at the Drake Relays in her freshman year.

In her senior year in 1998, she was named the school's Female Athlete of the Year.

“A really nice girl, a really nice young woman, I guess you could say now,” says Calloway. “Very talented and always a hard, hard worker.”

He still laughs at the time he was driving his sprint team to the Drake Relays and saw in his rearview mirror that she was crying in the back seat.

“I thought, 'What's going on,'" the veteran coach recalls. “And Krista says, 'Coach, I forgot my spikes.' Luckily, we were still in town and went back to the school.”

Johnson, who now finds herself in charge of a dozen teenage girls, recalls the incident well.

“I was a dumb 14-year-old,” she remembers. “And I'd get so nervous before a race I didn't think I could run.”

Admittedly more raw talent than refined as a young athlete, Johnson nevertheless was offered a full-ride volleyball scholarship at the University of Missouri.

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Her potential was obvious to all in the local club community, including fellow first-year coach Mary Kay Van Oort of Jefferson and Van Oort's coaching husband, Doug.

Chuck Voss, then an assistant at Mount Mercy, took a job at Missouri and invited her to join the team.

"After a few weeks in Columbia," Johnson says, "I wrote Chuck a very long letter, thanking him over and over for taking a chance on me. The opportunities I've had because of volleyball changed my life."

She was part of a rebuilding program at the big-time Big 12 school. "On that team," she says, "you weren't allowed to not do well."

As a jumping-jack middle hitter, she started on the squad that advanced to the NCAA tournament for the first time in school history. And in four years, she earned her degree with double majors in psychology along with human development and family studies.

"I come from a really large and very close family," says Johnson, whose mother, Belle, Aunt Lyse and cousins attend all Saints game. "I love being around kids. And I've always wanted to work with young people.

"I've thought about going into teaching. I think my dream job would be to teach kindergarten."

She moved to San Diego with a teammate after her 2002 college graduation, planning to save up for graduate school. "I just wanted to live in California," she explains. "I was young. And, at the time, it seemed like the thing to do."

She took a job in management training that involved door-to-door solicitations, but soon discovered life on the West Coast wasn't her style. "I missed my family too much," Johnson says.

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Back in Cedar Rapids, she took a full-time job working with at-risk youngsters. She also coached local club volleyball with highly successful youth teams for several years and served as an assistant on Rick Blackwell's coaching staff at Mount Mercy University for four years.

In 2011, she moved up as an assistant coach at Northern State University in Aberdeen, S.D., but says she again longed to be back in her hometown with family.

When the Xavier job opened last year after Barb Sullivan resigned to raise a baby girl, Johnson was thrilled to be offered the position. (Her boss, incidentally, is Xavier Principal Tom Keating, who coached the Wahlert team that beat Jefferson in the 1996 state tournament.)

Her Saints squad is currently 23-8 and undefeated in MVC play going into the conference tournament this Saturday.

They finished 3-1 in matches Saturday in a formidable field at the Jefferson tournament. Their only loss was to Dubuque Hempstead, ranked third in Class 5A.

The Xavier team went to the state tournament last year, and Johnson feels her talented group is primed for a return trip.

Hopefully, they'll bring back a trophy, but bigger than the one that now sits in the Jefferson trophy case.

"That," says the young coach, "was a long time ago."

More important to her, however, is the impact she hopes to have on the teenage girls who are just like her not that many years ago after all.

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“I want to be a role model,” says Johnson, who now also works at TransAmerica in Cedar Rapids. “I’m always positive with the girls.

“We’ll always be competitive. We hate losing. But there are more important things in life.”