

GOPHERS VOLLEYBALL



NEW HEIGHTS

The Gophers jumped up to cheer on their teammates during a scrimmage in April. Freshmen outside hitters McKenna Wucherer, middle, and Julia Hanson, above, soared to the net against St. Thomas. “I knew I wanted to play for these coaches,” Hanson said. “I knew it was going to be a challenge and I knew they’d push us.” Added Wucherer: “I have learned more about myself than I ever have.”

Photos by ANTHONY SOUFFLÉ • anthony.souffle@startribune.com

◀ **GOPHERS** from C4 gentle eyes and a New Zealand lilt. He channeled what his players were feeling at a given moment, and, like Monet in Giverny or Vänskä on the conductor’s podium, seemed to somehow extract more life from a living thing. When a player’s spike was off, he held elbows and wrists, moving arms through air.

When Wucherer was late on a dig, he chided her by standing on the balls of his feet, rocking back and forth and saying, “Remember, Wuchsie, when you’re moving, you’re moving on your toes.” His most consistent, emphatic refrain was, “Yes!” And he worked within the limitations of his good humor. One morning, as music rose from the speakers

overhead, he said, “With the soothing sounds of Beyoncé, nothing can go wrong.” But he is at his best when things go wrong. In the middle of March, there was a noticeable pall around the Pavilion. McCutcheon sat the team in a semicircle around the whiteboard and said the way they were thinking about themselves was destructive. “I understand the importance of trying to be the best you can be,” he told them. “But having perfection as the standard, where that’s the expectation, is really self-defeating. Because I just want you to know no one has ever played, or will ever play, a perfect game of volleyball.” He lectured on self-talk, negative biases, the effect of harsh language on the brain and the privilege of getting to play in this gym. “We don’t give anyone the chance to be here because we feel sorry for them,” he said. “You have earned the right to be here.” He told them to look out for one another, to listen to one another, to realize that negative internal emotions and put-downs followed them around like clouds. And that it didn’t have to be that way. It was OK to feel bad. But it was also imperative to work to understand those emotions in a healthy way. He told them they were the most important coach they had. “If we can change our thoughts, we can change our actions. Simple as that,” he

said. A few minutes later, as the team sat in the bleachers, assistant coach Jen Houk came over and pointedly addressed them. “If we as coaches talked to you the way you talk to yourself, would you ever stay here?” she asked. “We are taught as women to be humble. Don’t tolerate it. It’s OK to build yourself up. It’s not just OK — it’s necessary.” The practice hummed like a live wire. McCutcheon was exceedingly vocal, breaking in to ask his players: “Can I be the best person for the team as opposed to being the best person on the team?” He hollered, “You all know how to play your version of volleyball. We’re trying to show you how to play our version.” He implored them to get to know one another in the world. And when practice was over, he brought them together and told them why. “This is a really good team,” he said. “We have character, talent, personalities. Put your heart into it. This is a team worth fighting for.” And then he had everyone turn to Nao Ikeda, the longtime director of operations for the program, and sing “Happy Birthday.”

A crowd of best players This style of coaching attracts the best volleyball players in the country, so when a player who has been the best her whole life arrives on campus, a bunch of other best players with more experience are already there.

During 6-on-6 drills, there was so much talent on the court that it felt like watching two excellent Division I teams compete. Taylor Landfair was the top recruit in her class. She’s an outside hitter whose height belies her athleticism. She does not so much hit the ball as unfurl upon it. She enrolled for spring practice in 2020 and was named All-Big Ten first team after her freshman season. But the mental hurdles were high. “I would get overwhelmed or stressed or really frustrated,” Landfair recalled. “During that process, I know Hugh would say, ‘Just trust the process. It’s OK to make mistakes. We make mistakes just to learn.’ I really had to take that under my wing.” It’s an important lesson because the process never ends. McGraw is from Prior Lake and has been around the program since she was a teenager. She’s been named All-Big Ten first team twice and spent a week training with Team USA this spring. “I’ve gotten to a space where I don’t beat myself up for every rep,” she said. “You need to have that shift when you get here because if you stay in that same space, you’re just going to be so mentally drained.”

Freshmen find their groove As spring practice time increased to 20 hours per week and the Gophers started scrimmaging other teams, the intensity rose and every-

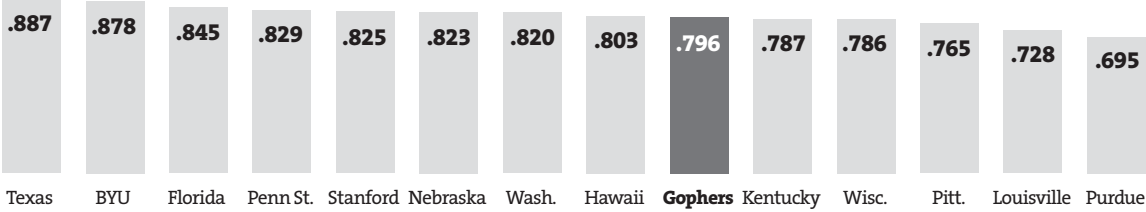
thing seemed to loosen. Smiles appeared as defenders stacked at the net, dances sprang organically in the huddle, the clap of high-fives became a soundtrack. Somewhere in the swirl, Booth, Hanson and Wucherer blended in. But it wasn’t their talent that made them fit, it was their resilience to handle the work. As practice entered its final week, the three freshmen gathered back on the bleachers. They took off shin guards and unraveled athletic tape and had an air of accepted exhaustion about them that brought to mind something Landfair said about playing sports at a high level your whole life: You mature a lot faster. They had spent months in extremely deep waters. “Hugh was talking the other day and I just sort of had, not an out-of-body experience, but in my mind I was like, ‘If I was a random person who walked in and was listening to this, it would sound like absolute gibberish,’” Booth said amid laughter. “But I can truly say I understand every single word he’s saying.” That depth of coaching, the intensity, had changed them. “I knew I wanted to play for these coaches,” Hanson said. “I knew it was going to be a challenge and I knew they’d push us.” Threading their reflections was a sense that they had started to let go of basing success strictly on results — of learning it’s OK to not be perfect, after trying to be perfect for so long. “I have learned more about myself than I ever have,” Wucherer said.

The stakes rise

The first scrimmage of the spring was held at Blue Earth High School on a Saturday in early April. At 1:30 p.m., about 30 minutes before the four-set exhibition against South Dakota, the stands were absolutely packed. Overflow seating was opened. Everywhere was maroon and gold. And this collection of players finally got to play as the Gophers. Landfair launched a spike at one point that was so resounding it made a teenager in the crowd, who seconds earlier had been discussing the ethics of making FaceTime calls at work, quietly mutter, “Oh my God.”

The freshmen debuted in the second set. They all had their moments. Wucherer sailed through the air for tips. Booth was dynamic at the net on offense and defense. Hanson ended the scrimmage with a clean kill. Afterward, fans mobbed the team. They snapped pictures for a half-hour. It was easy, as the freshmen were engulfed, to imagine what is coming for them. They will play matches with gigantic stakes where things will come together, minds and bodies operating alongside their teammates’ like a single, cohesive entity. They will obliterate opponents and have no choice but to circle up and scream at the top of their lungs. And they will play matches with gigantic stakes where things will fall apart. Their opponent will be too tough. Their synapses will fire a millisecond too slow and success will float out of reach, like a set just a hair too high. But if this program succeeds this fall, whatever happens on the court will be secondary to a greater, more difficult goal: To find something outside of yourself to believe in, to give every last ounce of yourself to it and live with what comes. Tomorrow is a whispered promise. If you’re lucky, you get to climb off the bleachers and try, once more, to be a little bit better.

WHERE THE U RANKS TOP NCAA WINNING PERCENTAGES SINCE 2012



NCAA TOURNAMENT WINS SINCE 2012 Source: University of Minnesota

