

COMMENTARY | Columnist makes argument that West Texas' strategy will be to stop Megan Sharpe, players need to play consistently

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 State University had a non-existent offense, and the Bulldogs cruised to victory. In 2006, it was national No. 1 Truman that fell to No. 13 North Alabama University in the regional semifinal. The teams that falter lose. The teams that bring their A game consistently win. It's that simple. The Bulldogs, despite a 4-7 record against regional teams this season, match up well with anybody when they play their best. This is evidenced by their 3-1 win at ESU on Oct. 21 and a 3-2 loss against the University of Central Missouri at home Oct. 7 — a match that Tru-

man had four fourth-set match points. So, the purple and white have the potential to beat anyone. But the 'Dogs have not shown consistency. Their longest winning streak this season is four matches. They have hit less than .100 five times. In the last nine matches, the team has lost 3-0 three times and won 3-0 twice. "Emporia, we really got up for it, and it's a big match," head coach Ben Briney said. "And this team, we get up for big matches. And it's a double-edged sword because sometimes we don't necessarily re-

ally get up for the smaller matches." In just the past two weeks, the 'Dogs picked up a key win against No. 23 University of Nebraska-Omaha before dropping a match to 15-21 Northwest Missouri State University last Friday. Truman can't afford another slip-up. "I told them in the locker room, 'Playoffs started for us Friday, and we're fortunate because we're the one team in the country that's in a double-elimination tournament,'" Briney said. "So we had our loss, and we can't lose from here on out." If the Bulldogs win today,

they play the winner of Washburn University and UNO. Both teams would provide an easier match than West Texas. In the third round, UCM is the favorite to make the final from the top half of the region. But before we can talk about the 'Dogs winning the region, they still have to get past West Texas. I would assume the strategy for West Texas head coach Jason Skoch, who did not respond to an Index interview request, is to stop middle blocker Megan Sharpe. Lately the Bulldogs go as Sharpe goes. In their last five losses, Sharpe hit a com-

bined .109. In the last eight wins, she hit .414. Skoch is no stranger to teams focusing on stellar middle blockers. In the national semifinal last year, California State University-San Bernardino was relentless in doubling All-American middle blocker Allie Cherven. Cherven hit a career-worst -.267 and the 'Dogs lost 3-0. Bottom line: Expect Sharpe to be doubled-teamed as much as possible. The rest of the team, led by senior outside hitter Lauren Graybeal and junior setter Ashley Petak, should have no trouble finding motivation. Lose and the season

is finished. Win and advance. "We've got to get there with that mentality of, 'We're not going home, and I've gotta do whatever I have to do to not go home,'" Briney said. Plus, there's that little extra incentive of beating Skoch. A loss in the first round of the playoffs against his former team would make for a long offseason. If the Bulldogs don't play their best against West Texas, they likely will be packing their bags after a short trip. But if Truman brings its A game consistently, they have a chance to surprise some people.



Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index

If the Bulldogs defeat West Texas at noon today, they will play either UNO or Washburn in the second round.

REGION | Volleyball team attempts to not focus on Skoch factor against West Texas

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 Lauren Graybeal, have seen time on the court during both of the last two postseasons. Truman has played every team but one in the region at least once this season. Wargo said this should help the team prepare for the regional tournament. The Bulldogs' first match is one that carries a little more weight than a postseason match normally would. West Texas is now home to Truman's former head coach Jason Skoch. Briney said working alongside Skoch for four years might give a little insight into how Skoch might play, but that it will be just like any other match for him. However, Graybeal said she has different feelings. "I definitely thought

the NCAA was playing a big joke on us," Graybeal said. "It's very ironic that out of however many Div. II schools in the nation, we get [Skoch] first round. It'll definitely add to the game in the back of everybody's heads, but it's not going to be in our foresight. We're not going to think about it or anything. It's just another game. "It's not just any game, but it's the first round regional game. It's not against him — they're just another team to us. I think that's the mindset we have to

have going in, that we need to play our game and focus on our game on our side of the court rather than theirs." The Bulldogs lost 3-1 to West Texas on Oct. 3. The Lady Buffs beat the Bulldogs by at least 10 points in two of the sets. Briney, Wargo and Graybeal all stressed that both teams have changed a lot since the last time the two played, and the matchup Thursday likely will be much different than the first. West Texas won the Lone Star Conference

this year with a 34-3 record to go along with an 18-match win streak. The Lady Buffs lead in almost every offensive category in their conference, including kills and hitting percentage. The Lady Buffs did not lead any of the significant defensive categories, but they were within the top three in both digs and blocking. The competition the Lady Buffs faced, however, was not on par with the competition Truman contended with. The Lone Star Conference had only one other school that was in the top 25, Abilene Christian University, while the MIAA had six. If Truman wins against West Texas, the team will play the winner of No. 2 Washburn University vs. No. 7 University of Nebraska-Omaha.

"We need to play our game and focus on our side of the court rather than theirs."
Lauren Graybeal
 senior

FINAL | Volleyball team rebounds from loss against Northwest to win final regular-season match

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 attempts, but also had eight attack errors. With an ineffective Sharpe, the other Bulldogs did not pick up the production, with 28 attack errors. After the teams split the first two sets, it seemed Truman would take control of the match when the Bulldogs took the first four points of the third set. But the Bearcats went on an 18-9 run to open up the lead and grab the momentum. They went on to win the third and fourth sets to take the match. Northwest hit just .044 in the first set, but hit .230 in the final three sets. For the match, Truman was out-hit .177 to .077. It was the fifth time this season Truman hit below .100. Last season Truman hit less than .100 just one time, which came in its loss to California State University-San Bernardino in the Final Four. Briney said part of the reason the Bulldogs hit so poorly was that they struggled with serve-receive, and the setters and middle blockers did not connect well during the match. "It was kind of a perfect storm," Briney said. "A combination of all kinds of bad things at once." Senior outside hitter Lauren Graybeal hit .256 and had 15 kills, the only Bulldog in double digits and was the only attacker who hit better than .100. Junior setter Ashley Petak finished with a double-double of 25 assists and 17 digs. After the loss to Northwest, Truman faced arguably its most important regular season match in 10 years against Mo. West. The first set looked like a continuation of Friday's loss, with Truman

dropping the first set 25-22. Mo. West took the first three points of the second set before Truman came alive. The Bulldogs rattled off four of the next five points to get back in the set and eventually took control, winning the set 25-22. The Bulldogs carried that momentum into the final two sets hitting .520 and .278, respectively, and holding Mo. West to a .065 hitting percentage. "I'm not really sure what happened," Petak said. "We just weren't ready to start off but we had that loss [Friday] and we decided no more, and we were going to come back and win the next one." Sharpe bounced back from her tough night against Northwest and hit .579 with 13 kills. Graybeal finished with 13 kills and had 28 for the two weekend matches. Senior outside hitter Erin Hattey finished with nine kills and a match-high .692 hitting percentage. Senior outside hitter Allison Barker did not travel with the team because of illness. She will return for the NCAA Tournament. "I think mentally some of us were kind of thrown off a little bit," Sharpe said. "You get used to who you're passing with, used to who you're with on the court. So I think with her not there, definitely a different feel, but I just think it was a mental thing." Unlike the match against Northwest, the Bulldogs controlled the front of the net, and outblocked the Griffons 9-5. Sophomore middle blocker Johanna Ruff led the Bulldogs with five blocks. "I'm just glad we won," Briney said. "In my mind, we still have six more matches to play."

PLAYOFFS | Mahn scores winning goal against Nebraska-Omaha before women fall 1-0 to West Texas A&M University in second round

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 the Bulldogs are 3-2 against the Mavericks. Senior forward Riley Mahn scored her sixth goal of the season in the 68th minute to give the Bulldogs the victory. Senior midfielder Kristin Haluszczak had an assist on the play. "We came out really hard to begin with, and that really helped us," Mahn said. "We played really well and it was a hard-fought game. It felt really good to beat UNO in the postseason. Any time we play UNO, it feels like you're playing for all the alumni that have been part of that rivalry." The West Texas defense, along with some wind, forced Truman to play out of its comfort zone. The match was even throughout, how-

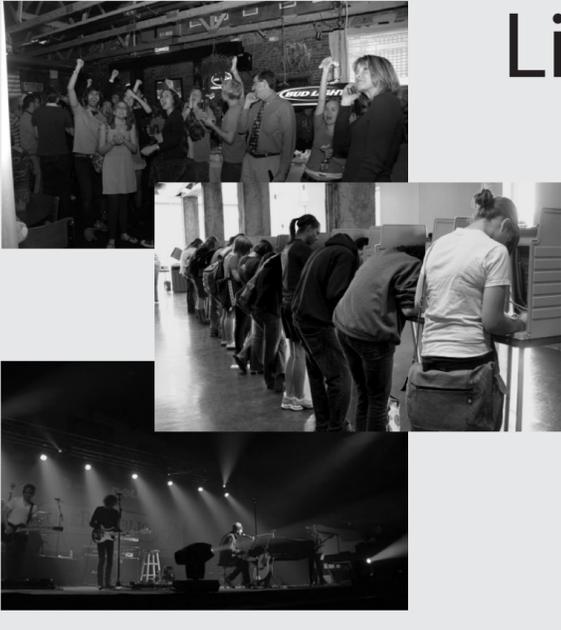
ever. West Texas took four more shots than the Bulldogs in the second half. Cannon said the Bulldogs couldn't put anything together offensively. "It was another tight game," Cannon said. "The weather conditions were difficult for both teams. Since we are such a possession team, the weather made it more difficult to keep the ball. The ball was flying around everywhere because of the wind and it didn't stay inbounds." After West Texas scored its goal early in the second half, the Buffs changed up their defensive strategy. They normally play a 4-3-3, but with the lead, the Buffs fell back into a 4-5-1, a defense designed to guard the goal more. Senior midfielder Katie Reuck

said the Bulldogs played a good match overall despite the loss. "[West Texas] played a lot of kick-and-run and we didn't fall into that game too much," Reuck said. "We possessed the ball well and had a few shots but didn't finish. We like to keep the ball on the ground and the wind didn't really allow us to do that. We did a pretty good job adjusting to the wind and used it to our advantage sometimes." The Bulldogs won their ninth MIAA conference title in the 11 years the conference has sponsored soccer. Truman had eight seniors on

the team that compiled a 59-20-9 record during their four years of soccer. The seniors won two MIAA championships and advanced to the NCAA Tournament three times. They reached the NCAA quarterfinals last year for the first time since 2001. Cannon said the seniors set a great example for the younger players to follow. "[The seniors] are the ones who know what it's like not to win the conference and not to make the NCAA tournament," Cannon said. "They learned from the older kids when they were younger and built on that success. For them, it's a good

team to leave." The Bulldogs had 14 shutouts, which puts them in a tie for the second most in Truman history. They also posted an 11-match win streak. During that stretch, the Bulldogs outscored opponents 27-1. Overall, Truman dominated the second half, outscoring its opponents by 17 goals. "Obviously we didn't get quite as far as last year," Cannon said. "We started a little bit slower this year, had the injury to [senior forward Jessica Wiegert] and it took us a while to get going. However, we had an 11-game win streak, we won conference and we got our first win against UNO in the playoffs. We had a really good season and I'm pleased with the team."

"We had a really good season and I'm pleased with the team."
Mike Cannon
 Head Coach



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