

VOL. 1, ISSUE NO. 2



HORIZONS

SYMONE
ABBOTT



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MOXIE

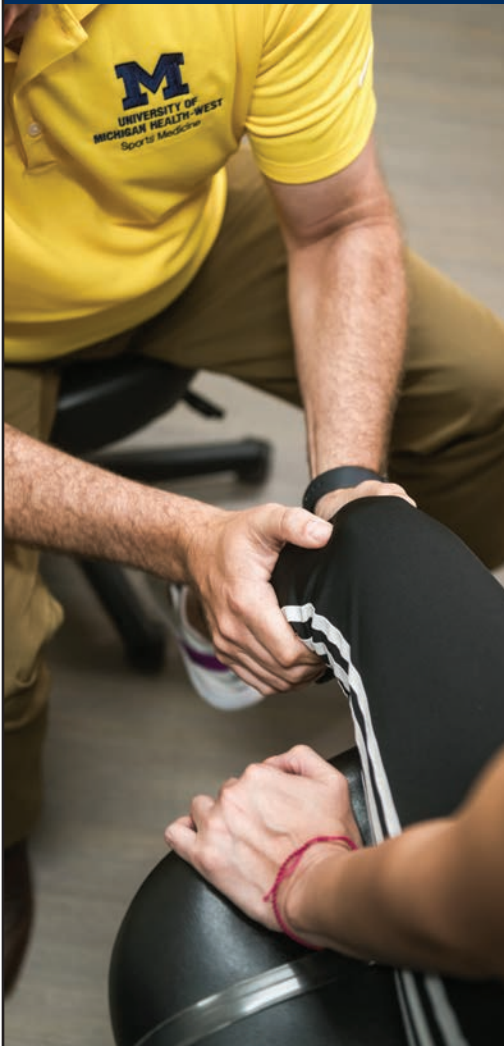


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SERVICE ORDER

PAGE 14 POETRY IN MOTION



Michigan native Symone Abbott is happy to bring her graceful style back to her home state.

PAGE 28 ENGINEERED FOR SUCCESS



Rise setter Ashley Evans knows the blueprint for any achievement requires hard work and dedication.

PAGE 34 STUDENT OF THE GAME



Kayla Caffey is putting everything she learned during seven years of college volleyball into practice at the pro level with the Rise.

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ABOUT THE COVER



Detroit native Symone Abbott played volleyball at Northville High School before taking her talents to Northwestern, where her play as an outside hitter led to a pro contract seven seasons ago.

Photo by Nicolas Carrillo



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COACH'S CORNER

with Rise head coach Cathy George

With the inaugural Pro Volleyball Federation season well underway, league play has shown that the action is unpredictable. Teams hanging by a thread in matches have come back to win sets. Matchups that might have favored one team over the other have had surprising outcomes.

In Grand Rapids, there has been one constant in the 2024 season. The crowd support has been phenomenal. Rise head coach Cathy George says the enthusiastic showing inside Van Andel Arena has provided her team with the kind of home-court advantage that can make a difference in close matches.

“It’s a huge thing because it almost feels like you’ve got an extra person on the court,” she said. “It provides a boost of energy that helps you fight harder and energizes the team during extended rallies. You can feel the excitement.”

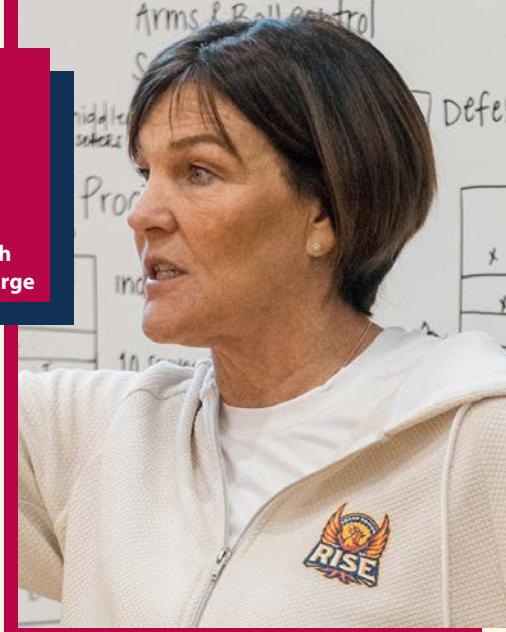
After 35 years as a collegiate head coach, including 17 seasons at Michigan State University, George has found the level of play illuminating. The first half of the season for the Rise has demonstrated that the level of play has accentuated the fundamentals that make the sport so exciting to watch.

“I’m learning that the things that are important are still important, whether it’s collegiate or professional, and that the things that make teams work well together are similar.

“It’s being mentally tough, being disciplined, being detailed, making sure every contact counts, making sure that you’re paying attention to game plans, and taking care of those little things that enable a great team to work together.”

Because there is so much talent in the league and there is parity among teams in terms of how the best players are spread among the seven teams, every match seemingly carries the weight of playoff implications.

“The league is very competitive, which is good



for everybody,” she said. “Every team is really good and I believe there’s not one team that will run away from all the rest. It’s a long season and every team seems to be taking its turn at putting together some victories.”

With fan support bolstering the fortunes of the Rise at home, George said her team must learn to play on the road with the same fire and passion. She wondered if a team’s performance as visitors would ultimately spell the difference in the standings.

“Some of these long travel swings put a lot of pressure on teams to perform on the road,” she said. “I think all teams are going to take their lumps because I don’t think any team will go through the schedule unscathed.”

The competitive balance means there is little room for error. Through their first 10 matches, the Rise had five sets that had reached the 30s, including a 36-34 loss at San Diego on Feb. 23. Unforced errors cost the Rise in the first four marathon sets before the team finished on top of a 32-30 margin in the fourth set to defeat the Columbus Fury 3-1 on March 20 at Nationwide Arena.

“Unforced errors can hurt you because points otherwise are hard to come by,” George said. “With both teams fighting and fighting, you don’t want to give up anything up because it’s so

hard to score, so you have to take charge of those things you can control.”

Service errors, in particular, are momentum killers. “Serving is one of those things in sports that can be particularly challenging,” she said. “There has to be some level of risk and reward, but it’s not about aces. It’s about taking away their offensive options.

“You always can be better at serving, but if you start thinking about it too much, it’s like the golfer who keeps missing those putts or the basketball player missing free throws. It’s something you don’t want to talk about, but it’s something you have to address.”

George said the Rise were becoming better at playing together as a unit so that the players were on the same page in terms of assignments and positioning. “It’s like in any sport, the action may look random, but everything is very planned. You make changes to exploit the other team’s weaknesses while taking advantage of your team’s strengths.”

As the season has progressed, teams have compiled thick scouting reports on each

other, which has only increased the overall competitiveness of the league. Defensive play, for example, becomes critical when trying to counteract the opposition’s offensive strategies.

“It’s a game of cat-and-mouse,” George said. “You’re always trying to find openings. It’s trying to counteract what the other team is doing. It’s similar to double-teaming a shooter in basketball or rushing the passer in football. Whether you’re serving, passing, blocking, or digging, it’s about playing in a disciplined way that makes it difficult for your opponent.”

George maintains her confidence that the Rise are figuring things out.

“We will see results if we invest in each other,” she said. “It’s the same philosophy behind any good business. We are trying to create a culture where our players put everything they’ve got into the good of the team.

“Our success depends on us playing together as a team, not individuals. When we’re totally in sync offensively and defensively, we can score more consistently. When we work together as a unit, we are successful.”

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



Data Analyst
Brady Compton

Not Pictured: Head Strength & Conditioning Coach: Daimond Dixon • Director of Performance Science: Harjiv Singh



**We're big fans of the Rise.
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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. Vegas, 4 p.m.

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

Tue., March 26
at 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, 7 p.m.

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

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

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

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

Fri., April 26
at Omaha, 9:30 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, 5:30 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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PRO VOLLEYBALL FEDERATION 2024 TEAM DIRECTORY



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Chief Strategy Officer	Diane Maher
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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Senior Vice President	Cheryl LaFoy
Head Coach	Todd Dagenais
Assistant Coach	Brian Doyon
Public Relations	Kelsey Bibik
Home Arena	Gas South Arena
Time Zone	Eastern



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Chief Executive Officer	David Paitson
Head Coach	Angel Perez
Team Services & Travel Director	Christine Podraza
Communications	Kylie Randall Cassie Kelley
Home Arena	Nationwide Arena
Time Zone	Eastern

2024 RISE MATCHES VS. FURY

1/25	COLUMBUS	W 3-0
3/9	COLUMBUS	W 3-1
3/20	@ COLUMBUS	W 3-1
4/28	@ COLUMBUS	2 P.M.



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Assistant Coaches	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. SUPERNOVAS

2/12	OMAHA	L 1-3
3/28	@ OMAHA	8 P.M.
4/26	@ OMAHA	9:30 P.M.
5/12	OMAHA	5:30 P.M.



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 General Manager Erik Nielsen
 Interim President Darrell Harbin
 Head Coach Amy Pauley
 Assistant Coaches..... Gordon Mayforth,
 Molly Stark, Blake Osmartian
 Communications..... Jean Racine
 Home Arena Addition Financial Arena
 Time Zone Eastern

2024 RISE MATCHES VS. VALKYRIES		
3/1	@ ORLANDO	L 1-3
4/6	ORLANDO	7 P.M.
4/11	@ ORLANDO	7 P.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 Coaches..... Deitre Collins-Parker,
 Brandon Directo
 Communications..... Lauren Lee
 Home Arena Viejas Arena
 Time Zone Pacific

2024 RISE MATCHES VS. MOJO		
2/23	@ SAN DIEGO	L 1-3
3/4	@ SAN DIEGO	L 2-3
5/4	SAN DIEGO	7 P.M.
5/5	SAN DIEGO	4 P.M.



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 vegasthrill.com

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	VEGAS	L 2-3
3/26	@ VEGAS	10 P.M.
4/13	VEGAS	7 P.M.
4/20	@ VEGAS	10 P.M.

**COMING
 IN 2025**

DALLAS

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

INDY IGNITE

indyignitevb.com
 Owners: Jim Schumacher,
 Don Hutchinson
 Time Zone: Eastern

KANSAS CITY

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



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GIVEAWAYS + PROMOTIONS



**RISE
POM
HAT**

SAT
APRIL 6
7:00PM



**RISE
TRUCKER
HAT**

SAT
APRIL 13
7:00PM



**PRINCESS
NIGHT**

SAT
APRIL 13
7:00PM



**RISE
TUMBLER**

THU
APRIL 18
7:00PM



**RISE
BOONEY
HAT**

SAT
MAY 4
7:00PM



**STAR
WARS
NIGHT**

SAT
MAY 4
7:00PM

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

SUN
MAY 5
4:00PM

**FAN
APPRECIATION**
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ice cream cups

SUN
MAY 12
5:30PM

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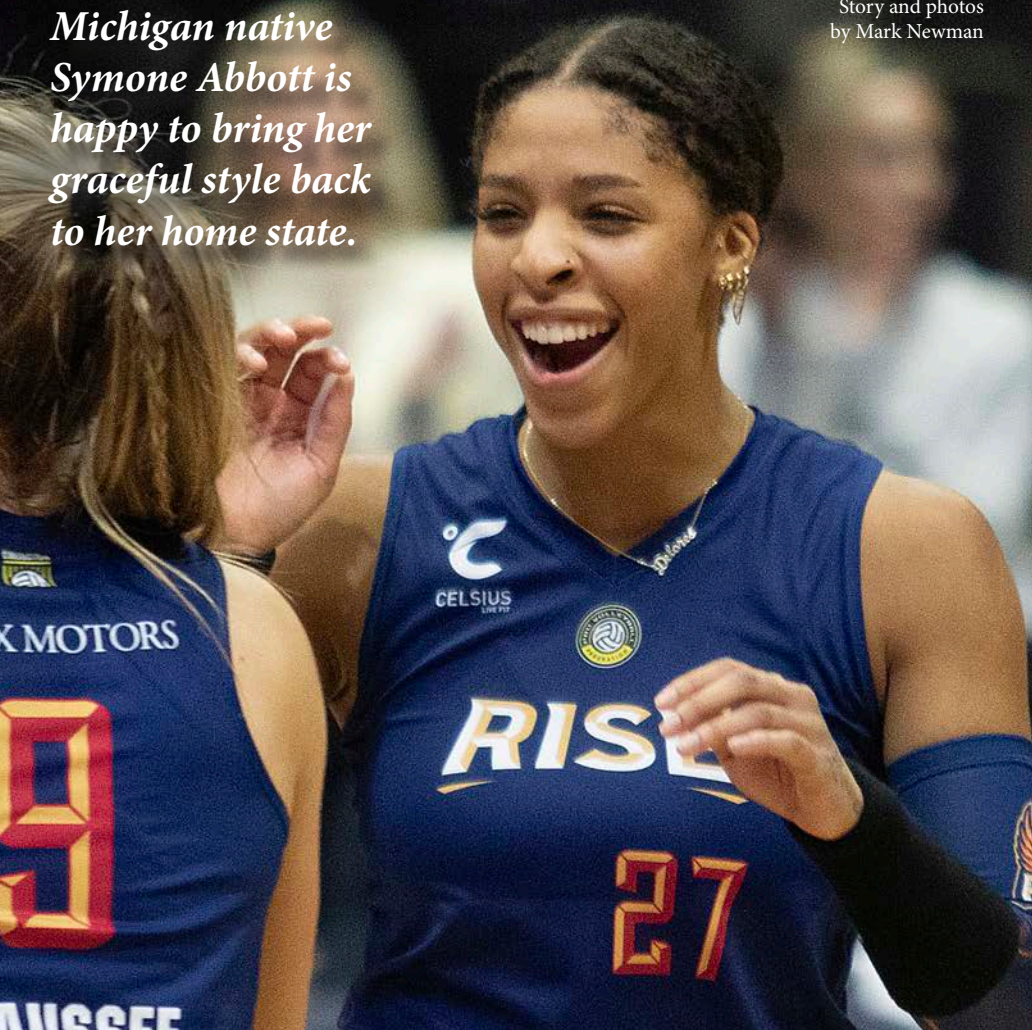


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*Michigan native
Symone Abbott is
happy to bring her
graceful style back
to her home state.*



Symone Abbott has the words of poet Dylan Thomas, *“Do not go gentle into that good night,”* tattooed on her left thigh, a significant statement that she says has served her well during her pro volleyball career.

Written in 1947 by the Welsh poet while he visited family in Italy, the poem is about not losing hope and not giving up – that is, life is precious and should be fought for at every turn.

“I think I got it at a time when I didn’t really know what it meant,” she recalled. “I didn’t fully ‘get it’ when I got the tattoo. I just thought it sounded really dope and sounded really

cool. I wanted my first tattoo, so I got it.

“As time has passed, I forget that it’s there, but it really does embody my whole career, because there have been so many times when I could have quit. It has not been, you know, just perfect, and it’s not been all accolades.

“There have been highs but lots of lows. And I feel like I’ve lived that quote without even being mindful about embodying it. So I think it was just divine that I got it without even really knowing.”

Dealing with highs and lows is part of life for a professional athlete like Abbott, who grew up in the North Rosedale Park

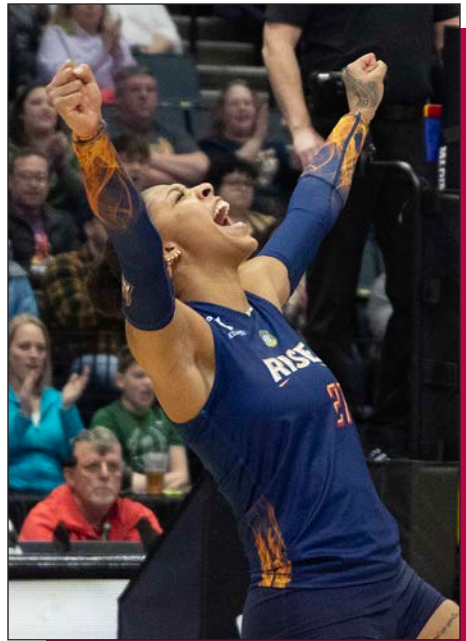
neighborhood of Detroit between Grand River Avenue and Six Mile.

Her family moved to Northville, between Novi and Plymouth, when she was 11. The decision to move into the relative safety of the suburbs was predicated on the idea that she would have better volleyball opportunities, and her parents were all about doing whatever was best for their kids.

And there was plenty of talent in the Abbott household.

Her father, Anthony Abbott, excelled in track and field at Eastern Michigan University. Her younger brother, A.J., would become a wide receiver at the University of Wisconsin and Western Michigan University. Her younger sister, Chloe, is a professional sprinter and Olympic hopeful who appeared on the 23rd season of NBC's "The Voice" last year after becoming an All-American at Purdue and, later, Kentucky.

Symone says she cannot sing like her sister, but she loves music all the same. She played flute and tuba as a child – talk about highs and lows – and although she maintains an affinity for music of all genres, she found her true love was athletics.



POETRY IN MOTION

Since she was tall and athletic, everyone assumed she would play basketball. But she tried it and hated it. In fifth grade gym class, when students had to choose something to do, she chose juggling.

"We could pick our activity and juggling was fun," she said. "I think they always thought I'd be good at basketball and that might be true, but I just didn't like the sport very much.

"We played all kinds of sports growing up and volleyball was definitely more for me. I did my first volleyball camp in sixth grade but didn't make any team until I was about 13."

In hockey, goalies are often attracted to their position because they like the gear. Similarly, Abbott said she has always thought volleyball players looked cool in their uniforms.

"When I was little, I liked wearing knee pads because I thought they were cool," she said.

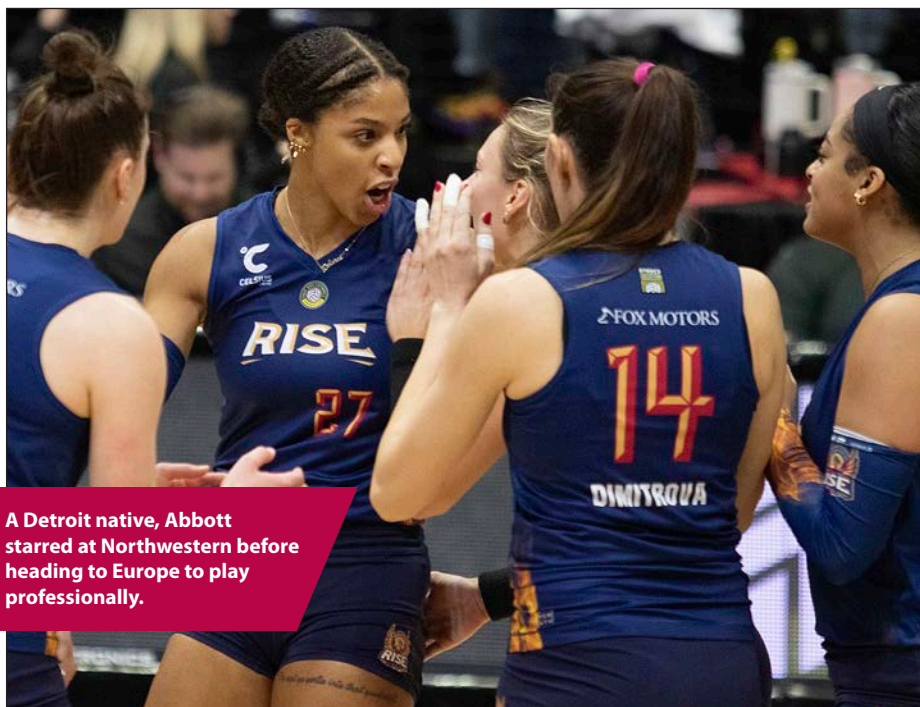
"I liked the look of volleyball players with the spandex and tight jerseys. I thought that was cute, so I wanted to be a part of that."

Abbott started playing for Michigan Elite Volleyball Club in Warren, then made the varsity team at Northville High as a sophomore, which is also when she committed to play college volleyball at Northwestern.

She had considered other schools – Georgia Tech, Central Michigan, Florida International, and others were in the mix – but she wanted to compete at the highest level, and nothing was higher than Big Ten volleyball.

Northwestern is considered one of the best journalism schools in the country and although she thought that would be her path, she ultimately chose communications as her major.

"I realized it was a lot of work to be a journalism major at Northwestern and I wasn't as passionate about it as I thought," she said.



A Detroit native, Abbott starred at Northwestern before heading to Europe to play professionally.

“I wasn’t passionate about any major, to be honest. Looking back, I probably should’ve done something like psychology because that’s interesting to me now. But it’s just hard to pick at that age.

“Like, I’m 27 now and I still think it’s hard to pick. I probably wouldn’t have picked communications if I went back, but I don’t think anybody knows at that age. You don’t know how you’re gonna feel.”

But she is certain about one thing. She improved greatly as a volleyball player during her time at Northwestern.

“I learned how to carry a big load,” she said. “I learned how to be a go-to player. That’s a position not everybody is in. You can be on a team and be a player that they look to, but the go-to player is the one that they are giving the ball to in most situations.

“I got good at being that person, being dependable, and just putting the team on my back.”

As the Wildcats’ top outside hitter, Abbott was more often than not in the middle of the action. She was accustomed to hitting so many balls per game that adjusting to the pros was a challenge.

“Not getting as many balls as I would get at

Northwestern, it always felt like ‘not enough’ because of how many I got in college,” she said. “I had learned how to have 70 attempts per game, so it always felt like ‘not enough’ when I turned pro.”

In 2017, she started her pro career in Italy. She went to France for the 2018-19 season, then to Turkey for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 seasons. She admitted that she harbored thoughts of quitting.

“It was just a lot of pressure, people depending on you because you’re American, you’re from overseas, and they expect you to put the team on your back. And if you’re not producing, it’s like they don’t need you – that kind of vibe.

“It felt more cutthroat and I think I didn’t need that constantly. I’ve gotten better at finding my peace, no matter what is going on around me, but before I did, those years were just very stressful.

“Even though it felt awful, I think those times helped toughen me up because of how much I’ve been through.”

But, true to that tattoo on her leg, she didn’t throw in the towel.

“I always wanted to keep trying to get to the highest level overseas and keep climbing and climbing, but I didn’t feel I was playing my best volleyball,” she said. “I didn’t feel in the same groove I felt at Northwestern, but I kept trying

and trying.”

Even though some might romanticize the idea of playing overseas in different countries, Abbott didn't love the experience.

“I'm a homebody at heart and when I go overseas, I'm still a homebody,” she said. “I don't like to do a bunch of steps just because I'm in a different country. If I'm practicing and playing, I'd prefer to be at home. So it's not as much sightseeing as you would think.

“I think the most valuable thing for me was learning how to communicate with Italians, the French, or Turkish people, just trying to learn the language a little, and not necessarily traveling around.”

She ended up playing the 2021-22 season in Puerto Rico and Greece, the latter being her favorite of all the places in which she has played. “I think I just liked the geography of it, because there's lots of water around, lots of beaches. And the food is great and the culture is closer to here than Turkey or even Italy.”

During the 2022-23 season, Abbott was playing for CBF Balducci HR Macerata in Italy with future Rise teammate Claire Chaussee when she first heard talk about Pro Volleyball Federation coming to the U.S.

As much as she was thrilled to get the chance to play pro volleyball closer to home, she was equally enthused to play for a veteran coach like Cathy George, whom she knew from her Big Ten days when Northwestern faced George's Michigan State Spartans.

“My last year in Italy, I felt like I was not getting better,” she said. “I realized that it was because no one was really watching me. No one was watching video of me. No one was talking to me about my form. It was very much ‘just go play,’ with no one working to develop me.

“Cathy is not only a good coach, she's a teacher and a developer of players. I knew I would learn more about the game from her and I would actually start getting better if I came back home.”

Abbott knows her game is still a work in progress. Although she can execute one of the more impressive jump serves in the league, she has opted to use her toss more judiciously.

She admits that has yet to perfect her jump serve.

“I started using it freshman year of college and I've been on and off with it for years,” she said. “If it gets to be too high error, you have to go to a different serve because you can't just keep missing serves when you're not getting an equivalent amount of aces.



A seventh-year pro, Abbott has played in Italy, France, Turkey, Puerto Rico, and Greece.

“I go back and forth between them. If it's going well, I'll do it. If I start erring, then I go to the standing serve. So it's definitely not perfect. It's mainly confidence and mental focus. It's risk and reward.”


Abbott believes fans have been treated to some great rallies early into Pro Volleyball Federation's inaugural season. “It's been really good volleyball, especially at home because we're playing with a chip on our shoulder. We need to work on playing just as well on the road as we play at home, because we play really well at home.”

She hopes the team is making a good impression on all fans, but especially young girls who might dream of playing professional volleyball.

“Sometimes I forget about kids and how they see us because I'm still trying to get better,” she said. “When you are in the swing of things, you forget that people are looking at you. It's just not something that's on the forefront of your mind.

“But tons of kids come to our games and I'd love for them to get something from seeing us. That would be great. And we miss our home crowd when we're away. The fans are a huge part of how we battle back.

“Every home match that we have, we have a really good shot at winning because of the fans.”



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2024 ROSTER



1

SYDNEY BOLDING

Middle Blocker

Height: 6-5

Years Pro: 1

Born: 2/16/2001

**Hometown:
Pickens, S.C.**

PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with the Rise, March 9 vs. Columbus ... Selected in the second round, 11th overall, of the 2023 Pro Volleyball Federation inaugural draft.

COLLEGE: Played three seasons at Kansas State (2021-23) and two seasons at Jacksonville (2019-21) ... Amassed 812 kills and 489 blocks across five seasons of collegiate play ... Two-time All-Big 12 Second Team selection (2023, 2022) ... 2023 AVCA Midwest All-Region First Team ... Second in the Big 12 with 141 blocks (1.32 per set) in 2022 and added 134 more blocks in 2023 ... Recorded at least one block in each of her last 60 matches with the Wildcats.

PERSONAL: First job was a coffee barista ... Volleyball idol growing up was Kerri Walsh Jennings ... Favorite foods include breakfast foods, burgers, cauliflower, fruits, coffee, and kombucha ... Majored in communication.



4

MORGAHN FINGALL

Opposite Hitter

Height: 6-1

Years Pro: 1

Born: 5/6/2001

**Hometown:
Fairfax, Va.**

PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with the Rise, March 4 at San Diego ... Selected in the first round, 4th overall, of the 2023 Pro Volleyball Federation inaugural draft.

COLLEGE: Played five seasons at Tennessee (2019-23), finishing with the fifth-most kills in the program's history (1,632) in 132 matches played ... Two-time AVCA All-American and two-time All-SEC selection (2023, 2022) ... Averaged 5.00 points, 4.31 kills, 1.82 digs, 0.79 blocks, and 0.28 aces per set while hitting .321 in 2023 ... Recorded a season-best 100 total blocks in 2021 and ended with 338 career blocks ... Put down a career-high of 29 kills in a win against Mississippi State on Nov. 20, 2022.

PERSONAL: Her father, Andrew, played college basketball at George Mason before a two-year pro career in China and Luxembourg ... Her sister, Nadia, played basketball at Stanford ... Majored in kinesiology ... Favorite vacation spot is the beach ... Enjoys eating pasta, Caribbean food and Chinese food.



MEET THE RISE



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.



5

ERIKA PRITCHARD

Outside Hitter

Height: 6-3

Years Pro: 3

Born: 10/19/1999

Hometown: Middletown, Md.



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 Yeguete, 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.



7

NIA GRANT

Middle Blocker

Height: 6-2

Years Pro: 8

Born: 5/8/1993

Hometown: Warren, Ohio



2024 ROSTER



8

MARIN GROTE

Middle Blocker

Height: 6-4

Years Pro: 2

Born: 12/16/1999

**Hometown:
Burbank, Calif.**

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, Ariz. ... 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.



9

CLAIRE CHAUSSEE

Outside Hitter

Height: 6-0

Years Pro: 2

Born: 5/15/2000

**Hometown:
Sun Prairie, Wis.**

PROFESSIONAL: Named to Pro Volleyball Federation's 2024 Preseason All-League Team ... 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.



MEET THE RISE



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 soccer at Allegheny College (1977-81) and cousins Emily Sciorra and Mary Gate 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.



10

SHANNON SCULLY

Outside Hitter

Height: 6-2

Years Pro: 2

Born: 3/3/1999

Hometown: Huntington Beach, Calif.



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 Itapema.

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.



12

SARAH SPENCIL

Libero / Setter

Height: 5-8

Years Pro: 7

Born: 8/16/1996

Hometown: Phoenix, Ariz.



2024 ROSTER



13

**ASHLEY
EVANS**

Setter

Height: 6-1

Years Pro: 6

Born: 12/23/1994

**Hometown:
Liberty Twp., Ohio**

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.



14

**EMILIYA
DIMITROVA**

Opposite Hitter

Height: 6-1

Years Pro: 17

Born: 12/26/1991

**Hometown:
Shumen, Bulgaria**

PROFESSIONAL: Named the Week 4 Pro Volleyball Federation Player of the Week on Feb. 20 ... 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 Yeltsin 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.



MEET THE RISE



PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with the Rise, Feb. 12 vs. Omaha.

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.



15

MAC PODRAZA

Setter

Height: 6-2

Years Pro: 1

Born: 11/21/2000

Hometown: Sunbury, Ohio



PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with the Rise, Feb. 23 at San Diego.

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-American, 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 ... Gained 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.



17

ALYSSA JENSEN

Middle Blocker

Height: 6-4

Years Pro: 1

Born: 3/11/1996

Hometown: Holland, Mich.



2024 ROSTER



27

**SYMONE
ABBOTT**

Outside Hitter

Height: 6-1

Years Pro: 7

Born: 9/27/1996

**Hometown:
Northville, Mich.**

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 Stephanie Holthaus' 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, Alexa, who graduated from Ross School of Business at Michigan ... Majored in communication studies ... Competed in softball, basketball, and was a high jumper growing up.



28

**KAYLA
CAFFEY**

Middle Blocker

Height: 6-0

Years Pro: 2

Born: 11/25/1997

**Hometown:
Chicago, Ill.**

PROFESSIONAL: Made pro debut with Ciollas 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 a 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.





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) ... Eamed 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 NUCAA 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.



31

CAMILA GÓMEZ

Libero

Height: 5-2

Years Pro: 3

Born: 7/6/1995

Hometown: Cali, Colombia



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**Rise setter
Ashley Evans
knows the
blueprint for
any achievement
requires hard work
and dedication.**

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Look up the characteristics of a successful engineer and you'll find qualities such as confidence, diligence, drive, persistence, optimism, and – most importantly – a team player.

If any of those attributes fit Rise starter Ashley Evans, there is a good reason. The Ohio native comes from a family of engineers. Her mom, Ann, and dad, David, met at General Electric, where they were both engineers. Evans and her older brother, Brian, both attended Purdue, a school renowned for its engineering program.

Analytical and introspective, Evans calculates that the conversations around the family dinner table made a positive impact on her life.

"I pride myself on being the best version of myself each day for those around me and my team around me," she said. "I know I have to give 100% in full effort every day.

"I'm not the most naturally gifted athlete, and I've known that since I was a youngster, so I've had to earn every inch I can manage in sports and in all aspects of life.

"I've had to apply myself maybe a little bit more than other athletes who might be a little more naturally gifted, which is not to take anything away from them. But hard work has gotten me pretty far, so I take a lot of pride in that."

Not surprisingly, school came before sports in the Evans household.

"Academics in our family always came first, and that's how I'll raise my kids one day if I'm blessed to do that," she said. "Academics, in the long run, will take me a lot further than volleyball ever will. And while I'm not ready to hang up my knee pads and shoes yet, I know I have a phenomenal background in studies to fall back on, and I'll cross that bridge when I get there."

The 6-foot-2 Evans grew up in Liberty Township, where her high school, Lakota East, was only a few miles from Kings Island amusement park, near Cincinnati. Good grades meant Evans and her brother could spend many hours there growing up.

"We would get our gold season passes, and my brother and I and friends would go whenever we could go outside of sports or summer activities," she recalled. "I practically grew up at Kings Island."

A dedicated scholar-athlete, Evans visited the park at least a couple of times each month during the summer. She started volleyball at the age of 8 but also played basketball, soccer, and tennis.

"My parents were very adamant that we play different things, that we didn't specialize just in one thing until we absolutely had to, and so volleyball, tennis and soccer were my main three. I played basketball maybe for a year and a half but it was not my thing.

"My nickname in soccer was 'Lighthouse'

because I was head and shoulders above everyone else. I stuck out like a sore thumb. My first true love was volleyball, but tennis was second. I was nationally ranked in tennis as a 14-year-old.

"I played all three sports for as long as I could, but all three were in the fall season in Ohio for female athletes, so I had to choose. I was incredibly tall and thin, so I wasn't built for soccer anymore, and although I loved tennis, it is a very individualized sport. I love the team aspect of volleyball, so it was an easy choice for me."

Starting at age 11, Evans was coached for three years by her mom, who had played volleyball at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois.

"It was a wonderful experience," Evans said. "She wasn't my mom during those times on the court. She was my coach first and my mom second, so she treated me like any other athlete, which I greatly appreciated. And it was a special time, a bonding experience on and off the court.

"She got to a point when I was about 13 or 14 where she said, 'I'm going to give you girls to another coach. I don't want to coach the older girls.' It takes a lot more time, effort and specialization, and she just wasn't in the place to do that, so she handed us off, and it worked out for the best. But it was a great three years."

A two-time Prep Volleyball All-American and a finalist for Ohio Gatorade Player of the Year, Evans finished in the top 10 of her high school's graduating class. There was little debate regarding which college she would attend. Ohio State was never really in the picture.

"I wasn't a huge fan of the Buckeyes, but I don't say that in a negative way," she said. "It wasn't a good fit for lots of reasons. First, it was too close to home for me. I wanted some separation, to be on my own, and not go home every weekend.

"When I stepped on the Purdue campus, it felt like it was meant to be. Purdue was a much better fit for me because a goal of mine was to play in the Big Ten and to study engineering, and I could have the opportunity to do both at Purdue.

"I couldn't pass it up, so it was a perfect situation."

Evans made her Purdue decision as a sophomore but kept it a secret until her brother made his own decision as a senior. "Social media wasn't huge back then, so for about two months, my family and I said, we're not going to tell him. We'll let him make his choice based on what he wants to do."

"When my brother and I were young, it was always lots of math and science, and that's how our brains work. Being very close as siblings, we both decided to go to Purdue and ended up studying the same thing in college.

"We overlapped for two years, and it was the



Evans has played overseas in Spain, Hungary, France, Germany and Romania.

best, most enjoyable two years of my college career. To have both of us on campus at the same time was a great thing. I would do it all over again.

“It takes a lot of time, effort and focus to study engineering and be a student-athlete at the same time, but it worked for me. I did not have much of a life outside of the gym or the classroom, but I loved every second of it.”

Evans was an outside hitter in high school, and while she was a solid all-around player, she didn’t do much setting. She redshirted her freshman season at Purdue before starting the process of becoming one of the best setters in the Big Ten.

She credits the tutelage of Dave Shondell, Purdue’s head coach, and his brother, John Shondell, a 20-year assistant at the school until he stepped down last fall.

“They recruit athletes who might not be fully developed in the way they want them to be when they first step foot on campus,” she said. “During their careers, they give them resources to develop into phenomenal women on and off the court.

“I wasn’t a true setter until I entered college but I’m a great example of what they can do. I saw myself entering as an all-around player and exiting as an All-American and now a national team setter with USA. I am forever indebted to Dave and his family.”

While she was retooling her game and becoming a Big Ten Distinguished Scholar and Academic All-American, Evans also was rapidly

becoming a notable player on the national scene, earning invitations to USA camps, training teams, and collegiate national teams.

“It’s been the honor and the highlight of my career to be a part of USA volleyball,” she said. “I get chills when I think about wearing the red, white and blue and playing for my country.”

Being connected to the national team development pipeline fueled her desire to play overseas after graduation. It was while she was playing overseas that she came across an NBC Sports article about Michelle Bartsch-Hackley, who would later win a gold medal at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics.

The article referenced Bartsch-Hackley’s connection to Karch Kiraly, the three-time Olympic gold medal winner, who had become head coach of the U.S. National Women’s Volleyball program in 2012.

“In the article, there was a quote from Karch that said, ‘I receive numerous emails and messages from athletes every summer asking, ‘Is there room for me in the gym?’” And I thought, ‘Okay, if other athletes do this, I can, too.’

“So I sent him an email and I said my goal is to be involved with USA in any capacity, whether it be a two-week training block or anything to get my foot in the door. I was being proactive because you never know until you ask. And so I took a risk. But I didn’t hear back from him for a good month and a half.

“So I sent him another email, and he was honest in his reply. He takes a lot of pride in his relationships and communication, being very open and transparent. And he said, ‘I’m profusely sorry. Your message was sent to spam. I did not see it. I don’t have any room in the gym for you this summer, but send me some video and we can be in touch.’

“I thought, ‘Awesome. I’ll take it.’ And so I sent him video. Long story short, fast forward to the end of that summer in 2019. I’m back at Purdue training before heading back overseas. And I got an email from him saying, ‘We need a setter for a short tournament and training block. Are you interested?’

“I said, ‘Absolutely.’ And that’s where things took off”

Evans eventually became part of the USA qualifier roster. An untimely injury to another player opened up a spot for her to join the team in Lodz, Poland, for the Olympic Qualifier for the 2024 Paris Games.

The Americans won their final match to book their ticket to France this summer.

While the final roster spots for the U.S. team won’t be announced until early this summer, Evans can be reasonably confident that her name is among the two dozen or so women under consideration.

“I’m in the mix, but the probability is extremely small,” she said. “Just to be in the conversation is exciting – that’s an honor in and of itself. I’m just excited to contribute in any way possible if my name is called.”

In the meantime, she is excited to be playing professionally in the U.S. after playing overseas in Spain, Hungary, France, Germany and Romania since the 2018-19 season. Volleyball in Europe has been a mixed bag for Evans.

“Overseas, as a whole, you can find great teams and great coaches, but you can also find difficult situations with management and training and living situations. Sometimes you never know what you’ll get,” she said.

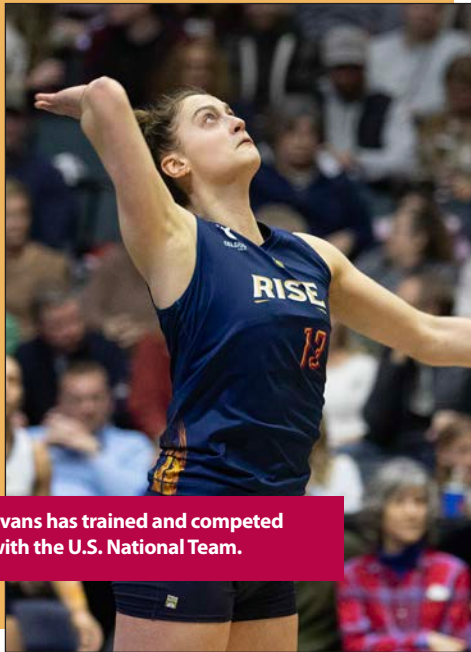
“I’ve definitely grown from those experiences and I’ve enjoyed learning and experiencing the culture of every country and meeting different people. I now have friends all over the world and that’s the biggest takeaway for me.”

Still, she was excited last year when she met with Pro Volleyball Federation co-founder Dave Whinham, the sports entrepreneur whose career started as a student assistant with the Grand Valley State football team. Her dad was connected to the league through an old business colleague.

“We ended up having dinner and Dave gave me the spiel about PVF and asked if I had connections within the volleyball world to get the word out,” she recalled. “I believed in their business model, their organization, and their vision, so I said, ‘Absolutely.’”



Evans became a setter at Purdue University after starring as an outside hitter in high school.



Evans has trained and competed with the U.S. National Team.

and I started putting out some feelers.”

She signed to play in Bucharest for the start of the 2023-24 season, but connecting with Rise head coach Cathy George convinced her to come play in Grand Rapids.

Evans was able to deliver the first serve in Rise history.

“It’s funny,” she said. “I told the team in our little huddle, ‘This is the first serve of our franchise, of our season. I’m just putting this ball over the net as a free ball. I’m not going to miss this.’ The goal is just to put the ball in play.”

Evans put the ball over the net and the Rise proceeded to sweep the Columbus Fury 3-0 in the team’s opener on Jan. 25 at Van Andel Arena. While the team has encountered some bumps in the road since that debut, she has enjoyed every minute.

“It’s been exciting,” she said. “As professional players, we have not had a chance to play in front of family and friends in our home country. And so to be a part of the inaugural season, regardless of what happens in the future, it’s an honor to put in the effort to make it a success. I want to make my mark in the most positive way and make the league the best it can be.”

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STUDENT OF THE GAME



Story and photos by
Mark Newman

Kayla Caffey is putting everything she learned during seven years of college volleyball into practice at the pro level with the Rise.

When middle blocker Kayla Caffey and Rise head coach Cathy George spoke for the first time, they found much in common.

They were both from the same part of Chicago, had attended the same high school, and shared the same passion for excellence. They were lifelong learners who shared an interest in self-improvement and a desire to teach others.

“We talked and literally hit it off,” Caffey remembers. “We could get on the phone and talk for hours. We’re from the same side of town, the same high school. We get each other because we both have that South Side passion and fire.

“The same day we talked for the first time, she called me back and said, ‘I really liked our conversation. I really like who you are, I like what you’re about. Do you want to play for the Rise?’ And I was like, ‘Yes, I would love to.’ Because I felt the same way. It was mutual.”

They were introduced by MacKenzi Welsh-Vazquez, who had played collegiately at the University of Michigan and was a teammate of Caffey’s in Puerto Rico, where she was playing at the time. Welsh-Vazquez, who would become director of volleyball operations for the Rise, already knew George because she originally had signed to be a setter for the team.

But Caffey started her path to the Rise and Pro Volleyball Federation years earlier, thanks to the guiding hand of her mom, who has been a teacher in the Chicago area for her entire career.

“My mom has played a hugely influential role in my life,” Caffey said. “She is a single mother and she’s done an amazing job. We’re like best friends. But she’s also my mother. I really appreciate the balance in our relationship.”

It was her mom who pushed her to go to Mother McAuley High School, the all-girls Catholic high school located in the Mount Greenwood neighborhood of Chicago that she and George had attended years apart.

“I loved Mother McAuley,” Caffey said. “It’s so funny because I did not want to go there originally. I wanted to just go to my local school where all of my friends were going. But my mom forced me to go there and I’m just so grateful that I went there.

“At Mother McAuley, we were just a big family. It was not strict and not catty at all. Everyone was free to be themselves. I wore a messy bun to school every day and just was myself and no one cared.”

Caffey admits that, like most teenagers, she probably needed a little discipline, but it mostly was her mother’s interest in quality education that drove the decision to switch high schools.

“As an educator, she obviously values education and she always strived for me to get good grades,”



Caffey is a Chicago native who made her pro debut last season in Puerto Rico.

she said. “My mom instilled in me that education is the only way you’re going to do anything in this life. Which is why she sent me to Mother Macaulay, because of the education piece, but she also knew the school had a great volleyball program.”

Up until she started playing volleyball at the age of 12, Caffey had been a competitive cheerleader. “I traveled and did all that stuff and was deep into it,” she said. “When I was Level 5 and I was still under 12, all my teammates were teenagers. I thought that was going to be my future.”

When Caffey gave volleyball a try, she was hooked.

“I came home from my first practice and I was like, ‘That was so fun. I love that.’ I just fell in love with volleyball instantly. I think it was the team aspect. In cheer, you rehearse and rehearse a routine for literally three minutes on the floor. Volleyball made you feel more part of a team.”

While she had raw athletic ability, her skills at that point were less than desired.

“I could jump really high, but it was rough,” she said. “I was not good at first. I was bad. I think people were willing to help me and work with me because they saw the potential, which I’m so very grateful for.”

Thankfully, Caffey was a quick learner. She



Caffey is a 6-foot middle blocker who played college volleyball at Missouri, Nebraska and Texas.

helped Mother McAuley win a state championship and became a team captain as a senior. Her first college offer came from Purdue, and she was set to become a Boilermaker when the University of Missouri came into the picture.

“I did not want to go on a visit because I was like, ‘What’s in Missouri?’ I was forced to go on a visit, by my mom again – she always knows what’s best. When I got there, I loved it.”

Caffey was redshirted as a freshman, then was granted a medical redshirt after missing all of the 2018 season with a leg injury. It gave her time to concentrate on her studies. She had considered studying journalism but changed to nursing, which she eventually found too sterile for her liking.

She gravitated to education, having helped her mom set up her classroom every fall.

“I just think school felt like a safe place for me,” she said. “My mom had always been a teacher, but I am so glad that I did not have her as a teacher. Just her helping me with my homework was enough for me to know I never wanted her to be my teacher.

“My hardest subject was math. She’s a math teacher, so it was like, ‘Why don’t you understand?’ but with love, of course. I liked English, reading, and writing, which is why I

thought I was going to do journalism.”

After earning her bachelor’s degree from Missouri in elementary education, Caffey still had college eligibility remaining from her redshirt seasons, so she decided to continue her studies at the University of Nebraska, where she learned to take her play to another level to compete in the Big Ten.

“Switching from Missouri to Nebraska – I always say this, and I don’t mean it as a knock to Mizzou – was like night and day. It was just completely different. From the state-of-the-art locker room to how we trained to nutrition to psychology, it was firing from all ends.”

“It definitely was a ramp-up. As a freshman or sophomore at Missouri, I wouldn’t have been ready for that. It was too intense, too much commitment. It was what I thought the Big Ten was like. It was volleyball, volleyball, volleyball. And I was okay with that because when I went to Nebraska I was 22. I was ready to work.”

At Nebraska, Caffey credited associate head coach Tyler Hillebrand, who would later become head coach at Long Beach State, with helping develop her game.

“Tyler is different than any other coach I’ve ever had,” Caffey said. “He studied psychology as an undergrad and he took an approach to coaching that I appreciated and valued. He cared about what we had to say as players and wanted feedback.

“He’s a phenomenal coach because he knows the game so much. I felt like he taught me so much while I was at Nebraska as far as blocking and hitting. I just was like a sponge. I soaked up so much and learned so much in just one year. And that’s why I credit so much to him.”

Caffey was recognized as a second-team AVCA All-American as a senior in 2021. She also earned her master’s degree in teaching, learning, and teacher’s education in December 2021, and worked as a substitute teacher in Lincoln.

“That town loves volleyball, so anytime I would go to any school, the students would be so excited,” she recalled. “They all knew who I was and asked for autographs. But I loved going to the schools because I love teaching. I just enjoy seeing kids grow and learn and see when they get that ‘aha’ moment.”

After Nebraska, Caffey still had one more year of college eligibility, due to being granted an additional year because of the pandemic. So she was still searching for something to put the crowning touch to seven years of college. She decided to take her talents to the University of Texas.

“I thought they had a good chance to win a championship so I decided to go to Texas. I knew

my worth as a player, and I had been playing at the highest level, so there weren't many schools that I would consider. Texas had done well the previous season, so I decided, 'I'm going to put the icing on the cake.'"

Texas beat Louisville — and Caffey's current Rise teammate, Claire Chaussee — in the 2022 NCAA championship game after finishing the regular season with a 28-1 record.

"Winning a national championship was amazing," she said. "It felt like the culminating moment of my career. It felt like, 'Wow, finally, everything I have worked for has paid off. It's been worth it.' It was the perfect way to end."

Caffey made her pro debut with Criollos de Caguas in Puerto Rico last season. Although she loved the experience, she jumped at the chance to play professionally with the Rise.

"I was really excited," she said. "I think that this has been everything that I hoped for and dreamed of. I knew the people in Michigan loved volleyball and they have shown up for us for every single game. So it's been really, really cool."

"Home-court advantage is so huge, and having all these people rally behind you gives us that extra energy, that 'oomph' to push. I love playing at home and love having that energy behind us. It's all been very positive."



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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.

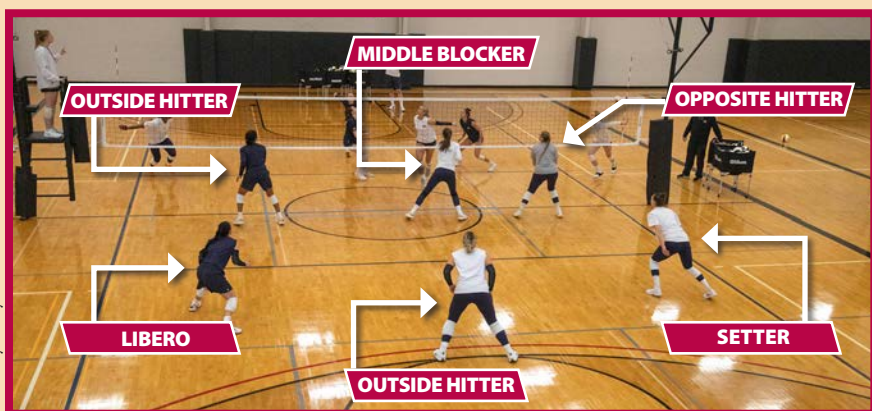
The ball is "in" when it touches the floor of the playing court — boundary lines are considered part of the playing court. The ball is "out" when the ball touches the floor completely outside the boundary lines; the ball touches the antenna, ropes, posts, or the net itself outside the side bands; the 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 across 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.

VOLLEYBALL TERMS

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.

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 attempts 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.



Kids Page

ANAGRAMS

1. Face Flaky, Ay!
2. Go, Claim Maze
3. Be Giddy, Nylons
4. Navy Leashes
5. Jeans Any Less?
6. Reuses a Chalice
7. Giant Ran
8. Clash: Only Nuns
9. Military Aim Video
10. Naming Hall Frog
11. Zap! Mad Orca
12. Irked Patriarch
13. Nacho Spirals
14. Manger Trio
15. Tomb Bayonets

PLAYERS

- Symone Abbott
 Sydney Bolding
 Kayla Caffey
 Claire Chaussee
 Emiliya Dimitrova
 Ashley Evans
 Morgahn Fingall
 Camila Gomez
 Nia Grant
 Marin Grote
 Alyssa Jensen
 Mac Podraza
 Erika Pritchard
 Shannon Scully
 Sarah Sponcil

15. Symone Abbott
 14. Marin Grote
 13. Sarah Sponcil
 12. Erika Pritchard
 11. Mac Podraza
 10. Morgahn Fingall
 9. Emiliya Dimitrova
 8. Shannon Scully
 7. Nia Grant
 6. Claire Chaussee
 5. Alyssa Jensen
 4. Ashley Evans
 3. Sydney Bolding
 2. Camila Gomez
 1. Kayla Caffey

ANSWERS

CEREBRAL MISNAMES (= RISE NAME SCRAMBLE)

Unscramble the goofy words to form the name of a Rise player. Good luck!



1. Face Flaky, Ay!



2. Go, Claim Maze



3. Be Giddy, Nylons



4. Navy Leashes



5. Jeans Any Less?



6. Reuses a Chalice



7. Giant Ran



8. Clash: Only Nuns



9. Military Aim Video



10. Naming Hall Frog



11. Zap! Mad Orca



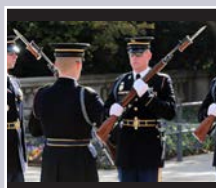
12. Irked Patriarch



13. Nacho Spirals



14. Manger Trio



15. Tomb Bayonets



Match POINT

Rise assistant coach Denis Dimitrov brought significant coaching experience to Grand Rapids. In addition to being an assistant for the Bulgarian National Team since 2019-20, he has served in similar positions for professional teams in Romania, Turkey and France. The former pro men's volleyball player came to West Michigan with his wife and a daughter, as he is married to Rise opposite hitter Emiliya Dimitrova.

Photo by Nicolas Carrillo

GRAND RAPIDS
RISE



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