

Netters headed to nationals

By JOHN HARRIS
Of the Emerald

Sometimes a coach takes the chance of making a seemingly incongruous strategic move that turns out to be a winner. Such is the case with Cris Voelz, first-year coach of the Oregon women's volleyball team which left last night for the national tournament in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

After debuting impressively against tough Portland State, though losing 15-14, the Ducks slowly began going downhill. They played well at times but never displayed the talent Voelz expected of them. A week before

the regional tournament, at which Oregon was seeded sixth, Voelz decided it was time to emphatically stamp her mark on the Oregon volleyball program.

"It was a matter of 'who can I coach?' " explains Voelz.

As it turned out there were four players the coach decided did not fit into her disciplined program. Two of the players, Mary O'Brien and Shawna Baxter, were starters and integral members of the team. But Voelz suspended O'Brien, a freshman, and Baxter, one of the Ducks' two seniors, anyway. She didn't kick them off — they just stayed home when Oregon went to the regionals and now to the nationals.

"I needed more solidarity in coaching and communication," says Voelz. "It comes down to what's good for my program."

The situation is not unique. Often when a new coach takes over a program there are players who become disenchanted with the direction the team takes and either quit or rebel.

And as is often the case when a coach shakes up a team with a radical decision, the players come together and perform better than before. Apparently that's what happened when the Ducks headed into regional play seeded sixth but emerged as the third place finisher behind Portland State and Washington, which declined the opportunity to participate in the nationals.

"The way we were playing was so exciting, because the girls were peaking, meshing together for the first time," Voelz says of her team's regional play. "Qualifying (for the nationals) was just icing, because we were playing so well."

"I had seen that happen the first game against Portland State, so I knew it could happen, but we hadn't loosened up enough since then."

"The group we took (to the regionals) was based on trust and a

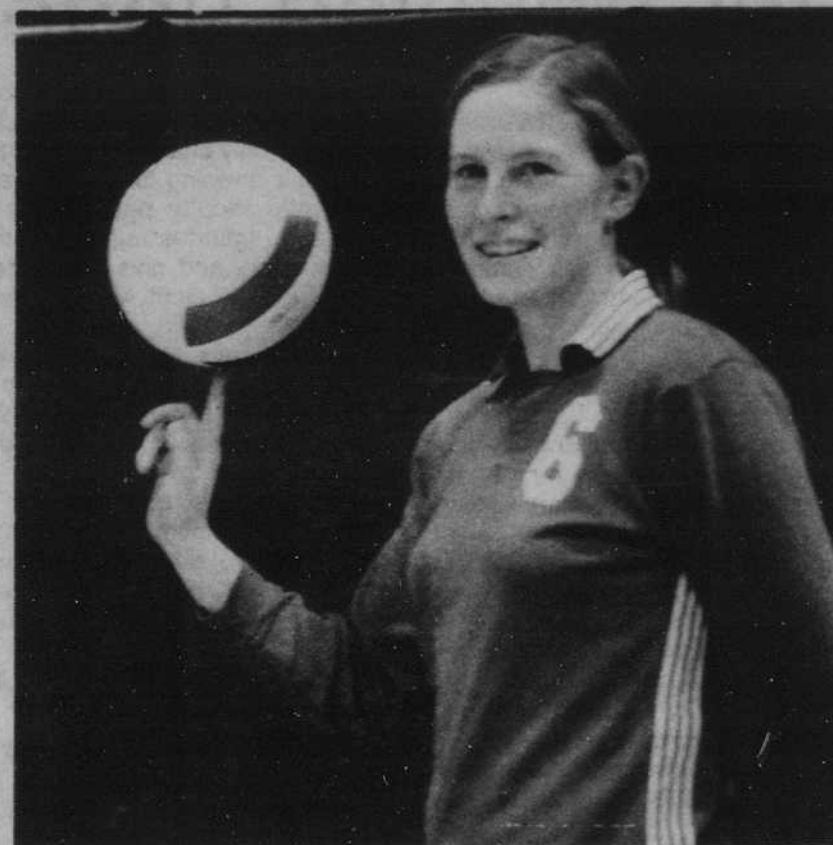


Photo by John Harris

Senior Sue Stadler is in full control of her game and will lead the Ducks into the national women's volleyball tournament this week in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

positive attitude, and they could all count on each other," adds Voelz. "It came as a gentle surprise, but it was a relief to some people who had worked so hard."

This is not the first time the Ducks have made it to the nationals. In fact, Oregon has gone five of the last six years, missing just last season. The importance of qualifying this time, though, is evidence the Ducks are keeping pace with the rest of the region. "The competition has just escalated," explains Voelz. "If you stayed at the same level from year to year you could go from second

to fifth."

The trip to the nationals will be a new experience for all but one of the team's members, though. The lone exception is senior Sue Stadler, a setter-hitter from Seattle, who was named to the all-regional first team. Her experience as well as her talent will be needed if the Ducks are to win even one match in Tuscaloosa.

"She's been coming on as a true leader," says Voelz. "She's got the experience and has brought us together on the court."

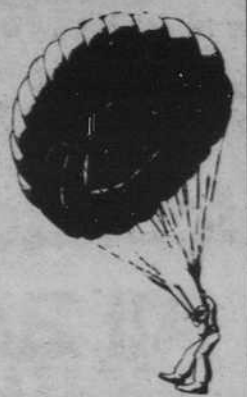
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