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Higher Call

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HIGHER CALL

BY STEPHEN PORT '13

A college athlete's focus can easily be consumed by common themes: playing time, starting or subbing, wins and losses, varsity or JV. But for the 2016–17 Cedarville University women's volleyball team, the consuming focus has been this humble but profound thought: "Who are we that we get to be a part of this?"

The team first asked the question after the 2014 season, when head coach Doug Walters challenged his team toward a higher calling. "I wanted it to be student-athlete led and driven, because that would create buy-in," Walters explained.

After their sophomore season, he charged rising captains Abby Shelton '17 and Rachel Krikke '17, along with teammates Angela Becker '17 and Kristin Cardwell '17, with this task: figure out how the team can best represent Christ — on the road, in class, in chapel, or wherever they might be.

MORE THAN A TEAM

The core change came in the way players began to view their team as a whole.

"We wanted to be a family that was on mission together," explained Shelton. "That meant acting like a family, not just a team. That meant holding each other accountable, having those tough conversations, and not letting people gossip or complain about workouts."

Most families, however, do not live life in front of cheering fans. During the fall 2016 season, the Lady Jackets played in front of crowds of several hundred to thousands, a rare experience in NCAA Division II and even at some Division I matches. And that doesn't even account for the many who livestreamed their contests.

SWEETER KIND OF SERVE

Part of the culture change that began in spring 2014 was not just about kindness and character, but about looking beyond the team to actively bless others. Players made dozens of cookies and wrote notes to each academic department and student organization on campus. The goal? To give back the love they received from professors and peers.

According to Shelton, it was Becker and Krikke who spurred that movement, which has reaped deeper relationships across campus.

“We are brothers and sisters in Christ, and that’s what we’re about,” said Shelton. “It wasn’t about getting them to come to games. It wasn’t about us. Who are we that we get to be a part of this?”

ELEVATING THEIR GAME

That question was certainly on the Lady Jackets’ minds when they received their first-ever bid to the NCAA National Tournament after winning their fourth Great Midwest Athletic Conference Tournament in the last five years. They finished the regular season with a strong 26-8 record.

Krikke sensed a higher purpose for the team during the tournament. “I just don’t think God’s done using us yet this season,” she told Shelton.

For each member of the team, it wasn’t about winning the match, though that was one goal; it was about expanding their mission field. That opportunity came in the win-or-go-home fourth set against in-state rival University of Findlay. Down by four and losing momentum early in the set,

junior captain Krissy Pratt ’18 gashed her shin diving into the bench for a ball. When the tournament director approached her to ask how he could help, Pratt didn’t miss a beat.

“Have the people in the stands pray for me,” she said.

“You want me to do what?” the director replied.

“Go ask my team’s parents to say a quick prayer for me,” Pratt repeated.

From her own team, word spread. What happened next was nothing short of a “God thing,” according to Walters: a gym full of people — including the opposing team and their parents — talking to the Lord together. It was just one of many practical manifestations of the Lady Jackets’ unabashed Gospel mindset.

VOLLEYS OF GOSPEL CONVERSATION

Take, for example, the practice of each team member praying for one or two members of that week’s opposing team. After spending the week in prayer, then praying as a group after the game, each Lady Jacket sought out her player(s) and, after offering a quick prayer and often a Gospel conversation, gave her a New Testament and a note with contact information.

“While a lot of times we do get shut down,” Krikke said, “we build some amazing relationships.”

Several years ago, a Lady Jacket received a text from a recent Hillsdale College opponent explaining how attendance at Hillsdale’s team Bible study had increased after playing



Cedarville, and that team members were coming with their gifted New Testaments.

Ultimately, that’s the kind of long-term impact Walters hopes his team continues to have. “This team is very Kingdom- and Christ-centered, which will always be our goal,” he said.

LEGACY WITH ETERNAL IMPLICATIONS

As Shelton and her senior teammates reflect on their four years and ponder the legacy they’re leaving behind, they return to a familiar refrain.

“Our heart is that Cedarville volleyball will always be a family on mission, and that everyone gets invited in,” she explained. “It’s been so fun to witness what God’s doing here. We’ve gotten to know Him through this sport, to know and share His character, and to see how great He really is.

“Who are we that we get to be a part of that?”

Stephen Port '13 is Digital and Social Media Manager for Cedarville University.