

PREMIERE ISSUE



VOL. 1, ISSUE NO. 1

HORIZONS

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CHAUSSEE**



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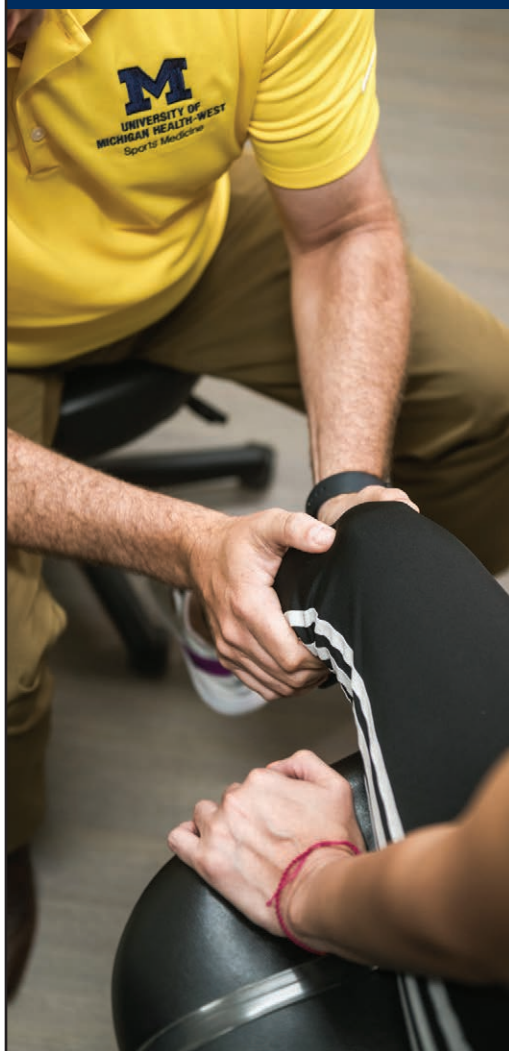


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SERVICE ORDER

PAGE 14 CHEERFULLY CONFIDENT



With a carefree smile, Claire Chaussee looks forward to making her mark with the Rise in the new Pro Volleyball Federation.

PAGE 28 NEW ADVENTURE



Opposite hitter Emiliya Dimitrova is thankful for the opportunity to experience the birth of a new professional league for women.

PAGE 34 CAREER CHANGE

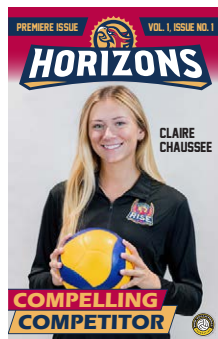


New mom Alyssa Jensen is thrilled to have the chance to play pro volleyball nearly six years after completing her collegiate career at MSU.

SIDEOUTS

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ABOUT THE COVER



Over her college career, Rise outside hitter Claire Chaussee accumulated 1,232 kills, 565 digs, and 124 blocks, showcasing her versatility and skills on the volleyball court.

Photo by Nicolas Carrillo



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COACH'S CORNER

with Rise
head coach
Cathy George

For months, billboards have proclaimed "This is Big" in reference to the arrival of the inaugural Rise season, but they actually might be underselling its significance. "This is History" might be more appropriate. It's the reason that Rise coaching staff and players posed for a commemorative photo on the first day of training camp.

After coaching at the collegiate level for 35 years, including most recently at Michigan State University for 17 seasons (2005-21), Rise head coach and VP of volleyball operations Cathy George is excited to see the dreams of many people finally become reality.

"It's like that moment in [the film] *Hoosiers* where you see the team photo hanging on the gym wall," she said.

She believes the Rise organization has built a team that will make the region proud. "We have assembled a group of players who, first of all, are talented and can play at this level, but who also exhibit those attributes that will make them great teammates – hard-working, passionate players who are courageous and can show the fight and work ethic we want."

The Rise talked to a lot of coaches and players, both in the U.S. and internationally, to find what George hopes will be a team that can embrace the challenge against all manner of opponents and overcome any adversity that may come during the Pro Volleyball Federation's first 24-match schedule.

"When you build a team, you want to have a group of players who are very earnest in what they do. They love the game and they want to play hard. They're good people and you can trust their intentions and their actions. It's something that you can almost feel, and that's where the camaraderie of a team starts to build," George said.



"These are people who are in it for each other, not just themselves. And that selflessness feeds into what we're trying to do, which is to build a team. We will have a team of very good volleyball players, not just one-dimensional players. Most of our players are skilled at more than one thing. I love the versatility of our players, so I am excited to watch them come together.

"I think we have some great synergy already."

Watching her players go through their paces during the team's initial training camp practices, George was excited about what she was seeing.

"I'm really enjoying this team," she said. "I believe that they're in it for the right reasons. They're committed to this team, to the program, to the Grand Rapids Rise, and to the league. And they're very grateful. They're so appreciative of this opportunity and they are adamant that they are going to make the most of it."

George has been impressed by how the veteran players are working with the team's draftees, for example.

"They're trying to look out for each other – you can see it in the way they're coming together to teach each other," she said. "They're

investing in each other so they can be the very best they can be."

George said getting everyone on the same page takes time in terms of teaching the desired systems, but she believes the makings of team chemistry were evident early in camp.

"Many of them have played professionally already, except for our draftees, so they've all played at a high level, they've been All-Americans. They've been a part of great teams, so they understand what you're saying a little bit easier. We want to make sure that we're in sync, that we feel connected when we play, so we can rely on each other and build that trust great teams have."

While her team looked strong on paper, George thinks they will be equally good on the court.

"I'm so excited for people to see our players in action," she said. "The athleticism of these women is incredible. You have to jump high. You have to move fast. You have to make great defensive plays. You use power and finesse. You have to do everything."

George can't wait to hear the roar of the Van Andel Arena crowd. She is anxious for her players to feel the difference thousands of fans can make.

"Fan support is exhilarating," she said. "We've talked about how Grand Rapids supports their teams, so we're looking forward to hearing the place rock."

After months and months of administrative work, George is excited for the season to finally get started.

"It's nice to be able to say, 'Okay, we're finally here.' It seemed like it was forever in the future and now it's suddenly here, but this is the part I truly love. Now it's real and I'm totally excited to watch it grow."

The enormity of the moment is not lost on George, the Rise staff, and especially, the Rise players.

"We're trying to do something that people haven't done before. We are starting from scratch," she said. "We will be part of history."

2024 RISE VOLLEYBALL OPERATIONS STAFF



Head Coach / VP of Volleyball Operations
Cathy George



Associate Head Coach
Bill Walton



Assistant Coach
Denis Dimitrov



Director of Volleyball Operations
Mackenzi Welsh-Vazquez



Head Athletic Trainer
Dave Getsoff

NOT PICTURED

Data Analyst:
Brady Compton

Head Strength & Conditioning Coach:
Daimond Dixon

Director of Performance Science:
Harjiv Singh



**We're big fans of the Rise.
We're also big fans of their fans.**

Huntington is proud to support the Grand Rapids Rise, through all the wins and losses. No matter the outcome, it's a joy to watch you from the stands, competing your hearts out. From all your fans at Huntington, go team!



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Schedule

2024



Thu., Jan. 25
vs. Columbus, 7 p.m.

Fri., Feb. 9
at Atlanta, 7 p.m.

Mon., Feb. 12
vs. Omaha, 7 p.m.

Sun., Feb. 18
vs. Atlanta, 4 p.m.

Fri., Feb. 23
at San Diego, 10 p.m.

Fri., March 1
at Orlando, 7 p.m.

Mon., March 4
at San Diego, 10 p.m.

Sat., March 9
vs. Columbus, Noon

Sun., March 17
vs. Las Vegas, 4 p.m.

Wed., March 20
at Columbus, 7 p.m.

Tue., March 26
at Las Vegas, 10 p.m.

Thu., March 28
at Omaha, 8 p.m.

Mon., April 1
vs. Atlanta, 7 p.m.

Sat., April 6
vs. Orlando, 7 p.m.

Thu., April 11
at Orlando, 10:30 a.m.

Sat., April 13
vs. Las Vegas, 7 p.m.

Tue., April 16
at Atlanta, 7 p.m.

Thu., April 18
vs. Orlando, 7 p.m.

Sat., April 20
at Las Vegas, 10 p.m.

Fri., April 26
at Omaha, 8 p.m.

Sun., April 28
at Columbus, 2 p.m.

Sat., May 4
vs. San Diego, 7 p.m.

Sun., May 5
vs. San Diego, 4 p.m.

Sun., May 12
vs. Omaha, 4 p.m.

■ Home

■ Away



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Dan DeVos



2024 SEASON

Dear Rise Fans,

How often can you get in on the ground floor of a revolution?

Volleyball's popularity is exploding. The Midwest is a hotbed for the sport, the Big Ten is the most dominant conference in the NCAA, and there are a number of strong club, high school, and college programs across our region.

The women's game has made many headlines during the past few months, drawing TV ratings that rank third among all collegiate sports, behind only football and men's basketball. And it was a football stadium in Lincoln, Nebraska, that was filled with 92,003 fans for a volleyball game last August, setting a record for the largest crowd to witness a women's sports event.

Growth and achievements like these have fueled the anticipation for the first serve to fly at Van Andel Arena, as the Grand Rapids Rise make their debut during the inaugural season of Pro Volleyball Federation.

Mirrored by the rising sun in our logo, this is truly a new dawn for professional sports in West Michigan, filled with opportunity not only for our world-class athletes but also for the thousands of children, teens and women who have new role models to look up to and cheer for. As Michigan's only major-league volleyball team, the Rise comprise the highest-caliber team of female athletes to ever call Grand Rapids home, but they stand on the shoulders of giants who came before them and created the rich history and legacy of local women's athletics that have helped make teams like the Rise a reality.

The Rise's roster is packed with some of the finest volleyball players in the world – including a U.S.



Olympian, collegiate national champions, numerous All-Americans, and members of several countries' national teams. (Learn all about them starting on page 20.) They are led by Cathy George, our dynamic and charismatic head coach who, before collecting the most wins in the history of Michigan State volleyball, became the first woman to coach a team (Texas-Arlington) to the NCAA Division I Final Four.

Pro Volleyball Federation has attracted elite talent beyond just the court, as league investors include Cincinnati Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow, music star Jason Derulo, and three-time Olympic gold medalist Kerri Walsh Jennings. The new circuit boasts major-market teams playing in premier arenas from San Diego to Orlando, and its seven teams will already welcome three more cities to the fold in 2025. National broadcast agreements with CBS Sports and other networks will allow volleyball fans in cities across the country to see what they're missing.

In short, Pro Volleyball Federation strives to provide the highest level of women's professional sports in our country, and we are thrilled for you to be with us from the start.

Sincerely,

Dan DeVos
Chief Executive Officer
Grand Rapids Rise

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- Cathy George, Head Coach



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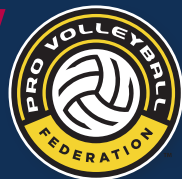
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PRO VOLLEYBALL FEDERATION 2024 TEAM DIRECTORY



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Chief Operating Officer	Scott Gorsline
Director of Strategic Investments	Cole DeVos
Senior VP of Business Operations	Tim Gortsema
Head Coach / VP of Volleyball Operations	Cathy George
Associate Head Coach	Bill Walton
Assistant Coach	Denis Dimitrov
Director of Volleyball Operations	Mackenzi Welsh-Vazquez
Data Analyst	Brady Compton
Head Athletic Trainer	Dave Getsoff
Head Strength & Conditioning Coach	Diamond Dixon
Director of Performance Science	Harjiv Singh
Communications	Randy Cleves, Alex Eisen
Home Arena	Van Andel Arena
Capacity	7,805
Time Zone	Eastern
Team Colors	Elevation Red, Ascension Blue and Sunrise Gold



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Assistant Coach	Brian Doyon
Public Relations	Kelsey Bibik
Home Arena	Gas South Arena
Time Zone	Eastern



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Team Services &	
Travel Director	Christine Podraza
Communications	Kylie Randall Cassie Kelley
Home Arena	Nationwide Arena
Time Zone	Eastern



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Owners	Danny White, Chris Erickson
President	Diane Mendenhall
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Assistant Coaches	Laura Kuhn John Xie, John Corbelli
Head Strength and Conditioning	
Coach	Laura Pilakowski Buttermore
VP, Organizational Development	
& Team Travel	Grant Gallo
Communications	Geoff Exstrom
Home Arena	CHI Health Center
Time Zone	Central

2024 RISE MATCHES VS. VIBE

2/9	@ ATLANTA	7 P.M.
2/18	ATLANTA	4 P.M.
4/1	ATLANTA	7 P.M.
4/16	@ ATLANTA	7 P.M.

2024 RISE MATCHES VS. FURY

1/25	COLUMBUS	7 P.M.
3/9	COLUMBUS	NOON
3/20	@ COLUMBUS	7 P.M.
4/28	@ COLUMBUS	2 P.M.

2024 RISE MATCHES VS. SUPERNOVAS

2/12	OMAHA	7 P.M.
3/28	@ OMAHA	8 P.M.
4/26	@ OMAHA	8 P.M.
5/12	OMAHA	4 P.M.



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General Manager Erik Nielsen
President & Chief Operating Officer. George Manias
Head Coach Amy Pauley
Assistant Coaches..... Gordon Mayforth,
Molly Stark, Blake Omartian
Communications..... Amani Jones
Home Arena Addition Financial Arena
Time Zone Eastern

2024 RISE MATCHES VS. VALKYRIES		
3/1	@ ORLANDO	7 P.M.
4/6	ORLANDO	7 P.M.
4/11	@ ORLANDO	10:30 A.M.
4/18	ORLANDO	7 P.M.



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Kerri Walsh Jennings, Nathan Fink
President Billy Johnson
General Manager Jeremy Waller
Head Coach Tayyiba Haneef-Park
Assistant Coach Deitre Collins-Parker
Communications..... Lauren Lee
Home Arena Viejas Arena
Time Zone Pacific

2024 RISE MATCHES VS. MOJO		
2/23	@ SAN DIEGO	10 P.M.
3/4	@ SAN DIEGO	10 P.M.
5/4	SAN DIEGO	7 P.M.
5/5	SAN DIEGO	4 P.M.



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President Ruben Herrera
Head Coach Fran Flory
Associate Head Coach Denise Corlett
Assistant Coach Melody Nua
Communications..... Lance Craig
Home Arena Dollar Loan Center
Time Zone Pacific

2024 RISE MATCHES VS. THRILL		
3/17	LAS VEGAS	4 P.M.
3/26	@ LAS VEGAS	10 P.M.
4/13	LAS VEGAS	7 P.M.
4/20	@ LAS VEGAS	10 P.M.

**COMING
IN 2025**

DALLAS

dallasprovolleyball.com
Owners: Armand Sadoughi,
Evan Stone, Richard Zaleski,
Michael Benitez, Mubina Benitez
Time Zone: Central

INDIANAPOLIS

indyprovolleyball.com
Owner: Jim Schumacher
Time Zone: Eastern

KANSAS CITY

kcprovolleyball.com
Owners: Kent McCarthy,
Missy McCarthy,
Molly McCarthy
Time Zone: Central



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OPENING NIGHT
INAUGURAL SEASON
T-SHIRT

THU
JANUARY 25
7:00PM



**RISE
T-SHIRT**

MON
FEBRUARY 12
7:00PM



FAMILY DAY
FLEECE BLANKET
\$1 small Pepsi and
\$1 small ice cream cups

SUN
FEBRUARY 18
4:00PM



**RISE
TRUCKER
HAT**

SAT
MARCH 9
NOON



FAMILY DAY
ST. PATRICK'S DAY
T-SHIRT
\$1 small Pepsi and \$1 small
ice cream cups

SUN
MARCH 17
4:00PM



**RISE
T-SHIRT**

MON
APRIL 1
7:00PM



**RISE
POM
HAT**

SAT
APRIL 6
7:00PM



**RISE
TRUCKER
HAT**

SAT
APRIL 13
7:00PM



**RISE
TUMBLER**

THU
APRIL 18
7:00PM



**RISE
BOONEY
HAT**

SAT
MAY 4
7:00PM

FAMILY DAY
\$1 small Pepsi and \$1 small
ice cream cups

SUN
MAY 5
4:00PM

**FAN
APPRECIATION**
MYSTERY SWAG
\$1 small Pepsi and \$1 small
ice cream cups

SUN
MAY 12
4:00PM

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*With a carefree smile,
Claire Chaussee
looks forward to
making her mark
with the Rise in the
new Pro Volleyball
Federation.*

Story by Mark Newman

CH



Photo by Nicolas Carrillo

EERFULLY CONFIDENT

Claire Chaussee remembers when she first heard that there were plans for a new professional women's volleyball league in the United States.

"My first thought was, 'I wonder who's going to join?' And then I was like, 'Wait, I'm going to join.'"

"It was exciting to know there was the possibility of playing in the U.S. for a pro season in a real league that will continue, hopefully, for many years to come. I think that is amazing and unbelievable, and I never thought that would ever be an opportunity, for me at least."

Chaussee (pronounced shaw-SAY), the 2022 Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) Player of the Year, was beginning her pro career in Europe after helping the Louisville Cardinals reach the NCAA championship game. When the Grand Rapids Rise became the first team announced for the new league, the Wisconsin native became more than intrigued.

"And then out of the blue, it happens, and I'm over in Italy and I'm like, sign me up."

For Chaussee, playing for the Rise in the new Pro Volleyball Federation was not only an opportunity to be part of history but also a chance to play closer to home.

Chaussee grew up in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, a working-class suburb of Madison, home of the University of Wisconsin, where her father runs an automotive repair shop not far from the high school.

She was heavily influenced by her sister, Emily, who was four years older.

"I give her most of the credit for where I am today," she said, noting that she followed in her sister's footsteps, from wearing her clothes to her jersey number. "We would hit the ball against the garage or play on the little volleyball court and net that our dad set up for us. She wouldn't take it easy on me and I am very grateful for that."

Chaussee tried playing other sports such as soccer and basketball but gravitated to volleyball because she felt it was the one that she could excel at; and that, indeed, is what she did during her teenage years.

A four-time First Team All-Conference

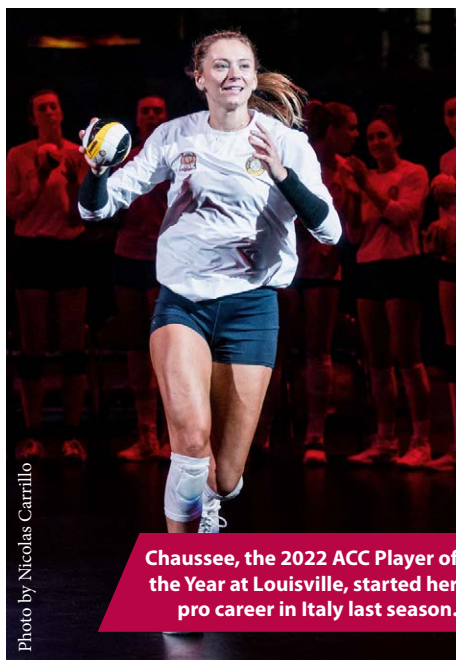


Photo by Nicolas Carrillo

Chaussee, the 2022 ACC Player of the Year at Louisville, started her pro career in Italy last season.

performer, Chaussee earned honorable mention All-State honors as a freshman and was Third Team All-State as a sophomore before earning First Team All-State kudos as both a junior and senior.

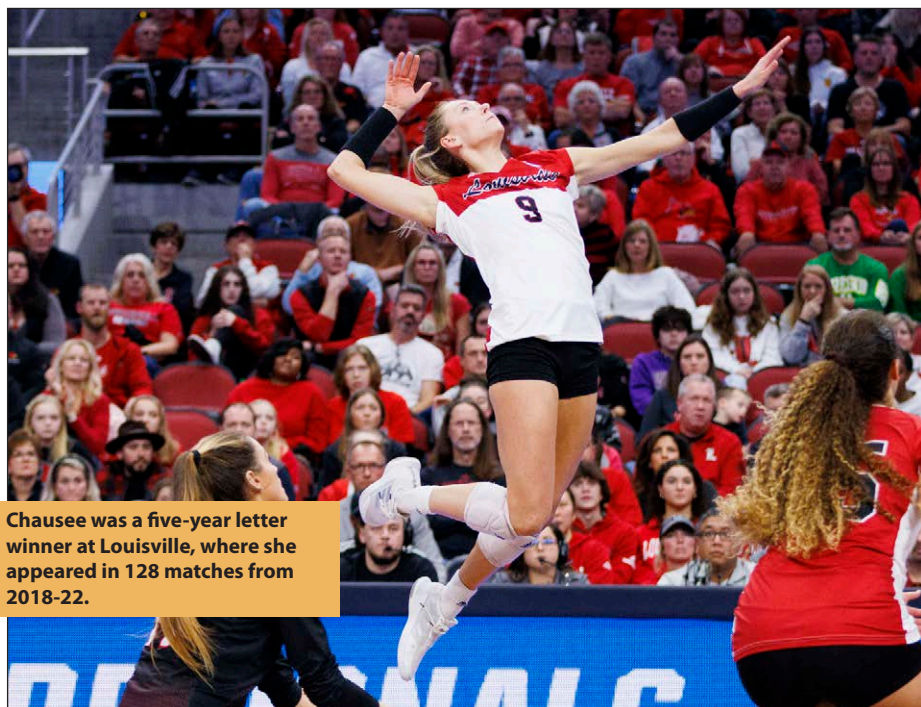
A college scholarship eventually seemed inevitable.

"I think I always wanted to play in college, so I knew it could be a possibility," she said. "I started getting offers from smaller D1 schools when I was 15 or 16 and that's when I thought, 'Oh my goodness, I really could have a shot,' but I wasn't sure where I would end up."

Her first choice, however, was not interested.

"Going to Wisconsin was a dream of mine, but I wasn't what they were looking for at the time," she said. "I'm very grateful that was the case."

Fortunately for Chaussee, she caught the attention of Anne Kordes, then the head coach at Louisville, during a Great Lakes tournament.



Chaussee was a five-year letter winner at Louisville, where she appeared in 128 matches from 2018-22.

"Within two or three weeks, I was on campus and she offered me," she said. "She had only seen me play once, maybe twice at that point, but she gave me time to think about it. At the time I was talking to another school and they were rushing me. They were like, 'You have five to seven days to give us an answer, otherwise it's going to the next girl.'"

"So for that and other reasons – smaller school, great people, great coaches – I knew Louisville was more of what I wanted."

Kordes would eventually resign to spend more time with her family, opening the door for current head coach Dani Busboom Kelly. In the meantime, Chaussee would require surgery for an ankle injury.

"Dani didn't get to see me play all that much, but she had faith in me and still gave me my scholarship," Chaussee said.

That faith would be rewarded later, but not before some misplaced misgivings on the part of one young volleyball player.

Chaussee had a tough freshman year, even thinking about quitting at one point.

"Going in was hard, but also being away from home among other things, I just was like, 'Maybe this isn't for me. Maybe I made a mistake. I don't

know.' But Dani, my parents, and my sister – and really all my teammates – pushed me to stay.

"I think just everything piled on top of each other, so it just got worse. I wasn't sure about what I wanted to do for school, or what to study, so that was stressful. I kind of fell into a little dark space. I never wanted to hang out with anyone, so that was rough.

"Fortunately, I was blessed with great teammates who would drag me along to whatever they were doing, and it ended up being super fun. I was really happy and grateful for them.

"By the end of spring – really by the end of summer – I was like, 'I'm so happy and grateful that you guys pushed me to stay because I think I would have made the worst decision on the planet if I had left.'"

She found a confidant in teammate Tori Dilfer, who had recently transferred to Louisville from Texas Christian University. Dilfer, daughter of Super Bowl XXXV Champion quarterback Trent Dilfer, provided emotional support at a critical time in her life.

"We would go on long car rides and just talk, because I think that was her way of just allowing me to share my feelings about everything, so I could get it out, and her as well because she had

just transferred to Louisville," Chaussee said.

"I asked her one day in the car, 'Can you be my mentor for all of this?' I had no idea what I was stepping into because I grew up Catholic, but this was way different. That spring semester is when I dove into my faith a little bit more, and I think that helped me out the most, actually."

Like most elite collegiate athletes, Chaussee had to face reality first before she would find success.

"Anyone going into college at a high level probably was one of the best players on their team in high school or club," she said. "It's a harder transition, because you think at the time, 'Oh, I'm good,' but you're going up against other girls who are just as good or better – nine out of 10 times better."

She knew she had to re-dedicate herself if she was going to excel at the college level.

"I think being challenged and being benched put a fire under my butt, as it would anyone, because nobody wants to sit on the bench," she said. "I started going in for extra reps, staying after practice, really taking the time to learn from the players who were playing over me. What are they doing? Once again, I had great teammates in the same position, but who were willing to help me."

Chaussee would eventually help lead Louisville to back-to-back appearances in the Final Four. As a senior, the 2021 Cardinals lost in the semifinals to eventual NCAA champion Wisconsin – a missed opportunity to exact revenge, as Louisville was edged in five sets – but it was an unforgettable experience nonetheless.

"It was like, 'Wow, we're here,'" said Chaussee, who still feels goosebumps at the memory. "Before the game, Dani told us that it's gonna be packed, there's going to be a lot of people, so just look around, take the time to appreciate everyone who's there, because you may never get this moment again."

But Louisville indeed returned. Chaussee opted to use the extra year of eligibility granted by the NCAA due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this time her team made it to the championship, losing to the University of Texas.

Honored as the ACC Player of the Year, Chaussee was also named an AVCA First Team All-American as well as a Final Four All-Tournament selection.

"Those are great honors, but I also don't think it was just me," she said. "I had all the other girls and the coaches behind me, and without them pushing me every day in practice, I would have

Chaussee received First Team AVCA All-American honors during her fifth-year senior season.



never been able to accomplish those things.

"I couldn't have imagined a better five years at Louisville."

Turning pro after college, Chaussee looked at various options – Germany, France and Greece were potential stops – but ultimately chose Italy.

"My agent said that Italy will push you and challenge you because it's one of the best leagues, if not the best, in the world, and you're gonna be going up against some of the best players in the world," she said.

"I wanted to be challenged and pushed right away. And in the end, I think it was probably the hardest route I could have chosen."

Chaussee played for a team in Macerata, a small town in central Italy. "I learned a lot about myself, just living alone, which is something I'd never done before," she said. "It was a smaller town, so I didn't have anyone to hang out with because my teammates were living outside the city. Not knowing any Italian, it was hard but it was a lot of fun."

She is thankful that one of her teammates in Italy was Simone Abbott, who is now one of her teammates in Grand Rapids. "She had already been there for five months, so she helped me a lot," Chaussee said.

While she could have returned for a second season in Italy, Chaussee was beyond thrilled that she was going to be able to play professional volleyball in the Midwest.

"Even though playing overseas can be fun, I think being able to do what you love in your country – or even your hometown as some girls are doing – is just amazing and unbelievable," she said. "I think being closer to home is what's best for me."

She is finding motivation in the possibility of being a pioneer of the sport in the U.S.

"I want to help this league grow," she said.

"I want other girls, younger girls, to have this opportunity when they grow up. Being able to have this opportunity in the U.S. is insane."

Although she is serious and committed to pushing herself to reach new heights, Chaussee is also intent on enjoying herself.

"The best job to have is one that's fun and one that you enjoy," she said. "I think now – transitioning into pro – keeping the game fun is important to me. There's a sense of responsibility, but I still want to allow myself to laugh and bring out my goofy side a little bit."

"I find it really fun and I've always found it enjoyable. We don't have to stress about it. Let's have fun."



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2024 ROSTER



5

**ERIKA
PRITCHARD**

Outside Hitter

Height: 6-3

Years Pro: 3

Born: 10/19/1999

**Hometown:
Middletown, MD**

PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with Vandœuvre Nancy Volleyball in France during the 2021-22 campaign ... Won a bronze medal with VBC Cheseaux in the 2022-23 Swiss Cup.

COLLEGE: From 2017-21, competed at the University of Maryland, becoming the all-time leader in points with 1,790 and finishing second all time in kills with 1,526 ... Finished collegiate career at Penn State University in 2021-22 ... Named to the 2020 USA Volleyball Collegiate National Team-Gold roster ... Dubbed a 2020 First-Team All-Big Ten member after ranking second in the conference with 339.5 total points and second in total kills with 28 ... In 2018, named to the First Team All-Big Ten, AVCA All-North Region Team and the Volleyball Magazine Honorable Mention All-American team after posting 493 kills and a .213 attack percentage, which were both career highs ... Paced the Big Ten with 4.32 kills per set in 2018 ... As a freshman in 2017, led the Big Ten with 48 service aces and 0.42 aces per set.

PERSONAL: Volunteers with Caitlin's Smiles, Frederick County Animal Shelter and Frederick Christian Fellowship Church Driven Ministry ... Started playing volleyball at 11 years old ... Hobbies include playing the ukulele, making art, and photography/film.



7

**NIA
GRANT**

Middle Blocker

Height: 6-2

Years Pro: 8

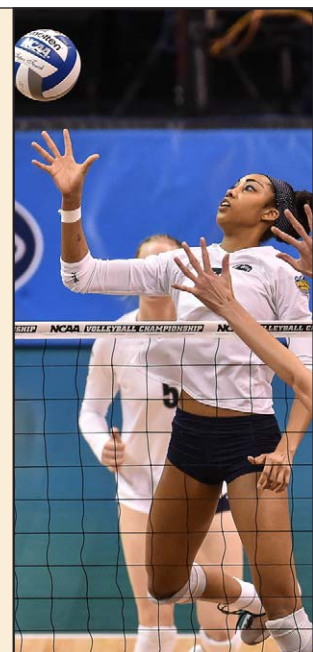
Born: 5/8/1993

**Hometown:
Warren, OH**

PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with Ayutthaya A.T.C.C. in Thailand during the 2014-15 campaign ... Accumulated seven medals at the club level since 2014-15, including gold at the 2016-17 German Cup and German Supercup with Allianz MTV Stuttgart ... Named the Best Blocker of the German Bundesliga in 2018-19 with SC Potsdam.

COLLEGE: Competed at Penn State University from 2011-15 and finished with a 129-16 (.890) overall record ... Won back-to-back NCAA national titles in 2013 and 2014 ... Consecutive Big Ten champion in 2012 and 2013 before placing second in 2014 ... As a senior, .458 hitting percentage ranked second nationally and in Big Ten ... In 2014, named an AVCA First-Team All-American and a unanimous All-Big Ten selection ... As a junior in 2013, dubbed an AVCA All-American Honorable Mention and an AVCA All-Northeast Region Team after placing fifth in the conference with a .350 hitting percentage ... Started in 32 matches as a freshman in 2011 and ranked second on the team with 107 total blocks, averaging 0.91 blocks per set.

PERSONAL: Her father, African, played pro football for the Miami Dolphins ... Married to Will Yeguet, a professional basketball player competing in France who played at the University of Florida from 2010-14 ... Has one daughter ... Majored in communications with a minor in Italian ... Enjoys aviation and would be an air traffic controller if she could trade jobs for a day.



MEET THE RISE



PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with Sigortashop in Turkey during the 2022-23 campaign ... Played one season in the Athletes Unlimited Pro League in 2023, scoring 1,426 points (38th best in the league).

COLLEGE: Competed for the University of Washington from 2018-22, finishing fourth in school history with a .380 career attack percentage ... All-Pac-12 and AVCA All-Region member in 2022 ... Two-time Pac-12 champion in 2020 and 2021 ... Career-best season in 2021 and was named to the AVCA All-American Second Team, AVCA All-Region Team and All-Pac-12 Team, leading the Pac-12 with a .415 attack percentage, which was the sixth-best single-season mark in school history ... In 2021, averaged career highs with 2.13 kills per set and 1.05 blocks per set ... 2020 AVCA All-Region Team member and All-Pac-12 Honorable Mention ... Reached the 2020 NCAA Final Four and ranked fifth in the Pac-12 with a .331 attack percentage ... Lost 3-1 to Baylor in the 2019 NCAA Final Four.

PERSONAL: Born in Flagstaff, Arizona ... Younger sister Lydia currently plays volleyball for the University of Minnesota ... Earned college degrees in biological anthropology: human evolution and political science ... Can play the flute, piccolo and piano ... Favorite food is pasta ... Favorite books include Where the Crawdads Sing, Arc of the Scythe series and Jane Eyre ... Enjoys vacationing anywhere with a beach.



8

MARIN GROTE

Middle Blocker

Height: 6-4

Years Pro: 2

Born: 12/16/1999

Hometown: Burbank, CA



PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with CBF Balducci HR Macerata in Italy on Oct. 23, 2022, against Igor Gorgonzola Novara ... Played one season with Athletes Unlimited Pro League in 2023, scoring 2,939 points (10th best in the league) with 222 kills, 114 digs and six service aces in 44 sets played.

COLLEGE: 2022 ACC Player of the Year at Louisville (2018-22) in addition to being named a AVCA First Team All-American, the AVCA All-East Region Player of the Year and a Final Four All-Tournament Team honoree ... Competed in 2022 NCAA championship game ... In 2022, led Louisville with 452 kills and 493 points ... Averaged 2.84 kills per set in 2021 en route to being named to the AVCA All-East Region Honorable Mention Team and All-ACC Second Team ... Invited to the 2021 U.S. National Team Open Program ... As a sophomore, helped guide Louisville to its first Elite Eight appearance in school history in 2019 ... From 2018-22 at Louisville, averaged 3.02 kills per set, a .250 hitting percentage, 1.38 digs per set and 0.30 blocks per set.

PERSONAL: Majored in sports administration and received a master's in business administration ... Started playing volleyball at 9 years old as a setter ... First job was a hostess at a golf course ... Favorite foods are chicken wings and watermelon ... Favorite music artist is Morgan Wallen ... Fan of the Green Bay Packers ... Enjoys photography, water sports, and social media.



9

CLAIRE CHAUSSEE

Outside Hitter

Height: 6-0

Years Pro: 2

Born: 5/15/2000

Hometown: Sun Prairie, WI



2024 ROSTER



10

**SHANNON
SCULLY**

Outside Hitter

Height: 6-2

Years Pro: 2

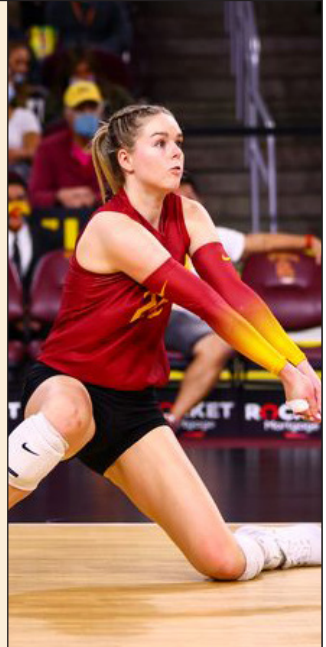
Born: 3/3/1999

**Hometown:
Huntington
Beach, CA**

PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with Terville-Florange OC in France during 2022-23 campaign and was dubbed the December Athlete of the Month ... Named the Best Receiver at the 2022-23 French Cup with Terville-Florange OC.

COLLEGE: As a graduate student in 2021-22 at USC, won Pac-12 beach volleyball championship and NCAA Beach Volleyball national title ... Served as captain for Pepperdine University as a senior in 2020-21 ... In 2020-21, named an All-WCC First Team, AVCA Pacific South All-Region First Team and an AVCA All-American Honorable Mention ... Three-time USA Collegiate National Team Member ... As a junior, was named to All-WCC First Team and AVCA All-Pacific South Region Honorable Mention ... As a freshman at Utah in 2017-18, paced the team in serve receive percentage and service aces (25).

PERSONAL: Her father, Tom, played men's soccer at Allegheny College (1977-81) and cousins Emily Sciorra and Mary Cate Scully played volleyball at Penn State (2016-20) and cross country at the U.S. Naval Academy (2013-17), respectively ... Graduated from Pepperdine University with a bachelor's degree in communication and media studies in May 2021 ... Graduated from University of Southern California with a master's degree in communication management ... Enjoys cooking, hiking, movies, music, and photography.



12

**SARAH
SPENCIL**

Setter / Libero

Height: 5-8

Years Pro: 7

Born: 8/16/1996

**Hometown:
Phoenix, Ariz.**

PROFESSIONAL: Member of Team USA Beach Volleyball for past five years ... Part of youngest team to ever represent the USA in beach volleyball at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics ... Part of Association of Volleyball Professionals Tour (AVP) for past six years and part of Federation Internationale de Volleyball Tour (FIVB) for the last five seasons ... Gold at 2021 FIVB World Tour Sochi and Ostrava ... Gold at 2022 AVP Tour Hermosa Beach and silver at 2022 FIVB World Tour Cape Town ... AVP Defensive Player of the Year in 2022 ... Silver medal at 2023 FIVB World Tour Ostrava and bronze at 2023 FIVB World Tour Irapuato.

COLLEGE: Competed at UCLA from 2017-19 ... Two-time beach volleyball national champion with UCLA (2018 and 2019) ... 2018 VolleyMob All-American First Team, VolleyMob Pair of the Year with Lily Justine, and AVCA All-American Honorable Mention ... From 2014-17, suited up with Loyola Marymount University, finishing ninth in school history with 1,193 kills and 3.43 kills per set, and seventh with 3,063 assists ... 2017 WCC Player of the Year and All-WCC First Team ... Gold medal with Team USA Beach Volleyball at 2016 Four Nations U21 Tournament ... Finished fourth at 2016 FIVB U21 World Championships, which was highest finish from the U.S. ... As a freshman in 2014, named to WCC All-Freshman Team and AVCA Pacific South Region Freshman of the Year.

PERSONAL: Has an older sister, Rebecca, who played volleyball at Regis University (2011-16) ... Majored in sociology ... Started playing volleyball at 6 years old as a setter ... Favorite music is country, including musical artists Morgan Wallen, Brooks & Dunn, George Strait, and Gabby Barrett.



MEET THE RISE



PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with Minis Arluy VB Logrono in Spain during the 2018-19 season ... Earned a bronze medal with Team USA at the 2022 Pan-American Cup and gold at the 2019 NORCECA Champions Cup ... In 2022-23, claimed bronze at the German Cup with Ladies in Black Aachen ... Won gold medals with Minis Arluy VB Logrono at the Spanish Superliga, the Spanish Cup, and the Spanish Supercup ... Collected a bronze medal with Terville-Florange OC in the French League ... Was named the MVP and Best Setter at the 2018-19 Spanish Cup.

COLLEGE: Spent five years at Purdue University from 2013-17 and became one of just seven setters in school history with 4,000 career assists ... Was the first Boilermaker in history to earn 4,000 assists and 1,000 digs ... In 2017, was named a AVCA Honorable Mention All-American ... Set a Purdue NCAA Tournament record with a .454 hitting percentage against Iowa State in the first round in 2016.

PERSONAL: Majored in mechanical engineering and minored in Spanish ... Favorite foods include pasta, steak, and anything breakfast related ... Favorite music artists are Kygo, Coldplay, Bruce Springsteen, Dua Lipa, and Adele ... Harry Potter is her favorite book series ... Enjoys water skiing and baking.



13

ASHLEY EVANS

Setter

Height: 6-1

Years Pro: 6

Born: 12/23/1994

Hometown: Liberty Twp., OH



PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut in 2007 with Slavia Sofia in Bulgaria at 16 years old ... Has played for 13 different club teams in Europe in six countries: Bulgaria, Italy, Turkey, Romania, Japan, and France ... Member of Bulgarian National Team ... Captured five medals for Bulgaria, including two gold ... Most recent gold medal came at the 2021 European Golden League with Bulgaria ... Won a gold medal for Bulgaria at the 2014 Yeltesin Cup and silver medals at the 2012 European Golden League and the 2010 European Golden League ... Collected a combined 17 medals at the club level ... In 2019-20, won the Bulgarian League with VC Maritza ... With the NEC Red Rockets in 2016-17, claimed the Japan V League Division 1 championship ... Lifted the Romanian League title and the Romanian Cup with Tomis Constanta in 2010-11 ... During rookie campaign in 2007-08, claimed a silver medal in the Bulgarian League with Slavia Sofia and a gold medal in the Bulgarian Cup.

PERSONAL: Married to Rise assistant coach Denis Dimitrov ... Has a daughter ... Has one younger brother, Stefan Nikolov, who also plays professional volleyball with ASD Insieme per Pordenone in Italy ... Had only traveled through and hadn't stayed in the United States before joining the Rise ... Started playing volleyball at 9 years old as a receiver and then setter before finally finding her role as an opposite hitter ... Considers herself a very organized person, near perfectionist ... Besides English, can also speak Bulgarian, Italian and Serbian ... Favorite food is sushi ... Has a Golden Retriever named Diego.



14

EMILIYA DIMITROVA

Opposite Hitter

Height: 6-1

Years Pro: 17

Born: 12/26/1991

Hometown: Shumen, Bulgaria



2024 ROSTER



15

**MAC
PODRAZA**

Setter

Height: 6-2

Years Pro: 1

Born: 11/21/2000

**Hometown:
Sunbury, OH**

PROFESSIONAL: Begins first year as a professional.

COLLEGE: Finished collegiate career at Penn State (2023) after playing four seasons at Ohio State (2019-22) ... Three-time AVCA All-American, making the second team in 2022, third team in 2021, and honorable mention in 2020 ... Named the Big Ten Setter of the Year in 2022 ... Four-time Big Ten First Team selection (2020-23) ... Accumulated 5,115 assists (36.5 per match), 998 digs, 325 kills, 283 blocks, and 56 aces in 140 college matches played.

PERSONAL: Her mother, Christine, played college volleyball, is in the Hall of Fame at Minnesota, and currently serves as the team services director with the Columbus Fury ... Majored in arts and sciences at Ohio State.



17

**ALYSSA
JENSEN**

Middle Blocker

Height: 6-4

Years Pro: 1

Born: 3/11/1996

**Hometown:
Holland, MI**

PROFESSIONAL: Begins first year as a professional.

COLLEGE: Played four years of college volleyball at Michigan State University under Rise head coach Cathy George from 2014-17, finishing career with 1,002 kills and 521 blocks ... In 2017, was named to the AVCA Second Team All-America, First Team AVCA All-North Region, First Team All-Big Ten, and was named MVP for the Spartans ... Ranked fourth in the Big Ten and 25th nationally with 1.35 blocks per set during the 2017 campaign ... Garnered spots on the 2016 AVCA All-American Second Team, AVCA All-North Region Team and the First Team All-Big Ten when she placed second in the Big Ten in blocks per set (1.30) and seventh in the conference for hitting percentage (.359) ... 2016 MSU MVP ... Set a MSU record for block assists in a three-set match with 10 against Illinois on Nov. 5, 2016... As a freshman in 2014, 1.06 blocks per set ranked second among Big Ten freshmen ... In MSU's freshman record book, her 110 block assists rank fourth, 122 total blocks place fifth, and 1.06 blocks per set rank seventh.

PERSONAL: Her maiden name is Garvelink ... Her parents attended every collegiate volleyball match aside from one, when they got a flat tire on the way to the gym ... Has a daughter ... Favorite vacation spot is Alaska ... Enjoys fishing, baking, camping, hiking, and boating ... Majored in communications.



MEET THE RISE



PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut in 2017 with Regatas Lima in Peru ... Collected five medals at the club level ... Played one season with Athletès Unlimited Pro League in 2021, scoring 1,461 points (33rd best in the league) ... Named the 2018-19 Best Server in the Peruvian League and tabbed the 2018 MVP of the Binh Dien International Cup ... In 2017-18, dubbed the Best Opposite at the South American Club Championship.

COLLEGE: From 2014-17, competed at Michigan State University under Rise head coach Cathy George ... As a senior, was named an AVCA All-American Honorable Mention, AVCA All-North Region Honorable Mention, and an All-Big Ten Honorable Mention, as she ranked second in the conference and 34th nationally with 0.41 aces per set ... Reached the 2017 Final Four ... Competed with USA Volleyball Collegiate National Team during the summer of 2017 ... Posted 0.36 aces per set in 2016, which ranked second in the Big Ten ... As a sophomore in 2015, paced the Big Ten with 0.33 aces per set.

PERSONAL: Has one older brother, Greg, who played baseball at Kalamazoo Valley Community College and graduated from Purdue North Central ... Her father, Paul, played basketball at Hope College for one season before eventually finishing his degree at Michigan State ... Her mother, Carolyn, was a basketball and volleyball player at Muskegon Community College and Grand Valley State ... Enjoys lifting and working out ... Has a Border Collie named Sebastian ... Degree is in creative advertising and marketing, studying nursing.



18

**HOLLY
TOLIVER**

Outside Hitter

Height: 6-2

Years Pro: 5

Born: 8/10/1995

**Hometown:
Berrien Springs, MI**



PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut in 2017 with Nordmeccanica Modena in Italy ... Finished in second place in the Greek Cup and won the Nomikeia tournament in 2021-22 with AO Thiras ... Collected a bronze medal at the 2020-21 Pan-American Cup ... In 2018-19, named Best Outside Hitter in the French Cup en route to winning the French Cup with Saint-Raphael Var.

COLLEGE: Competed at Northwestern University from 2014-17, totaling 1,613 kills and a hitting percentage of 0.210 ... As a senior in 2017, paced the Big Ten with 10.72 attacks per set, ranked third with four kills per set and fourth with 4.49 points per set ... Named a 2017 AVCA All-American Honorable Mention, AVCA All-Region First Team and a First-Team All-Big Ten member ... As a junior in 2016, 11.96 attacks per set ranked 13th nationally and 4.10 kills per set placed fourth in the Big Ten, 41st nationally and was the sixth-best mark in school history ... In 2016, 459 kills ranked third in Northwestern history and 1,339 total attacks were the second-most ever by a Wildcat junior (trailing only Stephaniea Holthus' mark of 1,350) ... Ranked second among Big Ten freshmen with 3.19 kills per set in 2014 and placed third among conference freshmen with 3.37 points per set.

PERSONAL: Has one younger brother, Anthony "A.J.," who played football at Wisconsin and Western Michigan ... Has one younger sister, Chloe, who ran track at Purdue and Kentucky ... Has one older sister, Alex, who graduated from Ross School of Business at Michigan ... Majored in communication studies ... Competed in softball, basketball, and was a high jumper growing up.



27

**SYMONE
ABBOTT**

Outside Hitter

Height: 6-1

Years Pro: 7

Born: 9/27/1996

**Hometown:
Northville, MI**



2024 ROSTER



28

KAYLA
CAFFEY

Middle Blocker

Height: 6-0

Years Pro: 2

Born: 11/25/1997

Hometown:
Chicago, IL

PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with Criollas de Caguas in Puerto Rico during the 2022-23 season ... Played one season with Athletes Unlimited Pro League in 2023, scoring 1,676 points (32nd best in the league), recording 50 kills and 26 blocks in 30 sets.

COLLEGE: Won the 2022 NCAA National Title with the University of Texas during senior campaign, finishing with a 28-1 regular-season record ... 2022 Big 12 champion ... In 2021 at Nebraska, became an AVCA Second-Team All-American and an AVCA North All-Region Team member after showing a .376 hitting percentage, which ranked fourth in the Big Ten ... Reached the NCAA national title game with Nebraska, falling 3-2 to No. 4 Wisconsin ... Ranked second in the SEC and ninth nationally with a .408 hitting percentage at Missouri in 2019 ... Named to the 2017 SEC All-Freshman Team ... In 2017, 130 blocks ranked fifth in the SEC and 10th all-time in a single season at Missouri, while 109 block assists tied for eighth all-time for a single season in program history.

PERSONAL: Earned a bachelor's degree from Missouri in elementary education ... Graduated with a master's degree in teaching, learning and teacher's education from Nebraska in December of 2021 ... Started playing volleyball at 12 years old ... Favorite food is sushi ... Favorite volleyball idol as a youth was Deja McClendon ... Favorite music artists include Jhene Aiko, Drake, Usher, and Rihanna.



31

CAMILA
GÓMEZ

Libero

Height: 5-2

Years Pro: 3

Born: 7/6/1995

Hometown:
Cali, Colombia

PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with Sesc-RJ/Flamengo in Brazil during the 2020-21 campaign ... Member of the Colombian National Team and has collected 11 medals with national team ... In 2022, claimed a silver medal at Pan-American Cup (Colombia), gold at Copa Sao Paulo (EC Pinheiros) and silver a Paulista Championship (EC Pinheiros) ... Earned four medals during the 2021 campaign, which included one for Colombia and three with Sesc-RJ/Flamengo in Brazil ... Named the 2021 Carioca Championship Best Digger and Libero ... Named 2019 Pan-American Games Best Libero and 2019 Pan-American Cup Best Digger ... Collected a bronze medal with Colombia at the 2019 Pan-American Cup and a silver at the Pan-American Games.

COLLEGE: Played at Texas A&M from 2018-20, after playing for Miami Dade from 2016-18 ... Totaled 470 digs during the 2019 campaign with Texas A&M, which ranked fifth for a single season at A&M ... Earned 2019 AVCA South All-Region Team honors ... Won back-to-back NJCAA Division I national titles and state championships with Miami Dade College from 2016-17.

PERSONAL: Began playing volleyball when she was 5 years old as a setter ... Greatest influence

on her volleyball career was former Texas A&M assistant volleyball coach Wendel Camargo, who showed he cared about her and wasn't afraid to tell her about things that she had to improve on ... Fluent in three languages: English, Spanish, and Portuguese ... Enjoys listening to music, dancing, hiking, and art ... Majored in international studies with a minor in economics.



MEET THE RISE



PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with LiigaPloki in Finland during the 2013-14 season ... Won the Oresund Liga Champion with Hylte Halmstad in 2018 ... Was named the Swedish League MVP in 2022-23, as well as the league's best setter in 2022-23 and 2017-18 ... Made her U.S. National Team debut in 2021 at the Pan-American Cup in the Dominican Republic, where the team won a bronze medal with a 3-0 sweep over Canada.

COLLEGE: From 2009-13, competed at the University of South Carolina ... Ranks seventh all-time in career assists (2,858), seventh in matches played (117), ninth in assists per set (7.58) and tied for 10th in double-doubles (25) ... Two best assist seasons in 2011 (971 total assists) and 2012 (953) are still ninth and 10th all-time in a single season at South Carolina ... Excelled in the classroom by being named to the SEC Fall Academic Honor Roll in 2012, 2011 and 2010, as well as making the 2009-10 SEC Freshman Academic Honor Roll.

PERSONAL: Married to former professional volleyball player Anton Wijk Tegenrot, who is now an electrical engineer ... Offseason home is in Gothenburg, Sweden ... Enjoys reading, writing, art, photography, baking, hiking, music, and rock climbing ... Bachelor's degree is in middle level education.



77

TAYLOR BRUNS

Setter

Height: 5-11

Years Pro: 11

Born: 7/17/1991

Hometown: Normal, IL

2023 DRAFT PICKS



1

SYDNEY BOLDING

Middle Blocker

Height: 6-5

Born: 2/16/2001

Hometown: Pickens, S.C.

(2nd round, 11th overall)



2

KARLY BASHAM

Libero

Height: 5-8

Born: 4/24/2001

Hometown: Louisville, KY

(5th round, 32nd overall)



4

MORGAHN FINGALL

Opposite Hitter

Height: 6-1

Born: 5/6/2001

Hometown: Fairfax, VA

(1st round, 4th overall)



11

KENNA SAUER

Outside Hitter

Height: 6-1

Born: 12/20/2000

Hometown: Ankeny, IA

(3rd round, 18th overall)

New ADVENTURE

**Opposite hitter
Emiliya Dimitrova
is thankful for the
opportunity to
experience the
birth of a new
professional
league for
women.**

Story by Mark Newman

Emiliya Dimitrova has traveled around the world and back to play pro volleyball, but she was thrilled beyond measure when she finally landed in Michigan.

Born Emiliya Nikolova in the Eastern European country of Bulgaria, her ambition had always been to someday play in the United States, and with her arrival here as a member of the Grand Rapids Rise in the new Pro Volleyball Federation, her desire has become a reality.

Able to speak or understand several languages due to her extensive travels as a professional athlete, Dimitrova still had never set foot in the U.S. outside of an airport before signing a contract to play for the Rise.

Over the years, she has played in Italy, Turkey, Romania, Japan and her native Bulgaria, a Balkan nation with "beautiful mountains, beautiful lakes, and a beautiful seaside," she says proudly. "We are a small country, but we have everything."

Photo by Nicolas Carrillo

So the idea of coming to America was not a foreign or unfamiliar concept when Dimitrova got the opportunity to move to the land of malls, movies and Motown. For years, she had romanticized the idea. She didn't know where, when, or even how it would happen, but she was resolved that it was an adventure that would eventually find her.

Her wanderlust began at an early age, moving frequently because her father was frequently being reassigned.

"I moved a lot from a very young age because my father was military police and his job changed many times during my childhood," she recalled. "I would start kindergarten in one place, then another place, always changing schools whenever we changed our home.

"When I was 12, there was a junior level tournament and one coach liked me very much and asked me to gather my documents and apply for the sports school in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia, which was known to be the best club there.

"So I said yes and we moved from the seaside to another city that was five hours away, just for me so I could have a better career. I studied in this school for two months only because there was some misunderstanding between my parents and the club, so I ended up at a completely different sports school."

Playing in Sofia, she quickly established that she was a player who was going places.

"I was good for my age, and the head coach of the women's team asked me to join them when I was 13," she said. "I went to school for 7th grade, but that was my last year of normal school, because for the next five years of my education, I only had exams twice a year, because I was practicing twice a day and playing with the women's team."

She looks back at those times with mixed feelings.

"It is something I do regret because I did not have the normal education like everyone else does, but I was catching up with my volleyball career. And even going back, I would probably make the same decision because it led me to be able to meet different people from different cultures and different parts of the world.

"My high school friends did not move from Bulgaria at all, because that is how their lives developed, so I'm grateful to the sport because it

gave me all these opportunities because I was able to have an amazing life with volleyball."

At the age of 17, she reached a crossroads of sorts. She tore her anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) when she landed badly after jumping for a ball during a World Championship qualification contest against Serbia. She ended up going to France for surgery before spending the next nine months in rehab.

"From then on, I have tried to find the positive out of the negative," she said. "I always say to girls who get injured during some part of the season – when they are really in a bad mood about it – that they have to think about the positive in this negative situation."

She remains grateful for the assistance she received from a Bulgarian family at the time, but she admits that she was essentially on her own in Lyon, France.

"I was so young to go through that alone, staying in a different country by myself, taking care of myself, going to rehab every single day, learning to change buses and everything else. I learned how to take care of myself and count only on myself because nobody could do things for me.

"I got to know more about myself and what I want. I became 100 percent sure that I wanted to continue doing this sport no matter what because getting injured is always part of the sport, but I learned that taking care of your body can help keep you safe and free from injury.

"It was hard but I came back a stronger person after the injury. I understand at that moment how important it is to take care of my body so I can show a good performance. I think getting to know this early in my career helped me have the long career I have had to this point because my body is taking care of me."

While she was seeing a clear path forward, her rehab produced another silver lining to what would be the cloudiest part of her career. She spent a considerable amount of her compulsory confinement in the company of an American who helped her practice – English, not volleyball.

"They teach us English in Bulgaria, but learning, studying, and talking are completely different things," she said. "So this was the first time that I got to really speak, and I had some nice conversations in English with her."

It was a skill that would serve her well in



Dimitrova joined the Rise with 14 years of professional experience throughout Europe and Asia.

the coming years, whether she was playing in Italy—where she would spend several years—or Turkey, Romania or Japan. "I have played with many American girls over the years," she said. "In Italy, for example, I spoke Italian with my Italian teammates and coaches, but with my foreign teammates, it's usually English."

Getting to play in the Land of the Rising Sun ranks as a career highlight for Dimitrova, who was the 2017 Japanese V.League MVP. After traipsing across the European continent, she had honed her ability to adapt her skills to playing for new teams in new countries.

"I think because I started very young and I was always moving from a very young age, I am used to adapting very quickly," she said. "At the end [of the day], going to all these places was my choice. It was my dream to play in Japan and it was a dream to come here to play in the U.S."

"Coming to America is a dream I first had in high school but there was no professional league. Now that I am part of this new league, it is another dream come true."

Dimitrova jumped at the chance to be a part of the inaugural Pro Volleyball Federation campaign.

"I had different options for this season, to play

in Turkey or Italy, but I was following my dreams and I decided to come here," she said. "I felt like I was prepared for this decision, knowing how to handle a different life, different cultures, different people. But I still had to look at the decision from every point of view because I am not alone anymore."

In May, she will mark 10 years being together with Denis Dimitrov, who entered the coaching ranks after a successful playing career. His experience in both playing and coaching professionally overseas made him an ideal addition to the Rise's staff, where he will serve as an assistant coach during the team's inaugural season.

"Once we decided to move in that direction, that I continue playing and he moved to a coaching career, we knew that it wouldn't be easy because people won't believe that this can work professionally," she said. "As husband and wife, we knew that it was a big risk, but we already worked together on the national team."

"People walking into the gym who do not know that we are husband and wife could never say that we even know each other. We are really professional, never showing any feelings, never showing any preferences, so we can get the best

from each other together for the best of the team."

Dimitrova believes they make a good team.

"Part of the secret is to always keep it professional," she said. "When we are on the court especially, there is no affection, no physical signs or no verbal preference shown. Actually, I think he is tougher with me than with other girls, which can drive me crazy sometimes, but it's good for me because he is pushing me to my limits and so I am getting better."

In May 2019, they welcomed the birth of Michaela, whom Dimitrova calls her ladybug. "To me, the color red is a symbol of self-confidence, and that is how I want her to be," said Dimitrova, 32, who now wears a tattoo in honor of the daughter who changed their lives.

"I knew that I wanted to come back after having her," said Dimitrova, who resumed playing when her daughter was six months old. "I was still not in my best physical shape because I was still breastfeeding and playing and it was difficult to get back into perfect shape. I played for the national team again and I didn't give up. I'm so grateful that I could come back and compete at the highest level and compete against the best players in the world.

"I think being a mother made me stronger. No matter how difficult it is physically and mentally, I know that I have this sunshine at home who repairs every possible scratch on my everyday life no matter the struggle.

"Being a mother and a professional athlete is a huge thing and I feel like more people should support our experience. Balancing life between family and sport while competing at the highest level makes everyone stronger and I think it's made me a better athlete."

In fact, it's motherhood that makes Dimitrova want to nurture the nascent pro league she has joined. She feels she is in the unique and envious position of having a front-row seat to its inevitable growth and development.

"This is one of the reasons why I came here," she said. "Being the first of the first is very important. Being able to leave my mark on those who will come later is very important to me. If I can share my experience with other people, I want to be a good example and help people love our sport even more.

"I want to be a good community member as well as a good teammate. This can be a good example not only for my daughter but for every kid who wants to be good at sports, no

Photo by Nicolas Carrillo



Dimitrova was the MVP of the Japanese V.League in 2017.



Photo by Nicolas Carrillo

Dimitrova has suited up for 12 different clubs in five countries.

matter which sport, or if they just want to be a good person in life. I am so grateful for this opportunity for my family.

"I think back to my first coach – he was amazing and I felt honored that he believed in me because I am not as tall as other players at my position, so I had to develop my play in different ways. When I became a mother, I developed even more as a teammate. In the last few years, I became more like a big sister to my teammates because I would help them with whatever they needed.

"It's a big circle of those things that make me love the sport. I met my husband thanks to the sport and a lot of other good things have happened, too, so through my story, I want to show other kids that the sport of volleyball is something good. I did not go to school because of sports but this sport has probably given me more than school ever could do. So this will be my legacy to my kids, and whether they follow me as volleyball players or not, I just want to show them how to be good people."

Because she believes in giving 100 percent to anything she does, Dimitrova said she never finished school because she was fully committed to her sport. Now, however, she

is rethinking her stance as she peers into her future. She has chosen to pursue her university studies in pedagogy (the methods and practices of teaching) to eventually pursue a role in education.

"When I was young, I felt like I was having an amazing life with volleyball and earning good money. But with age, I started asking myself questions about what I am going to do after volleyball, and I think too many educational systems care more about developing the brain and not developing the body. I believe developing both at the same time can lead you to better results."

For now, Dimitrova is focused on helping the Rise enjoy a successful season. As an outside hitter with a powerful left hand, she is determined to be an all-around force on the court for the new Grand Rapids team.

She also hopes to find time to see more of the U.S. while here. The family had plans to visit Chicago during the holidays and figures to eventually find their way to Niagara Falls and Disney World as well. But she has bigger dreams, too. "If we win the championship, hopefully, we will go to Hawaii," she said. "Hawaii is my every day motivation."



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CAREER CHANGE

New mom Alyssa Jensen is thrilled to have the chance to play pro volleyball nearly six years after completing her collegiate career at MSU.

Story by Mark Newman

Alyssa Jensen was pregnant when news broke in December 2022 that Grand Rapids would be the first city to play in the new Pro Volleyball Federation.

In the spring, when Cathy George, her coach for four seasons at Michigan State University, floated the idea of playing for the new team, the 6-foot-4 Jensen conceded that playing pro was the furthest thing from her mind. She was thinking more about motherhood than starting a new career.

"But she was encouraging me, like 'You could do this,'" Jensen recalled. "And the more I thought about it, my mindset started to shift to 'I know I can do this,' and everything fell into place."

Jensen knew it was in her best interests to listen to George because it had paid dividends before.

Aaron Jensen had been a member of the pitching staff for the Grand Rapids Community College baseball team with T.J. George, the older of the Grand Rapids Rise head coach's two boys. (Conner, the younger son, played basketball for Tom Izzo at MSU.)

"They lived together and were best friends, so Aaron would always go to MSU football games and volleyball games with T.J.," Jensen said. "Aaron would joke with Cathy, like 'Pull up the roster. Who do you got to set me up with?' That type of thing. And one night she actually did it."

"She had known Aaron for a long time and she pointed at me and was like, 'Oh, this girl.

Good family. Good similar backgrounds. You guys would gel well.' And then she added the kicker, 'But don't talk to her until after the season.'"

"I knew T.J. from him being Cathy's son. When I saw the guy next to him, I was like 'Oh, he's kind of cute. And tall (6-8).' But I didn't think anything about it. And then we met out one night and things went from there. I guess he didn't follow her rule but, to be fair, I didn't either."

Things quickly became serious and, roughly three years later, then-Alyssa Garvelink of Holland wed Big Rapids native Aaron Jensen on Sept. 26, 2020. They welcomed the arrival of their first child, Ella, on May 9, 2023.

Born a week early, Ella was not overly long, but she is already trending toward the tall side of the length charts. Odds are she will not be short.

"I just hope that it's like a normal tall, because it's hard being super tall," she said. "Even at my height, it's not easy growing up. I grew up in Holland so it's a bunch of Dutch people. I was always on the taller side but not the tallest."


She recalls her eighth-grade summer as the time when she really experienced a growth spurt. "I think I grew like a foot in the summer," she said. "So I went through a kind of an adjustment period to my new tall body."

Always fairly athletic, she played soccer, basketball and volleyball growing up, but by high school it was clear that volleyball was



Jensen was one of the first three players signed by the Grand Rapids Rise, along with Claire Chaussee and Emiliya Dimitrova.

Photo by Nicolas Carrillo



As a middle blocker, Jensen is quick and athletic with the ability to score with both her blocking and attacking skills.

Photo by
Nicolas
Carrillo

becoming her focus.

"By freshman year of high school, volleyball was already a priority," she said.

"Basketball was just social to me at that point because all my friends played it. I didn't necessarily love basketball like I did volleyball.

"What I loved about volleyball is it's

such a team-driven sport, which of course most sports are, but there's a closeness in volleyball that you don't find in other sports. It's kind of a rah-rah sport because we celebrate after each point. I just kind of like that."

She led Holland Christian to conference championships all four years of high school. A self-described homebody, she was looking at attending college in West Michigan – Hope, Calvin or Grand Valley – when she realized she might be able to look further afield.

"Suddenly Michigan State was in the mix and Purdue, too," she said. "But I never went and visited Purdue because when I went to State, it just felt like home. The campus was beautiful and not very far from home, and I loved Cathy. She was so welcoming and her presence was just so fun and intense."

Jensen said playing for George was a positive experience because she knows how to build a team.

"I've always said her philosophy is recruiting good people, and that's who I was always surrounded with – good teammates," she said. "Obviously she cares about volleyball, she wants to win, but deep down, at the root of everything, she likes good people, and she cares about you as a person. Back then she wanted to set us up for success and teach us all the lessons a typical college person should learn, and I did.

"I can take so many things from my college experience and apply it to life, as I'm sure most people can."

From the beginning, she saw how George's people-first philosophy paid dividends.

"We had a great freshman class," she said. "Just learning everything and the speed of the game was obviously different than high school, so there were adjustments, but we had great seniors who took us under their wing and helped us along."

Although Jensen says her first two years at MSU were a bit of a blur, she is confident that she matured as a player during her collegiate career.

"I was definitely more emotional as a freshman," she explained. "Like the highs were really high and the lows were really low, and sometimes I would get a little upset on

the court and be very intense in the moment.

"I think as time went on, I matured and found a better balance. I saw that it was probably not great for the team to go through such highs and lows. Now I look back and I think it took me so long to learn that. I wish I had learned it sooner."

Always highly driven, Jensen learned how to work her competitive nature to her advantage.

"My junior and senior years were more memorable to me. I don't know why," she said. "I think it was channeling my competitiveness to offer more encouragement to others, making sure that my teammates knew they didn't have to worry about me."

She was a Second Team All-American during her junior and senior seasons (2016-17) in addition to earning All-Academic Big Ten honors from 2015-17.

"[Being named All-American] was a huge honor because honestly, that wasn't one of my goals. It kind of happened due to team goals, which is not to say that I didn't work for it because I worked hard. It was just a nice cherry on the top to my junior and senior years."

During her time at MSU, Jensen came to appreciate the importance of good defensive play.

"I think I may have enjoyed defense a little bit more, just because a good block can, in my opinion, shift the momentum of a game. Obviously, a good kill can do it as well, but there's something about a block that kind of shuts the opposing team down and pumps your team up."

After her senior season, Jensen could have played pro volleyball elsewhere – Peru was one option – but in the end, she chose to stay home.

"I had met my future husband and he encouraged me to go, but I've always been a homebody and I like being close to family. I'm adventurous to a point, but if I didn't have anyone out there with me, that wasn't something I was interested in."

And so, their athletic careers seemingly behind them, Jensen and her new husband settled into 9-to-5 jobs. He still dabbled as an assistant coach for the Kenowa Hills High School baseball team while working as a

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Jensen was a two-time Second Team All-American as a Spartan in addition to being a two-time First-Team All-Big Ten selection.

pharmacy operations supervisor for Meijer. She kept playing volleyball recreationally while employed as a board relations specialist at National Heritage Academies in Grand Rapids.

Then came the baby. Then the new job offer.

If becoming a mother changes your life, becoming a mother and a pro athlete at the same time will turn your world upside down.

For Jensen, it's a touch of heaven.

"[Becoming a parent] is life-changing, amazing and difficult, but in the most rewarding way," she said with the broadest of smiles. "She's seven months now and every age has just been more fun than the last. She recognizes us, she smiles at us when we come home. It's just the best thing to come home to and see."

Any lingering doubts dissipated once the decision was made to pursue a position with the Rise.

"My husband was super supportive in making it all work with being a new family of three," she said. "I know my volleyball skills didn't go away and I know the training it took to get me there, and honestly, I feel great. Probably even better than I did before. Having

a baby kind of changes your body, and I think that shift has worked in my favor."

Jensen is enthusiastic about the arrival of the first full-fledged pro volleyball league for women – like giving birth to something new all again.

"Just to be a part of the first year is exciting and seeing everything come together has been really cool," she said. "To have a women's professional sport in the town that I live in is just amazing and I couldn't say no to the opportunity," said Jensen, who grew up going to Grand Rapids Griffins and West Michigan Whitecaps games.

"I know volleyball is big in Grand Rapids with a lot of clubs around, and I just hope that girls and young girls like my daughter, too, can see us play and know that it's an option for them after college if they want. So, yeah, it's a huge honor."

And so Jensen is eager to start the new career that she never envisioned nor imagined. "It is very exciting because volleyball, like any sport that is growing, just keeps going up," she said. "I'm very fortunate."

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Volleyball 101



By any measure, volleyball is one of the world's top sports. From growing TV viewing figures and record-breaking attendance to larger social media followings, and from the burgeoning number of collegiate and pro athletes to an unprecedented increase in recreational players, volleyball continues to grow at a pace that is unmatched in sports.

Volleyball is action-packed and thrilling in its display of agility and finesse. Armed with a basic understanding of the team structure and tactics, spectators can better appreciate the grace, skill and talent that make the sport so exhilarating to watch.

Here are some basics.

TEAM COMPOSITION

Volleyball is a sport that pits two competing teams on a playing court divided by a net. Each team consists of six players on the court – typically, three front-row players and three back-row players. The starting lineup, which guides the rotational order of the players on the court, is presented by the team's coach to the referees before the start of every set.

Players must rotate positions in a clockwise direction after their team wins the right to serve. The rotation ensures that each player has the opportunity to occupy different positions on the court. Front-row players occupy position No. 4 (front-left), No. 3 (front-center) and No. 2 (front-right). Back-row players fill position No. 5 (back-left), No. 6 (back-center) and No. 1 (back-right).

At the moment the ball is hit by the server, each team (except the server) must be positioned within its own court in the proper rotational order. Once the ball is hit, the players may move around and occupy any position on their side of the court. A team commits a rotational fault or loss of the point if any player is not in the correct position when the serve is executed.

SCORING SYSTEM

Each volleyball game is called a match. Points are scored when the ball lands within the boundaries of the opposing team's court. A point is also awarded if the opposing team commits a fault, such as a ball landing out of bounds or a net violation. The first team to reach 25 points with a lead of at least two points wins a set. Matches are best-of-five sets. In the case of a match tied 2-2 sets, the deciding fifth set is played to 15 points with a minimum lead of 2 points.

SUBSTITUTION

For the match, a team may consist of up to 14 players. The order of the starting lineup must be maintained throughout the set. Players who are not in the starting line-up are the substitutes for that set, except for the

libero, who can be substituted at any time.

A player in the starting lineup may leave the game but will be allowed to re-enter only once in a set, and only to their previous position in the lineup. Conversely, a substitute player may enter the game in place of a player in the starting lineup, but only one entry per set.

Each team has the right to designate from the list of players on the score sheet up to two defensive specialists known as liberos. Only one libero may be on the court at any time and must wear a different colored jersey. The libero is allowed to replace any player in the back row and is not allowed to attack the ball anytime it is above the net. The libero may not serve, block, or attempt to block.

COIN TOSS

A coin toss determines the first service and the sides of the court in the first set – and in a deciding set, if one is to be played. The winner of the toss chooses either the right to serve or receive the service, or which side of the court to play on. The loser takes the remaining choice. For sets two through four, the team that did not serve first in the previous set serves first, and it alternates again for the next set.

ORDER OF SERVICE

Rotational order is determined by the team's starting lineup and is controlled with the service order throughout the set. When the receiving team has gained the right to serve, its players rotate one position clockwise: the player in position No. 2 rotates to position No. 1 to serve, the player in position No. 1 rotates to position No. 6, etc.

When the serving team wins the rally, the player or her substitute who served before serves again. When the receiving team wins the rally, it gains the right to serve and rotates before actually serving. The player who moves from the front-right position to the back-right position serves.

The ball must be hit with one hand or any part of the arm after being tossed or released from the hand or hands. Only one toss or release of the ball is allowed. At the moment of the service hit or take-off for a jump service, the server must not touch the court – end line included – or the ground outside the service zone.

Service faults include: the ball touches a player of the serving team; the ball fails to cross the vertical plane of the net between the antenna; or the serve lands "out."

STATES OF PLAY

Play begins with a serve when the player in the No. 1 position makes contact with the ball (underhand or overhand) from behind the end line. The served ball must pass over the net and land in the opposing team's side of the court.

The ball is in play from the moment of the hit of the service authorized by the first referee.

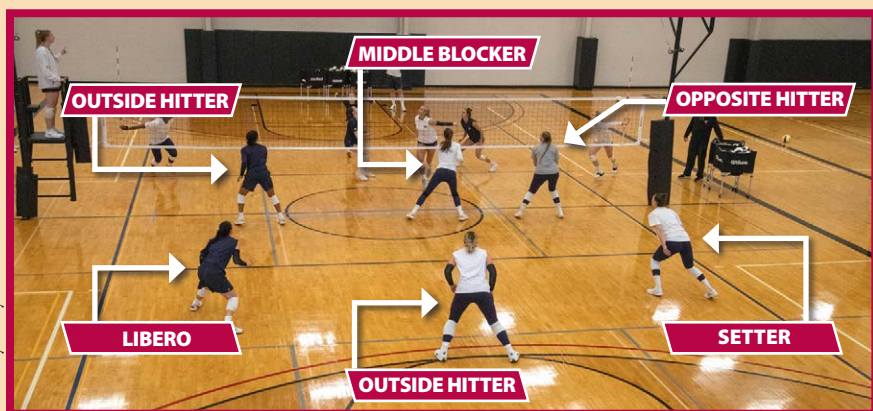
The ball is "in" when it touches the floor of the playing court — boundary lines are considered part of the playing court. The ball is "out" when the ball touches the floor completely outside the boundary lines; the ball touches the antenna, ropes, posts, or the net itself outside the side bands; the ball crosses the vertical plane of the net either partially or totally outside the crossing space; the ball crosses the lower space under the net; or the ball touches an object outside the court, the ceiling or a person out of play.

Each team attempts to play the ball within its own playing area space. The team is entitled to a maximum of three hits to return the ball. No player can hit the ball two times in a row. When two (or three) teammates touch the ball simultaneously, it is counted as two (or three) hits (with the exception of blocking). If multiple players reach for the ball, but only one of them touch it, one hit is counted.

Hits include intentional and unintentional contacts with the ball — a deflection off a block is not counted as a team hit. The ball must be hit, not caught or thrown. The ball may touch any part of the body, or various

POSITIONS

Photo by Macy Mineni



SETTER: Similar to the quarterback in football, the setter is the main contributor to direct and execute the offense. The position requires a delicate touch to set the ball in rhythm for one of the attacking players. Communication is essential because the setter needs to make sure the rest of the team is on the same page.

OUTSIDE HITTER: Playing in the left-front position, the outside hitter is the lead attacker in the offensive strategy but must also be able to defend. To be successful as an outside hitter, one must be able to serve-receive. As an attacker they look to score in a variety of ways. It is helpful to jump high, be quick on their feet, have great court vision and be ready to adapt to different situations.

MIDDLE BLOCKER: Sometimes known as the middle hitter, this player is used to defend the opponent's attack at the net and to channel balls to her team's defenders. As the first line of defense, the middle blocker must read the other team's attackers to quickly jump and press her arms against the net to limit the court space for

and to capitalize on quick points throughout the match.

OPPOSITE HITTER: In professional volleyball overseas this player is used as the top point scorer. In this right-front position, a player must strike a perfect balance of both offense and defense by being able to hit and defend, providing many opportunities to score points. Like the outside hitter, this player will get many opportunities to hit the ball.

DEFENSIVE SPECIALIST: Players who excel in ball control and passing will typically be found in this important position. A defensive specialist is unique in her ability to substitute out any player on the court.

LIBERO: Distinguished on the court by her different color jersey, the libero does not count against the team's substitutions. Liberos are defensive and serve-receive specialists who are typically fast and are able to change direction quickly. A libero is confined to the back row and is not permitted to attack the ball from above the height of the net.

parts of the body provided that the contacts take place simultaneously. There is an exception in blocking, provided that the contacts occur during one action. If a blocker deflects an attack into the air, she may then hit the ball again.

When the ball goes out, it is the fault of the team which hit it. While crossing the net, the ball may touch it. A ball driven into the net may be recovered within the limits of the three team hits.

BLOCKING

Blocking occurs when a player or players at the net attempt to prevent an opponent's attack hit from making it past the front line of defense and into a team's playing area. Only front-row players are permitted to complete a block. In blocking, the player may place their hands and arms beyond the net provided that this does not interfere with the opponent's play. A player is not permitted to touch the ball beyond the net until an opponent has executed its attack hit.

A block is not counted as a team hit. After a block, a team is entitled to three hits to return the ball. The first hit after the block may be executed by any player, including the one who executed the block. Players are permitted to reach beyond the net or penetrate the opponent's space, provided they do not interfere with the opponent's play.

Contact with the net between the antenna during the act of playing the ball is a fault. When the ball is driven into the net, causing it to touch an opponent, no fault is committed.

COACHING

During a match, the coach requests timeouts and substitutions. He or she may give instructions to the players on the court while standing or walking within the free zone in front of his or her team's bench, as long as he or she doesn't disturb or delay the match. The assistant coaches sit on the team bench but cannot intervene in the match.

VOLLEYBALL TERMS

ACE: A serve that is not passable and results immediately in a point.

ANTENNA: The vertical rods mounted near the edges of the net. The antennas are mounted directly above the sidelines and are not in play.

APPROACH: A fast stride toward the net by a spiker before jumping in the air.

ATTACK: The offensive action of hitting the ball in an attempt to terminate the play by hitting the ball to the floor on the opponent's side.

ATTACK BLOCK: An aggressive attempt to block a spiked ball before it crosses the net.

ATTACKER: Also known as the hitter or spiker, it is a player who attempt to hit the ball offensively with the purpose of terminating play in her team's favor.

BASE: Defensive positions that the players on the team always return to.

BLOCK: A defensive play by one or more players meant to deflect a spiked ball back to the hitter's court.

DECOY: An offensive play meant to disguise the spiker who will receive the set.

DIG: A defensive play that describes the art of defending an attack and keeping it off the floor.

DUMP: An attack, typically performed by the setter, that sends the over ball over on the second contact to an open area of the court.

FREE BALL: A ball that is returned by a pass rather than a spike. This is usually called aloud by the defense to instruct players to move into easy ball coverage.

HIT: To jump and strike the ball with an overhand, forceful shot.

JOUST: When opposing players play the ball simultaneously.

JUMP SERVE: Occurs when the server tosses the ball into the air and jumps into the serve, hitting the ball during its downward motion.

KILL: A hit that results in an immediate point or side-out.

MATCH: A volleyball contest, consisting of individual sets.

PANCAKE: A move in which a player dives in an attempt to save the ball with an open hand on the floor.

PASS OR SERVE RECEIVE: A way to deliver the ball to a teammate by joining the forearms and striking the ball in an underhand motion.

RALLY: The action that occurs when the volleyball goes back and forth on both sides of the net.

RED CARD: A severe penalty that results in the disqualification of a player, the loss of the serve, or the loss of a point. A red card may be given with or without a prior yellow card as a warning.

SERVE: The way to start each point. A player makes contact with the ball (underhand or overhand) from behind the end line.

SET: The tactical skill in which a ball is directed to a point where a player can spike it into the opponent's court. Also the word for a volleyball game.

SETTER: The person who delivers the ball to the hitters (typically the second ball).

SIDE-OUT: Occurs when the receiving team successfully wins a rally or when the serving team commits an unforced error and the receiving team gains the right to serve.

SPIKE: A ball contacted with force by a player on the offensive team designed to terminate the ball on the opponent's floor or off the opponent's blocker.

SUBSTITUTION: When one player replaces another player on the court. There are limits and restrictions to allowable substitutions. Pro Volleyball Federation uses eight substitutions. In collegiate volleyball the number is 15.

TIP: A legal push of the ball past, over, or around blockers.

YELLOW CARD: A warning from an official indicated by the display of a yellow card. Any player or coach who receives two yellow cards is disqualified. A single yellow card does not result in the loss of a point or serve.

INTRODUCING EMBER

KIDS
PAGE



Michigan boasts a number of outstanding sports mascots, including the Grand Rapids Griffins' beloved Griff, Michigan State's legendary Sparty, and the Detroit Lions' regal Roary.

Now we welcome the new girl on the block: Ember of the Grand Rapids Rise!

Inspired by the phoenix within the Rise logo, Ember is sharing her glowing expression, fiery competitiveness, and warm personality with fans in West Michigan and across the state.



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Since your Crayola box doesn't have Elevation Red, Ascension Blue, and Sunrise Gold, use whatever colors you'd like. Have fun!



Match POINT

Hudson Van Til reacts in disbelief after sinking her serve into a bin to win season tickets during the Serve for Your Seats contest at the Rise's Meet the Team Showcase on Dec. 7 at Van Andel Arena. The 14-year-old resident of Dorr, Michigan, who plays for FaR Out, had the opportunity to meet Rise head coach Cathy George after her memorable shot.

Photos by Nicolas Carrillo





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