

BOEHLER | Senior made transition from outside hitter end of freshman year

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score, but if you go to a game, you'll notice that."

Skoch credited Boehler's passing performance against the University of Missouri-Saint Louis as one of the main reasons the Bulldogs were able to avoid being upset in the first match of the Classic.

"Whitney has been the most consistent player on our team," Skoch said.

"... She is playing at a very high level now. She's smooth, has confidence. I don't say much to Whitney. I focus on other players. I trust Whitney, so I don't say much to her. I really haven't done any coaching with her this year. ... In fact, I've had her do a little coaching and talk to our underclassmen liberos."

For most of Boehler's career, she was not a libero. During her high school days at Olathe East (Kan.), Boehler was a decorated outside hitter. She earned All-State honors and was named the No. 1 passer in the Kansas City metro area.

But late in her freshman year at Truman, the Bulldog coaching staff decided to make Boehler the permanent libero in time for the team's post-season run. The move paid off immediately for the 'Dogs. In

the 2005 NCAA quarterfinal match against the University of Nebraska-Kearney, Boehler came up with 32 digs, the fourth most during a match in Bulldog history. Even though Truman lost that match, the Bulldogs had found the libero they were looking for.

Boehler said she learned a lot that first year and that the transition phase from outside hitter to libero was not as difficult as it might seem.

"Defense was always my strongest point," Boehler said. "I already had a defensive mindset, but learning middleback defenses was a little weird."

She currently ranks 10th in career digs at Truman with more than 1,000 digs. Boehler has 18 career matches with more than 20 digs, which is the second most in Bulldog history.

Cherven said Boehler's play is essential so players like Keck and Cherven can gather kills.

"We look to her to get everything up off the court and dive for everything," Cherven said. "She has done a really good job this year. ... She thrives in the background and tries to get her hand on every ball so the front line can put it away."

Boehler Files

Whitney Boehler
Senior Libero
Olathe, KN

32 digs against
Nebraska- Kearney in 2005
(fourth best in Truman history)



Second all-time in
Truman history in
recording 20+ dig
games

2007: averaged 4.84 digs/set
(first in Truman history)

Design by Antionette Bedessie/ Index

Boehler's consistent play during her career has helped anchor one of the most successful runs in Bulldog history. During Boehler's career the Bulldogs are 111-14, but have not been able to get that elusive national championship, which is something that made the end of last season tough to swallow for Boehler and her teammates.

A late season injury left Boehler at less than 100 percent for the NCAA Tournament. The

Bulldogs tried running multiple players in but could never find anyone who could consistently pass the ball and play solid defense. Boehler even tried playing through the pain during the regional final loss to Washburn. This year Boehler is determined to stay healthy the entire season and be ready to go for the stretch run.

"If I'm strong and healthy by the end of this season they won't know what hit them," Boehler said. "It'll be scary."

FIRST | Men finish second at Invite

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in Grinnell, Iowa, and will include more competitive opponents.

"It's better competition," Cochrane said. "There are a couple ranked Div. III teams. Actually, the next two meets are basically Div. III meets. Both of the places we are going are regional sites for Div. III, so you're going to get people to come and run on those courses. You'll get some pretty decent people in there. It'll be bigger and tougher."

The men's team also did well last Saturday, finishing second to Drury University. The 'Dogs had five runners finish in the top 15. Sophomores Bob Gorman and Josh Mantooh led the way, both finishing in the top 10. Freshman Joey Walls, junior Zach Chapman and sophomore Adam Kell were also included in the top 15.

Head coach Tim Schwegler said he was impressed with how the Truman runners finished so close together.

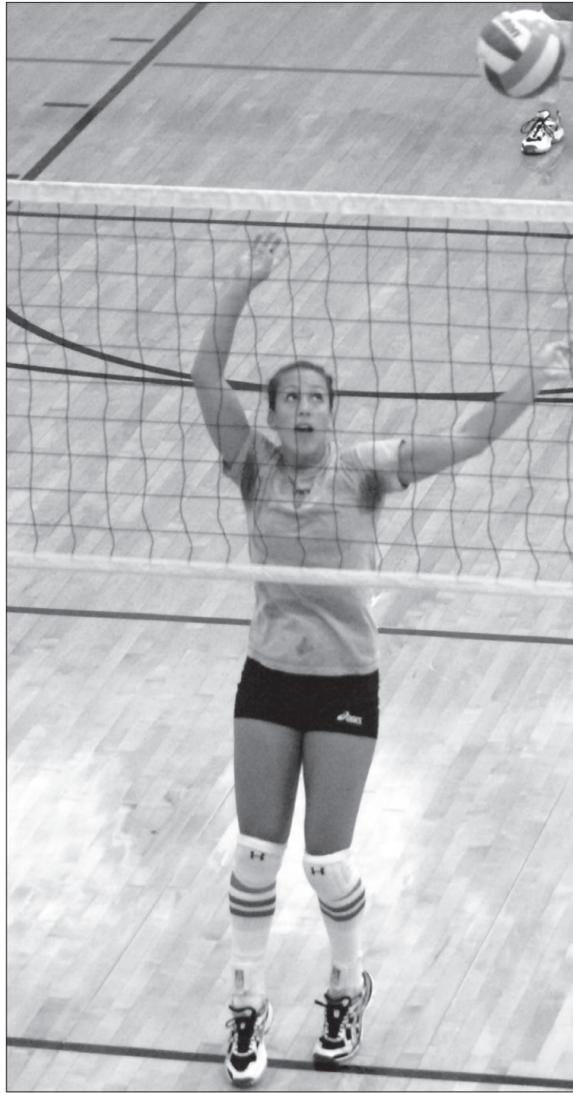
"We were really pleased," Schwegler said. "Our gap between our first and fifth runners was 20 seconds, and the gap between the first and seventh runners was 39 seconds. That's a really big plus. We came out of it real positive for the first meet of the year. Everyone on the team is pretty excited about it and what's going to happen the next few meets."

Pack running also helped the men's team during the meet. The top seven Bulldogs were all able to stay pretty close to each other. This allowed them to pace themselves and stay ahead of most of the competition.

However, Schwegler said the team still has some things to work on.

"We were right there with Drury with about a mile to go," Schwegler said. "We could have finished a little better. We have to do better in the last half mile. It's something that comes with time and later in the season. I'm sure they would tell you the same thing. They just needed to finish a little faster."

Both the men and women will take the trip to Grinnell, Iowa, to run in the Les Duke Invitational this weekend.



Senior outside hitter Eli Medina readies for a kill during practice on Tuesday. Medina had a team-high 18 kills in a loss to UNK.

INJURY | ACL injury would end junior season for Emokpae

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Emokpae said it takes about eight months for the ligament to fully heal.

"This is kind of new to me, but I've already started doing exercises to make sure I don't lose too much muscle as far as my quads and my calves go," Emokpae said. "But first thing to do of course is get the MRI and surgery then comes not too long after that."

Because Emokpae was injured within the first two games of the season, he is allowed to medical redshirt if he does not play again this season. Redshirting would give him two more years of eligibility.

Emokpae was the leading receiver last season with 462 yards and was second on the team with 35 receptions. He had a Bulldog single-game season high 170 yards receiving against Upper Iowa University.

This year, he moved into more of a hybrid role, lining up in the backfield or as a slot or wideout receiver.

"The thing about Vanness is he's real versatile," head coach Shannon Currier said. "He could line up at slot, he could line up in the backfield, he could be a wing, he could be a receiver. So that was something he allowed us to do, where now maybe other players are more specialized and not quite versatile as he was, possibly. We are going to run the same offense,

we're just going to count on different people to do different things for us so we can get the same sort of concepts taken care of."

On Saturday, Emokpae had one rush for five yards and one reception for 11 yards. He and senior Tyler Fenton started as the two wide receivers.

Currier said the injury will give multiple players a chance to step up, especially in the running back position. On Saturday, eight players had at least one rush, with the team combining for 102 yards on 36 carries.

"It's part of the game, part of the game we can't control and you can't really dwell on that," Currier said of Emokpae's injury. "He can't really dwell on that, he's got to focus on the rehabilitation. And the positive is we get him back now for two more years, so that's the benefit. And the other benefit is somebody else gets a chance to do something good with that opportunity."

Emokpae's absence will be felt at wide receiver, where only three players caught a pass during the game Saturday and multiple passes were dropped.

"You never want to see one of your better players, if not one of your best players, go down," senior quarterback Matt Ticich said. "It's going to be tough, but I'm certain that we have guys who will be able to step up and fill his role."

LOSS | Team takes 7-1 record into last tournament before conference play begins

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The loss Friday ended Truman's 10-match regular season winning streak, which dated back to 2007.

Skoch said the team learned from the loss and used it as motivation for the remainder of the weekend. After the loss to UNK, Truman picked up two sweeps Saturday against Upper Iowa University and Chadron State University (ND).

"We have some mature players," Skoch said. "They know they choked and they know we should have won that game. Kearney is a great team and that's why it's more upsetting. We had a moment with 2,000 fans and a chance to shut them down, ... and we didn't have that killer instinct. I think the players recognize they lost it themselves. They came back Saturday and played like we should play."

Before the loss to Nebraska-Kearney, the Bulldogs began the classic with a sweep of the University of Mary (N.D.). The Truman defense was the story of the match, holding Mary to .063 hitting percentage and forcing 24 attack errors. Cherven led a balanced attack with eight kills and a .500 hitting percentage. The match against the winless Mauraders gave the 'Dogs a chance to use 16 players.

Truman was nearly perfect in its two Saturday sweeps.

"We finally played as a unit," Skoch said. "All six people contributed. We didn't just ride

certain people. The proof is that we hit over .350 for the matches as a team. ... I was happy that we all came out firing and played as a unit and were all focused."

The defense was once again the story for the 'Dogs. Truman held Chadron to a -.013 hitting percentage, including holding five different Chadron players to negative hitting percentages.

The Bulldogs used a balanced team effort in both matches. Against Upper Iowa, nine different Bulldogs recorded kills. Against Chadron, 10 Bulldogs recorded kills. Junior outside hitter Jenna Novelli had a breakout match against Chadron. She recorded a season high 12 kills and a .611 hitting percentage.

The win against Chadron extended Truman's winning streak against unranked opponents to 22 matches.

The schedule won't get any easier this week for the Bulldogs, who already have played two ranked opponents. Truman plays four ranked opponents in the next eight days, including a pair of top-five clashes at defending national-champion Concordia University-St. Paul (Minn.) and No. 2 Washburn University in the home opener.

"We'll find out who really is the kind of player that we're expecting to have on that court," Skoch said. "We'll see who gets timid or who wants to show how good they are."

First volleyball loss brings no need for panic

Even the best teams suffer a loss at some point during the season.

The 2006-07 Div. I University of Florida football team lost in October to Auburn University, but the Gators recovered to win the national title. The New York Mets stumbled through the first three months of the baseball season this year before soaring to the top of the National League East as the playoffs approach.

So there certainly shouldn't be any reason for major concern after the Truman volleyball team's 3-1 loss Friday to the nationally-ranked University of Nebraska-Kearney.

"We had the game, and we choked," head coach Jason Skoch said. "There's just no other way of putting it. ... It was a sickening loss to be honest."

It's hard to argue with Skoch's assessment. In the fourth set, which would have tied the match at 2-2 had Truman won, the Bulldogs led the set 19-13 before letting it slip away and losing 25-23. Truman, now 7-1 and

1-1 against ranked opponents, also had an early lead in the opening set before Kearney came back to take the set.

Still, better to choke in an early September match against a non-conference opponent than later in the season in MIAA play or the NCAA tournament. Even with the loss, the Bulldogs will gain strength of schedule points that will help them when teams are seeded for the NCAA tournament. Kearney is 7-1 this season and currently ranked No. 11 in the nation. Plus, the match was on the Lopers' home floor.

Friday's loss also helped refocus the team. The Bulldogs came out Saturday and swept Upper Iowa University and Chadron State University (Neb.), hitting a combined .356 in the two wins.

"We finally did what we were supposed to do on Saturday," Skoch said. "Against two teams that we're better than, we put it to them consistently."

There is a reason the Bulldogs are 70-4 in conference play since 2003

and won every MIAA conference tournament from 2003 to 2007. Truman gets the kinks out early in the season against a difficult slate of non-conference opponents. By the time the conference season rolls around, the Bulldogs are battle-tested.

Losing early in the season is nothing new for Truman. The Bulldogs lost their first match of the 2006 season to Concordia University-St. Paul. Then, Truman compiled a 36-match winning streak. Last season, the 'Dogs started the season 5-2 before winning 21 of its next 23 matches.

The Bulldogs could suffer a few more losses early this season. Truman will play four more ranked opponents in an eight-day period, starting Saturday when the 'Dogs play at defending national champion No. 3 Concordia.

It's a key stretch of matches for the Bulldogs. Although escaping the four ranked opponents undefeated is unlikely, if Truman can be competitive in all four matches and win at least two, it should help them come NCAA tournament time when the Bulldogs will be facing top competition night after night.

Now, the Bulldogs are not without

their problems at this stage in the season. Skoch said he is looking for more consistent production from his outside hitters, right side hitters and setters.

"I'm waiting for people to just take ownership of their positions," Skoch said. "And because they didn't do that Friday, we lost."

For one, Truman needs to find a second outside hitter to consistently provide support in big matches for senior outside hitter Eli Medina.

Before the season, junior outside hitter Jenna Novelli, a junior college transfer, was seen as a player who could help take pressure off Medina. Although Novelli is hitting .242 this season, she hit a combined .000 and totaled just 10 kills in Truman's two matches against ranked opponents.

Truman also needs more consistent production from its right side hitters. Throughout the course of her career, senior right side hitter Melissa Keck has been a source of inconsistency.

When Keck wants to play, she's an offensive juggernaut. Her full potential was seen in last year's NCAA tournament match against Washburn University, when Keck recorded a match-high 19 kills and hit .410.

Entering this season, Keck was a .317 hitter, including a .335 hitting percentage a year ago. Yet like Novelli, Keck has not produced enough in Truman's matches against ranked opponents this season. In those two matches — the win against then-No. 6 Grand Valley State University and the loss to then-No. 13 Kearney — Keck hit a combined .209, more than a full 100 points below her career average.

Novelli and Keck have had their hiccups. It's time for them — and others who have struggled at times this season — to step up and become major factors as the season progresses.

"All of our issues are fixable within half of a season," Skoch said. "... I'm not worried. I think some of the girls got the hint after this weekend."

As long as Friday's deficiencies don't persist, that loss at Kearney won't hurt the Bulldogs in the long run. The 'Dogs might actually be stronger because of it.

"By the time we get to conference, I'll be glad our girls lost to Kearney and not [conference rival] Washburn," Skoch said. "... This team is going to be good, and it will be good by the end of the year."

COMMENTARY



Blake Toppmeyer

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