

Success follows Volleyball

Squad stays consistent, compiling a 277-75 record in past 10 years

John Scognamiglio
Staff Reporter

During the past ten years, the women's volleyball team has been one of the most successful teams in the country in any sport, compiling an incredible 277-75 (78.7 winning percentage), including two trips to the national title game.

"I think it's pretty impressive to be this good for this long," head coach Jason Skoch said. "Some teams that have had better success, as high as their highs were, they have had that low of lows."

In 1996, with former mayor Debbie Masten as the head coach, the 'Dogs ended the season with a 26-14 record, including a 13-3 mark in the MIAA. Masten brought a lawsuit against the University alleging Title IX infractions and eventually settled out of court for \$175,000.

The Bulldogs hired Becky Pike to lead the 'Dogs the next season, and they enjoyed a 21-15 campaign. The season, though, is still the worst record in the past 10 years. The Pike era came to an end in 2000, culminating in the squad's second trip to the NCAA South Regional tournament. It reached the regional championship game before falling to host school University of North Alabama in five games.

The end of Pike's tenure started a whole new chapter in Truman volleyball, quite possibly the greatest run in Bulldog volleyball history.

Two new people became the faces of the 'Dogs in 2001, as former assistant coach Qi Wang and current graduate assistant coach Jessica Sears joined the purple and white.

Wang brought more to the program that Xs and Os.

"I just tried to use my volleyball knowledge to teach them," he said. "We always competed at a very high level."

Wang and Sears' first campaign was only the second time the Bulldogs had advanced beyond the 30-win plateau. The squad advanced to the NCAA Elite Eight for the first time in school history, but lost to South Dakota State University in the first match. Sears was rewarded with the MIAA Freshman of the Year Award, while Wang was named MIAA Coach of the Year and AVCA South Central Region Coach of the Year.

In 2002, the squad failed to win its second straight outright conference title but was named second seed in the South Central Region. Wins over North Alabama and Central Missouri State University sent the squad packing for the Elite Eight.

The team was 26-8 entering the competition when it faced No. 1 seed and host school West Texas A&M University. The squad trounced the host school, winning in four games. Then it defeated Grand Valley State University (Mich.) to advance to

the school's first NCAA championship game. The squad unfortunately dropped all three games to Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

In 2003, the Bulldogs won the MIAA outright in the regular season and conference tournament and hosted the South Central Region. Once again, No. 4 North Alabama, in a shocking upset, swept the purple and white on its own turf, en route to winning the national title.

If 2002 was a season to remember, the 2004 season was the dream season that almost was. The squad won its second straight conference title by way of going undefeated in the regular season and in the conference tourney. It entered NCAA postseason play as the No. 1 seed in the South Central region yet again.

The 'Dogs knocked off Albany State University (Ga.), Pittsburg State University (Kan.) and CMSU to advance to the Elite Eight. The team traveled to Florida where it knocked off Queens University (Fla.) in the first game of the mini-tournament. The squad then faced the top-ranked team in the country, University of Nebraska-Kearney.

A battle between two unbeaten foes turned out to be a one-sided victory for the Bulldogs, who won by a score of 3-0. The only thing that stood in the way of a dream season was the host school, Barry University (Fla.). After winning the first game, the squad dropped the next three to lose in heartbreaking fashion.

Wang said the memories he will carry of Bulldog volleyball are in the small details and not the large victories.

"Their biggest success was their skill improvement," he said. "They improved a lot. A large group of them went from not being able to kill to killing with ease, not being able to dig to digging."

Wang also said there was no specific player to single out on any of his teams but groups of five to six players.

Sears said some of her fondest memories involve specific matches throughout her career.

"When we beat North Alabama my freshman year, it was not a rivalry I had been a part of yet," she said. "The whole experience of going to nationals in 2002 is another great memory."

This year the Bulldogs are having another season to remember. Entering Wednesday night's action, the squad is under the eighth head coach in the program's history. Skoch needs only one win to pass Pike's first-year win total.

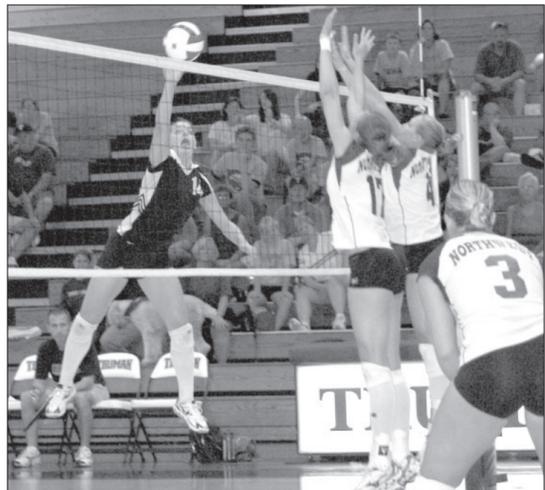
The squad also is undefeated in the MIAA for the past two years, last losing to Pittsburg State on Oct. 11, 2003.

Skoch said he sees the squad leading the MIAA in the future.

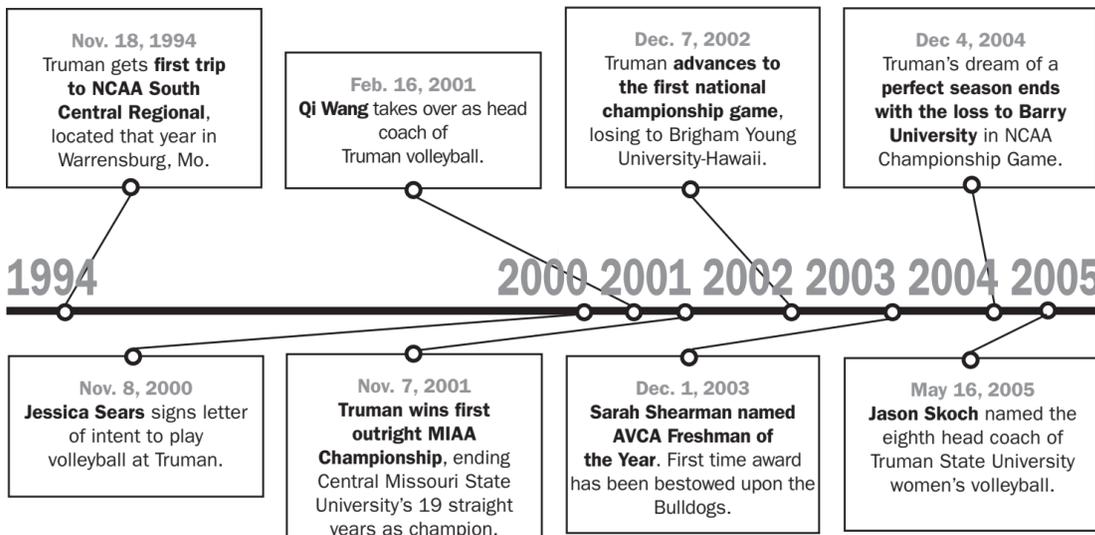
"There are a lot of schools who have surpassed us because facilities are better," he said. "We're just going to have to do it better at practices, and the coaching job is going to get more difficult bringing in better players. I see us being there [at the top], but we are going to be a lot more athletic and a lot more structured."



Chris Tharp/Index
Junior outside hitter Alex Baker hits an attack in a 3-0 win against Northwest Missouri on Sept. 24 at Pershing Arena.



Chris Tharp/Index
Junior Sarah Shearman performs a touch spike over two Northwest Missouri State players earlier this season.



'Dogs use depth and athleticism en route to No. 1 rank

Bulldogs have used the entire roster in compiling 20-1 mark

Aaron Eidson
for the Index

The Bulldogs stepped onto the floor Oct. 1 against MIAA rival Pittsburg State University. Similar to multiple other matches, the Gorillas had four players taller than anyone the Bulldogs have on their roster. But, like many other matches, the height didn't seem to matter. On this night, the 'Dogs won 3-0, running their overall record to 19-1 and 8-0 in the conference.

This year, like past falls, the volleyball team is enjoying another terrific season, despite having one of the smallest lineups in Div. II. It also hasn't missed a beat since falling in the national title match to Barry Uni-

versity (Fla.) last December. Even without head coach Qi Wang, 2004 First Team All-American Jessica Sears and three other starters, the 'Dogs have fought their way to a No. 1 ranking for the first time in school history this year.

Last spring, the team was without a coach as Wang departed for Northern Michigan University. After searching the entire spring, the team eventually hired Jason Skoch to take over the position. Skoch said he didn't think the team could be where they are right now.

"With the players we lost and not having a good spring practice because they didn't have a coach, I thought we'd struggle a little more than we have," Skoch said. "We've struggled, but the girls have a lot of fight in them. So we struggle, but we win."

The Bulldogs' roster does not include a single girl taller than 6 feet,

while many of the team's opponents boast three or four more than 6 feet 1 inch, including Pitt State's teams, whose tallest girl is listed at 6 feet 4 inch and who has three more at 6 feet 1 inch. But the 'Dogs have dealt with the challenge very well, holding opponents to a .125 hitting percentage, one of the lowest in the country.

Central Missouri State University head coach Peggy Martin has seen the Bulldogs at least twice a year in the past 10 years.

"They are great at ball handling," she said. "It doesn't matter how big your opponents are. If you always put the ball in a place where it's hittable, you can beat anyone."

Junior outside hitter Sarah Shearman supported Martin's sentiments.

"We are more of a thinking team," Shearman said. "We use our shots a lot better, and because we are a smaller team, we know that

we need to use all of our resources. When we do that, we do well."

This squad also is one of the most athletic teams in the conference, if not the nation. Although Shearman is not intimidating, standing only 5 feet 8 inches, her 25 to 26 inch vertical jump makes the difference, Skoch said.

"We have some athletes, but they come in small packages," Skoch said. "We have better volleyball players. We have some girls that just flat out fly at the ball."

Junior setter Christine Wagener said other factors led to their success this season as well.

"I think we are pretty quick, and we have good ball control and defense, so we can get a lot of balls up that a lot of teams can't," Wagener said. "We are a little more technically sound and quicker than a lot of the taller teams."

Another big part of the team's

success against taller teams this year has been freshman outside hitter Eli Medina's ability to come up with the clutch dig. Her 3.89 digs a game have helped with the losses of libero Lauren Dickbernd and Sears.

"He's a tough coach," Medina said. "He makes us work hard and just wants the best out of us. He wants to win so bad and it transfers over to the team. You couldn't ask for anything else out of a coach."

Skoch has implemented a 6-2 offensive system, employing two setters instead of one, and it has paid off.

"We have definitely benefited from it," Shearman said. "It helps spread out the offense, and we are able to capitalize more often."

The most notable beneficiary is junior outside hitter Kelsey Wackerman, who posted a triple-double in six out of the last 10 matches.

The athleticism, depth and team chemistry has yielded a 20-1 record, including eight wins against nationally ranked opponents.

Still, to win it all, it is going to take some leadership and some emotional changes, Skoch said.

"I really think that if we had some attitude and a little more tenacity from the girls, that would allow them to be the players they are capable of being all at the same time," he said.

Skoch said he is confident that if the girls keep moving in the direction they have been, good things will be in store for them come tournament time.

"I think we will pleasantly, for us, surprise some people," he said. "We are expected to be in there anyway, but when I say surprise, I mean beating teams that are good and beating them decisively."

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