

GRAYBEAL | Junior lobbied for starting spot prior to regionals

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 slotted to receive much playing time.

Skoch had made a lineup adjustment after Truman's Oct. 24 loss to Washburn. He bumped Graybeal out of her right side hitter spot and inserted senior middle blocker Lisa Weber, who had been struggling in the middle. Skoch said Graybeal always has been a more offense-oriented player, and when she encountered an offensive slump in late October, he decided to insert the defensively-sound Weber into the right side hitter spot.

"When Lauren was not producing offensively, she lost her calling card to stay in," Skoch said. "It was like, if we're not getting the offensive numbers up there — because her blocking is not her strong suit — well then, we're just going to put the best blocker out there. And we were winning just by having a great blocker out there in Lisa."

But Graybeal won her starting spot back. Playing primarily as a substitute right side hitter and outside hitter — the position she played at Truman during her first two seasons — Graybeal racked up 33 kills and hit .418 in Truman's three matches from Nov. 1 to 8.

"All I could [do] was work harder and just show [Skoch] that I deserve to be on the court, and the team wants me on the court," Graybeal said.

Even so, Graybeal played just one set in the Bulldogs'

last two regular-season matches, and Skoch said he was prepared to go with Weber and senior right side hitter Melissa Keck as his top two right side hitters, until Graybeal stopped by Skoch's office just two days before regionals.

Skoch said Graybeal was armed with statistics and reasoning for why she thought she should be on the floor during the regional. He said Graybeal also had surveyed the team and had their support in reinserting her at right side hitter and shifting Weber back to the middle.

"It was going to be my biggest regret if I hadn't said anything and then I didn't end up playing in regionals," Graybeal said.

Skoch said he was impressed Graybeal used rationale and statistics to support her appeal for playing time, rather than complaining. And after consulting with some of Graybeal's teammates, Skoch made the switch.

The move paid off. Not only did Graybeal contribute a season-high 16 kills and hit .538 in Truman's second-round win against the University of Central Missouri, but she also stepped up defensively. Graybeal had four block assists against UCM and a season-high five block assists in the regional final against Emporia State University.

More importantly, Skoch said Graybeal took away the hitting lanes of opponents' outside hitters and forced

them to channel their attacks to senior libero Whitney Boehler and senior outside hitter Eli Medina, Truman's top players at digging balls. Against ESU, Graybeal helped limit the Hornets' outside hitter Arica Shepard to three kills and a .375 hitting percentage. Shepard had entered the regional leading the MIAA by averaging 3.74 kills per set.

"I think it says a lot about Lauren as far as her willingness to just deal with the cards that have been dealt and work through it and improve," Skoch said. "She's improved enough where we can put her back in, and she produced on the big stage."

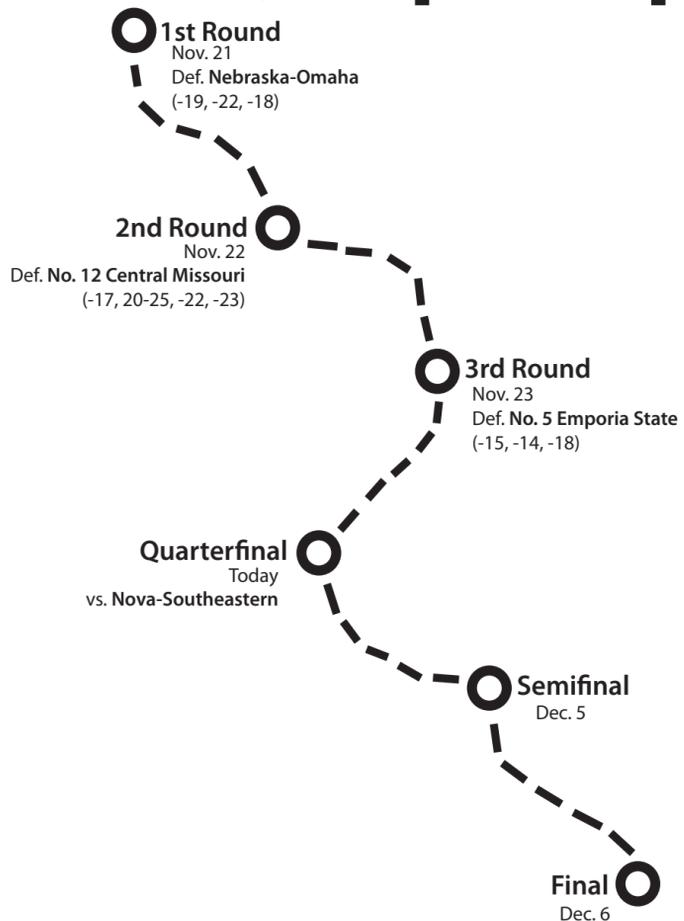
Skoch said he now has no doubts about who to use as the second right side hitter to supplement Keck in the Elite Eight. He's going with Graybeal.

"I feel very comfortable now about her," Skoch said. "I know she will be there. I trust her. The team trusts her."

Graybeal will need to produce in the Elite Eight like she did in the regional for the Bulldogs to make a run at the national title. No doubt, the competition will key on the All-American trio of Keck, Medina and senior middle blocker Allie Cherven.

To take the pressure off these three, the Bulldogs need the Graybeal they saw during the South Central Regional. The Bulldogs need continued production from their X factor.

Road to the Championship



Design by Rose Runser/Index

PREVIEW | 'Dogs are 24-0 this season against unranked teams

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"They are extremely fast," Skoch said. "Their outside hitters are like [senior outside hitter Eli Medina] and Whitney, with just a little bit more pop on their verticals."

Although Truman's defense has been the backbone of the team this season as they have held opponents to a .135 hitting percentage. Skoch said his team's improved offense will be just as vital to his team's success this weekend.

"Our defense is there," Skoch said. "But because our offense has gotten better, our defense doesn't have to do as much so they stay fresher and are able to capitalize more."

The Sharks are 8-1 on neutral courts this season but have not played a match outside the Sunshine State since Sept. 13.

Truman is 14-1 on neutral courts, with only one loss against Southwestern Minnesota State University at a tournament in St. Paul.

The Bulldogs have a little bit of history on their side in this match. Nova comes into the match unranked in the latest coach's poll. Truman is 24-0 this season against unranked opponents and has not lost to a team outside the top 25 since Sept. 8, 2007 when the Bulldogs lost 3-1 to Central Oklahoma University. That is a string of 40 consecutive matches.

Truman and Nova have met once before, with the Bulldogs sweeping the Sharks

on Aug. 26, 2006, in Florida.

This tournament also creates an interesting scenario for the Bulldogs in that they have not played five of the other seven teams in the tournament this season. (They defeated Grand Valley State University earlier this season 3-0 and lost 3-0 to host Concordia University, St. Paul). This is unlike the regional

tournament in which Truman already had played each of its opponents twice previously. Skoch said it creates more of an unknown factor. He said he has tape on California State University San Bernardino, but has not watched it yet.

If the Bulldogs defeat Nova, they will take on the winner of San Bernardino (28-3) and California (Penn.)

University (40-1) on Friday.

But senior outside hitter Dana Hanselmann insists the possible next opponent for the Bulldogs doesn't matter at this point.

"Right now we're just taking it one game at a time and our first match is against Nova on Thursday, so we're focused on that right now," Hanselmann said.

Team Breakdown

Grand Valley State Record: 32-3 Hitting %: .248 Opp. Hit. %: .133 Digs/Set: 15.4 Blocks/Set: 2.4 Key Players: Danielle Alexander: 3.20 K/Set, .325 Rebecca Rapin: 2.41 K/Set, .304	Armstrong Atlantic Record: 28-6 Hitting %: .240 Opp. Hit. %: .154 Digs/Set: 16.2 Blocks/Set: 1.8 Key Players: Michele Remlinger: 2.62 K/Set, .354 Rindy Vidovich: 3.35 K/Set, .291	New Haven Record: 31-3 Hitting %: .268 Opp. Hit. %: .109 Digs/Set: 14.1 Blocks/Set: 2.1 Key Players: Rhe-Ann Niles: 3.36 K/Set, .476 Charisse Cotton: 3.40 K/Set, .249	Concordia Record: 34-1 Hitting %: .305 Opp. Hit. %: .140 Digs/Set: 14.6 Blocks/Set: 2.3 Key Players: Emily Palkert: 3.65 K/Set, .347 Maria Steinhagen: 2.80 K/Set, .343	CSU-San Bernardino Record: 28-3 Hitting %: .285 Opp. Hit. %: .132 Digs/Set: 14.5 Blocks/Set: 2.0 Key Players: Samantha Middleborn: 0.93 B/Set, .331 Jessica Granados: 4.20 K/Set, .314	California (Penn.) Record: 40-1 Hitting %: .290 Opp. Hit. %: .118 Digs/Set: 17.4 Blocks/Set: 2.2 Key Players: Ludmila Amaral: 1.14 B/Set, .424 Joanna Nist: 3.56 K/Set, .243	Truman Record: 32-7 Hitting %: .254 Opp. Hit. %: .135 Digs/Set: 17.4 Blocks/Set: 2.5 Key Players: Allie Cherven: 1.17 B/Set, .315 Melissa Keck: 2.46 K/Set, .323	Nova Southeastern Record: 24-11 Hitting %: .210 Opp. Hit. %: .170 Digs/Set: 14.2 Blocks/Set: 1.8 Key Players: Emily Carle: 2.57 K/Set, .318 Melinda Gorman: 2.75 K/Set, .199

Design by Blake Toppmeyer/Index

REGIONAL | Truman swept Nebraska-Omaha and Emporia State, but they were on the verge of a fifth set against Central Missouri

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 more than 12 per set.

"I think we just came out and said, 'Enough's enough, and we're just going to do it this time,'" senior libero Whitney Boehler said. "It's now or never."

Skoch said the Bulldogs served to Miller early on in the match and got an ace past her. After that the Bulldogs made an adjustment and continued to serve the ball toward Miller, frustrating her so much she could never get anything going offensively.

"It was partly us, but she just wasn't ready for that situation," Skoch said. "So we can't take too much credit for that."

Truman also outblocked Emporia 12-3.

Offensively Truman continued to get production from all over the court. Senior middle blocker Allie Cherven paced Truman with 11 kills and senior right side hitter Melissa Keck chipped in eight. Five different Bulldogs recorded at least five kills as the Bulldogs hit .220 as a team.

The balanced offense and stifling defense was not just a factor in the Emporia match. It was a carry-over

effect from Truman's earlier tournament matches.

In the first round, the Bulldogs held the University of Nebraska-Omaha to a .038 hitting percentage. In the second round they held the University of Central Missouri to a .142 hitting percentage.

Truman's toughest match of the tournament came in the second round against UCM.

The sixth-seeded Jennies upset Washburn University the day before and had a chance to

take the match with Truman to a fifth set. With the score tied at 23 in a back-and-forth fourth set, the Bulldogs needed two points to finish off the Jennies. Senior middle blocker Lisa Weber made it 24-23 with a kill and she finished the match with a block from the right side.

"I think we were the only team that could compete with Central," Skoch said. "Central destroyed Washburn. If Central had beaten us and played like that in the finals, they would have beaten Emporia. They were sensational."

The offensive balance for the 'Dogs continued against Central as four Bulldogs finished with double-

digit kills. Junior right side hitter Lauren Graybeal finished with 16 kills and a .538 hitting percentage. Cherven finished with 12 kills and hit .500.

Truman has dominated the Jennies during the last several years, winning 23 of the last 24 matches and will go down in the record book as the last team to defeat UCM head coach Peggy Martin. Martin, the winningest coach in Div. II volleyball history, announced her retirement earlier this season.

During her 33 seasons at Central, Martin led the Jennies to more than 1,000 wins and 25 NCAA Tournament appearances, the most in Div. II.

MIAA | Adding a 12th team to the conference would eliminate the need for two bye weeks for men's and women's basketball teams

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if we would be successful in joining the conference, our average trip would be 100 miles. So one, we would have considerable financial savings in travel expenditures and two, we'd have a significant reduction in missed class time per student athlete."

Wollmering said Lincoln also is interested in the MIAA because of closer travel.

Lincoln, located in Jefferson City, is the only school from Missouri that competes in the nine-team Heartland Conference, which includes six teams from Texas. If accepted, this would be Lincoln's second stint in the MIAA. The school was in the conference from 1970 to 1999.

Lincoln's Director of Athletics Paula Jackson could not be reached for comment.

Scheduling benefit

Although Wollmering is not sold on either school yet, he said adding a team could have an advantage. With 11 MIAA teams in volleyball and men's and women's basketball,

teams now have two bye days during the conference season. Byes were not an issue when the conference had 10 teams and would be corrected by expanding the conference to 12 teams.

Wollmering also said the conference could add both schools and then maybe divide the MIAA into north-south or east-west divisions.

Wollmering said a downside to expanding the conference would be the increasing amount of conference games for basketball. According to NCAA rules, 27 regular-season basketball games can be scheduled. If the MIAA expanded to 12 and kept the system of playing each conference team twice in a basketball season, 22 of the season's 27 regular-season games would be conference games.

But women's basketball coach Michael Smith said expanding the conference schedule would be worth it to eliminate the two byes that currently exist.

"I personally don't like the idea of having the off days in the second semester," Smith said. "I'd like for [the

conference] to be an even number [of teams]. I would like for them to possibly add one team. I don't know about two just because then we're back to an odd number and then we have to start [conference play] even earlier in December, and I don't like that."

Athletic breakdown

Neither Lincoln nor Rockhurst would be a complete stranger to the Bulldogs. The Truman men's soccer team and women's basketball team usually compete against Rockhurst, and the women's and men's basketball teams often schedule Lincoln.

Lincoln sponsors 11 sports — five men's, six women's — but does not have women's soccer or volleyball, prominent sports in the MIAA. But Wollmering said Lincoln's proposed five-year plan includes the implementation of these programs.

Lincoln's track program traditionally is strong, but in 2007-08, of Lincoln's five sports that have win-loss records, none had winning seasons.

Since 2002-03, the men's basketball team is 5-0 against Lincoln, and

the women's basketball team is 15-0 against Lincoln since 1997-98. Still, Wollmering said Lincoln's lack of success in some sports will not eliminate it from possible admission. He said when considering the schools, he will look at factors such as location and what each school brings as an overall institution

Rockhurst also sponsors 11 sports — five men's, six women's — but does not have a football team. Football is one of the four sports the MIAA requires its member schools to have. However, starting this season the MIAA's Southwest Baptist University was allowed to play independently in football. It's under this exemption that Konzem said he hopes Rockhurst will be admitted, despite not having a football team.

"We're geographically in the center

of the MIAA, but not having football has always been the holdup," Konzem said. "My hope is that the football issue will not be a negative for us joining the conference."

Smith said his concern is that because Rockhurst does not devote money to a football program and facilities, the school has more cash to pump into other teams — a luxury the MIAA schools do not have.

On the field, Rockhurst should stack up well against MIAA competition. The Hawks already play many MIAA schools in non-conference games, and Konzem said that in the last five to seven years, Rockhurst has won about half its games against MIAA teams. In 2007-08, six of Rockhurst's nine sports that keep a win-loss record had winning seasons.

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Richard Konzem
 Rockhurst Athletic Director