

Saleaumua Provides Inspiration for Huskers

By Sarah Sherman, NU Media Relations

Despite more than a dozen voices bellowing from the NU Coliseum gym every afternoon, Jennifer Saleaumua's voice can easily be picked out from the hallway that stands alongside the Coliseum court.

Behind the red curtains that separate this year's No. 1 Nebraska volleyball team from the outside world, the senior outside hitter is constantly finding new ways to pump up the squad. Saleaumua's enthusiasm is one thing that keeps the daily practices exciting during a long season.

"With Jen, the one day she wasn't in practice, you could feel a void because she brings a lot of energy with the way she communicates," Coach John Cook said. "She's always encouraging them, and that's a gift that she has."

A five-minute glimpse into a practice reveals the affect that Saleaumua's dynamic personality has on the team. Nicknames abound as phrases like "Come on, Pavy (sophomore Sarah Pavan), you got it," single out each teammate throughout drills.

"My auntie always told me I need to have fun because without having fun everybody's just going to have a crabby attitude, and nobody wants to play," Saleaumua said. "So for me, I crack jokes and make people laugh so they're loose and relaxed. And it gets them fired up, too."

Saleaumua's athletic ability has guided her to statistical marks that will keep her in Nebraska record books for years to come. The versatile athlete who could play nearly any position on the floor already holds Nebraska's career record for digs with more than 1,100 and in the third match this season became only the second player in school history to record 1,000 kills and 1,000 digs in her career.

Saleaumua revealed that she was not even aware of the mark and downplayed her individual accomplishments. Instead she puts the focus on success as a team.

"Setting records is fine and dandy, but I don't really notice things like that," Saleaumua said. "It's a great accomplishment and I'm proud to do that. But my one goal is to win a championship this year, so whatever I need to sacrifice to do that, I will."

That willingness to do anything for the team included training at the libero position extensively in the spring as well as with Team USA in the summer despite having played the outside hitter position her entire life. After evaluating the team this fall, Cook decided that running a 6-2 system, which incorporates two setters, would be the best way to utilize Saleaumua's extensive abilities.

"She was one of our best servers, she was our best left side attacker, she's an exceptional blocker for her size and we

already know she can pass and play defense," Cook said. "We just felt like we needed her to play in the front row as well. By only having her as a libero, we weren't taking advantage of her talents."

Saleaumua's accolades in 2004 included being named the Big 12's co-Defensive Player of the Year, as she averaged 3.74 digs and 3.09 kills per game. She also holds two of the top four single-season dig totals in school history.



Senior Jennifer Saleaumua leads not only by example but with her voice, motivating the Huskers to succeed on and off the court.

Despite the success that Saleaumua has had on the court, the natural athlete did not always have the confidence that she projects today.

"I got down on myself so many times when I was younger," Saleaumua said. "When my parents were watching, they would say 'You have the worst attitude.' So I decided that if I encouraged everybody else, it would make me better and I wouldn't have to focus on myself."

It was evident where Saleaumua got her enthusiasm when Nebraska hosted the AVCA/NACWAA College Volleyball Showcase in Omaha to open the season. Extended members of her family stood out in the fifth row with painted faces and posters, screaming encouragement throughout the matches. As Cook recalls, a visit to Saleaumua's home state in 2003 revealed the same enthusiasm she inherited.

"We went to San Diego for spring break two years ago, and there were about 60 people from her family there," Cook said.

"She's grown up in a Samoan culture, which is all about always interacting as a family. She brings that part of that culture in the way that she's grown up onto the volleyball court. She just has a way about her, and you can't really coach that."

As hard as it was for Saleaumua to leave a close upbringing in a big family – she's the third oldest of 17 cousins – so far away in National City, Calif., the two-time All-American trusted her aunt's suggestion that she take a closer look at Nebraska.

"Coach Cook actually coached both of my aunts when they were younger," Saleaumua said. "That's the whole connection and that's how I knew about Nebraska."

"My aunt was coached by him in club ball, and when I was first being recruited I was like 'Nebraska?' Then my aunt started telling me about him, and that's how it all came together."

While Saleaumua reveals it took her about two years to adjust to a completely different setting, she admits that Nebraska was the perfect fit for her. Additionally the commitment to academics is part of what makes Nebraska one of the top volleyball programs in the country.

"If I were to go to any other school it would be tougher to graduate," Saleaumua said. "At Nebraska, you have to focus on school and there are great people here to help. I love them."