

The Girl Who Wears the Different Color Jersey

Jill Bax of Hastings (Neb.) and her journey to 2x libero of the year

KANSAS CITY, Mo. - "Why is there one player that wears a different color jersey than everyone else on the team?"

If you're around volleyball very much you've heard or even asked the question.

To answer your question, one player wears that jersey because they can enter the game without using a substitution and they are only allowed to play in the back row. The different color jersey sets them apart so that the officials and book keeper know who that designated person is.

These unsung heroes of the volleyball world are called liberos. They are the best defensive player on the court, and Jill Bax of Hastings (Neb.) was just that.

"Having a strong libero and setters is vital to any team because they are the foundation," said Bax. "These positions are what make great teams so great."

Bax started playing volleyball around age six and even from a young age, she knew that this was the sport that was for her and did not play any other sports through high school and college.

As a young girl, Bax held tight to the dream that someday she would compete at a national tournament with her team. She set herself up for that throughout her career as she always played at a high level and held high expectations for herself.

"I found volleyball to be very fun and competitive," said Bax. "There was always room for improvement and something new to learn every day."

One of her favorite things that she has learned about volleyball is how to read the game and anticipate what the opposing team's next move will be and how she can defend it. She was always trying to be two steps ahead of the other team and help advise her teammates.

Bax did not start her volleyball career as a libero, but as an outside hitter and loved it despite measuring in at 5 feet 4 inches. It was during high school that her coach moved her from being an outside hitter to the team's libero.

After high school, Jill followed in her older brother and sister's footsteps and attended Hastings College. Jill chose Hastings so that she could continue to play volleyball with her sister Mikayla.

Mikayla was also a defensive player for Hastings and played for the Broncos from 2013 through 2016.

"I am so happy that I followed her to Hastings College," said Jill. "We were lucky enough to make some of life's greatest memories because of it. She is my best friend and sister all in one! I would do it all over again if I had the opportunity to."

During Jill's freshman year, the team did not make it to the national championship after losing in the quarterfinals of the Great Plains Athletic Conference (GPAC) tournament.

"I felt as if we did not understand how great our team could be," said Jill. "We were good individually, but as a team we did not have a great connection which obviously showed."

The following year, Jill's sophomore year, was the first year that Jill was able to experience what it was like competing at the NAIA National Championship tournament.

The team began to taste success that year as they started winning more big games over ranked opponents.

"We started trusting each other and building bonds on and off the court," said Jill.

"Those bonds made us into a unit on the court which allowed us to be a great team and gave us all confidence in ourselves and each other."

The Broncos advanced to the national tournament in 2015 and after making it through pool play suffered a devastating loss in the Round of 16.

"We looked around [after the loss] and there was little to no crying," said Jill. "We were more angry than anything and that's when I knew we were going to come back the next year and win the whole thing. My team was hungry!"

The team grew closer together through the offseason as they prepared for the upcoming season.

Jill's junior year the team captured its first GPAC title as well as its first national title during the 2016 season.

"What best prepared me for the national championship was trusting the process to get there," said Jill. "I do believe that it took a three year process to build a solid foundation to our team. There were some days where we would almost feel defeated. What lead us to win is we all never gave up on each other, we trusted each other and our wonderful coaching staff. Great things take time and are worth the blood, sweat, and tears."

They made some tweaks to their game play that year and finished with only three losses on their record and tallied 33 wins.

That same year, Jill was received her first Libero of the Year honor.

"I was almost in disbelief," said Jill. "It was a very humbling moment. Winning the national championship was by far a greater feeling, but earning the Libero of the Year Award after winning the championship just kept adding onto how great that moment of time was."

The 2017 season did not end how the Broncos hoped. The team was eliminated from the national championship tournament in the Round of 16 much like Jill's sophomore year.

"My favorite part [of the 2017 championship] was getting to play the game," said Jill. "Playing teams from around the country and athletes from around the world was such a wonderful opportunity. I was blessed with some of the greatest teammates and coaches I could have ever asked for coming into college."

Jill closed out her volleyball career with her second Libero of the Year honor.

"As a libero you get used to being the 'behind the scenes' player," said Jill. "So to be recognized for the years and years and years of hard work I put into perfecting my craft is in the top five heck yes moments of my life!"

Jill is one of two NAIA liberos that have won the Libero of the Year award consecutively. As well as being a two-time All-American, Jill has forever etched her name in the NAIA volleyball history book.

"Through volleyball, I've met the most incredible people, learned lifelong skills and lessons and done things that I thought were near impossible, such as winning a national championship and becoming a two-time Libero of the Year," said Jill. "Volleyball has taught me a lot of life skills and lessons such as you have to work hard to get what you want or where you want to be in life."

Jill graduated from Hastings with a degree in business administration and she hopes to someday watch her kids grow up on the volleyball court just as she did.

"Volleyball has given me amazing memories," said Jill. "And when I think of NAIA volleyball it gives me butterflies. NAIA volleyball has an amazing environment and is filled with some of the world's best people. It is very special to me and I am blessed to have been a part of it."