

LIBERO BANWARTH CONTROLLING THE COURT

By Shamus McKnight, Nebraska Media Relations

While it is easy to recognize a libero on the court with her different colored jersey, the contributions she makes are often overlooked by most casual volleyball observers. It is a position that is defined by limitations, but for Nebraska Coach John Cook, the opportunities that Kayla Banwarth can have on a match are limitless.

"A lot of people look at that spot as just passers or servers, but Kayla has the ability to impact nearly every play on the court for us," Cook said. "Other than (All-American setter) Sydney (Anderson), she touches the ball more than any other player, and that is a big responsibility."

Banwarth is in her third season as the Huskers' starting libero, a position that may be one of the most demanding on the court. Not only does she handle a majority of the Huskers' passing duties in serve-receive and keep rallies alive with her defensive handiwork, Banwarth also coordinates the team's backline defense on the fly.

It is a role similar to a middle linebacker who not only has to have the range and athleticism to cover from sideline to sideline, but also the communication skills to help put teammates in the best position to make plays.

"I don't think people realize how much communication goes on during a play," Banwarth said. "Things are always changing, and it's part of my role on the court to help control our defense and to make sure everyone is on the right page."

Banwarth, who was an outside hitter and setter in high school, said that becoming more vocal was her biggest obstacle to playing that spot.

"I'm naturally shy, and I think I said about two words the first six months I was here," Banwarth said. "A libero can't be quiet on the court and to be the player I wanted to be, I needed to be more vocal. It was a big step outside my comfort zone, but it was something I needed to do to reach my potential."

"The key for me was building relationships with my teammates and getting to know the girls better," Banwarth said. "Once I started doing that and getting more comfortable with them off the court, it became easier to become more vocal on the court. I think I went from a two or three (on a scale of 1-10) as a freshman to more of a seven or eight now, but I want to keep challenging myself to get better in that area."

Banwarth is putting together her best season in 2009. Entering conference play last week, she ranked second in the league in digs, averaging 4.59 digs per set and was second on the team in both assists (42) and service aces (6). More importantly, she is the team's best passer and a main reason why NU had allowed a league-low 0.65 service aces per set through the first nine matches.

Banwarth has been spectacular at times, recording a career-high 32 digs in the Huskers' five-set win over No. 11 Minnesota at the Runza/AVCA Showcase. That total was the most by a Husker libero since the

position was created in 2002, and the most by any Husker since 1993. The following weekend, she was the defensive MVP of the LSU Tiger Classic, collecting 54 digs in three wins while also holding Nebraska's opponents to a .054 hitting percentage.

Cook has seen Banwarth mature into not only an outstanding defender over the past three years, but into one of the leaders for a youthful Husker squad with seven freshmen on the roster. He believes that she has the potential to be one of the best liberos in the country.

"I look at her now, she's controlling the court, and that's what you want out of a great libero," Cook said. "We've seen a lot of liberos do that to us. Now, we have a libero who's doing it for us."

Husker fans saw Banwarth do just that in last year's regional final at Washington, when she collected a team-high 22 digs and added career highs in both assists (5) and aces (3). Banwarth showed her mettle in the final two sets against the Huskies, ending the fourth set with an ace before a memorable fifth set. With NU trailing 9-4, Banwarth's ace started a run of eight straight Husker points on her serve, helping Nebraska regain the lead in one of the most memorable matches in program history that gave NU a spot in the NCAA semifinals in Omaha.

Banwarth has also put the time in off the court to become one of the best all-around athletes in the program. She now ranks fifth all-time in the Performance Index (2,313 points) and holds the school mark for the fastest pro-agility time (4.29 seconds). That work has allowed her to become an even better volleyball player.

"Since freshman year, I feel like I've just gradually gotten stronger and quicker and faster," said Banwarth, whose 476 digs last year ranked third in program history, while her 4.12 digs per set ranked fourth in the Big 12.

If Banwarth keeps improving as she has during the first half of her career, her coaches believe she has the potential to do something that no other Husker libero has done – become an AVCA All-American.

"I'll go on record as saying that Kayla is as good as any libero in the country, if not the best," Cook said. "That is saying a lot, but I believe Kayla is up to the challenge."

And that would be fitting recognition for one of the Huskers' unsung heroes.



Kayla Banwarth and the eighth-ranked Huskers were off to a 9-2 start this season following a 3-0 sweep at Colorado on Sept. 19.