

Making the transition

Eli Medina delivers for basketball team after years of production on volleyball court

BY BRENT FOSTER
Staff Reporter

Senior guard Eli Medina made her first career start for the woman's basketball team in Sunday's loss to Emporia State University. Only 147 more starts and she will match the number of starts she had in her Truman volleyball career.

Fresh off the volleyball team's Final Four run, the All-American and three time all-MIAA selection in volleyball stepped on the Pershing Arena floor as a member of the women's basketball team in December. It was the first time Medina played basketball since her junior year of high school.

"The [volleyball] season ended, and I guess I could have changed my mind at that time, but I had given [head coach Michael Smith] my word, and I was excited to play," Medina said. "I knew what I was coming into, and I am really happy that I decided to play."

Medina said volleyball head coach Jason Skoch and Smith both had roles

in the process of getting her on the basketball team. Medina and Skoch talked to Smith last summer about her possibly playing basketball after the volleyball season ended. Medina said that after talking with Smith during the summer, she decided that she would give basketball a try during her final year at Truman.

Smith's decision to allow Medina to play basketball was made a little easier when he received what he described as a "sign" about Medina. When cleaning out his office earlier this year, he found an old tape of Medina playing from high school. Before that, it was not a done deal that Medina would play for the 'Dogs this season. But Smith watched the tape and knew Medina would have a lot to offer the team, he said.

Despite the five-year layoff between games, Medina is no stranger to the basketball court. She was a three-year basketball letter winner in high school at St. Teresa's Academy in Kansas City where she averaged 12 points per game and led the team in field-goal percentage and three-point percentage her junior season. Medina was recruited to play basketball as well as volleyball and might have had a tough decision to make regarding her college athletic career had it not been for a knee injury. Medina tore her ACL during her senior year of high school, missing the entire basketball season and putting her basketball career on hold for five years.

"I kind of felt like I got like [cheated] out of a year of my life of basketball," Medina said. "So when Coach Smith put the opportunity out there I kind of felt like it was meant to be because I was getting a year back that I had lost."

"When you are going through so many struggles of so many losses in a row, it's nice to have someone there to remind you to stay strong," Mueller said. "Her volleyball team was very successful this year, so it's nice to have someone remind you what it feels like."

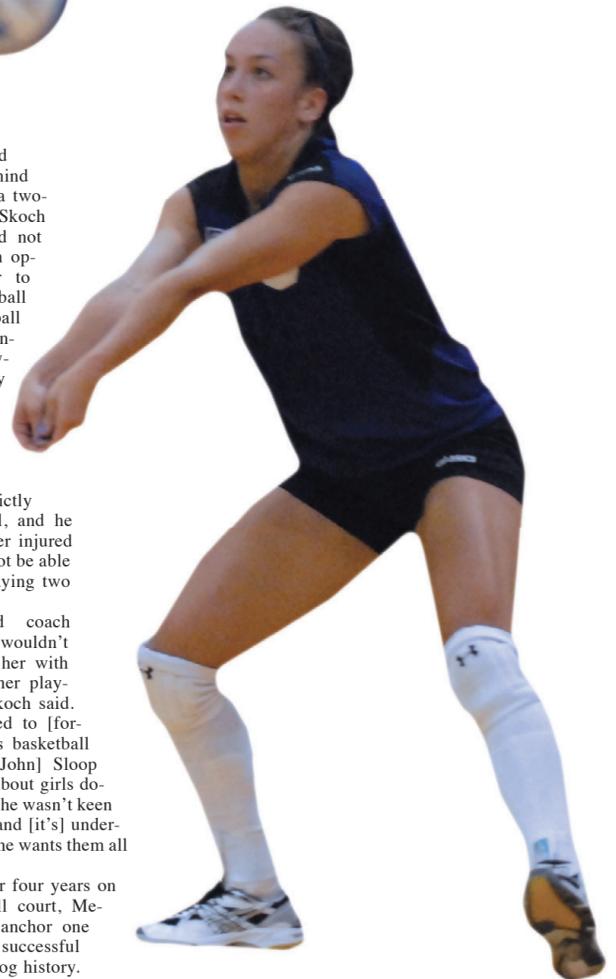
Although the thought had crossed Medina's mind about being a two-sport athlete, Skoch said it would not have been an option for her to play basketball and volleyball at Truman until her volleyball eligibility was finished. He said that early on in her career she needed to focus strictly on volleyball, and he was afraid her injured knee might not be able to handle playing two sports.

"The old coach [Qi Wang] wouldn't have signed her with the idea of her playing both," Skoch said. "I only talked to [former women's basketball head coach John] Sloop a few times about girls doing both, and he wasn't keen on the idea, and [it's] understandable — he wants them all the time."

During her four years on the volleyball court, Medina helped anchor one of the most successful runs in Bulldog history. The team went 137-22 during those four seasons, including a trip to the national quarterfinals in 2005 and a run to the Final Four last fall.

During the same four-year span, the women's basketball team has gone just 40-64, with no trips to the NCAA Tournament. Even if it is only for part of one season, senior forward Georgia Mueller said she thinks Medina is helping instill a winning attitude on the team just by being on the court.

With the basketball team mired in the middle of a 4-16 season, Medina's play has been the shot in the arm the team needed. Medina has played in 13 games for the 'Dogs this season, averaging 17 minutes per game, mostly off the bench.



Photos by Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index
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She played a career-high 37 minutes against Emporia on Sunday and had three steals. But apart from her playing ability, Smith said Medina brings a lot of intangibles to the court that can't be taught. Smith said that in the end it was Medina's personality that really sold him on her playing basketball.

"Before I knew what she could do ability wise, I wanted her to be a part of my program," Smith said.

Medina said she hopes the energy and passion she brings to the floor spreads to the rest of the team.

"I'm so excited to be able to play right now," Medina said. "So every time I step on the court I'm really excited. Coach Smith tells me sometimes, 'Eli, you need to settle down. You need to wait for your screens,' because I'm just so excited to be out there. I just hope the other girls can feed off that excitement."



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