

# Spikers

*McKnight, Leno are former Willamina teammates looking forward to a college rematch*

**By Danielle Frost**

*Smoke Signals staff writer*

Since she was in elementary school, Bethany McKnight had a goal of playing college volleyball.

Now, the 18-year-old Grand Ronde Tribal member and freshman at Mount Hood Community College in Gresham is doing just that.

The middle blocker is enjoying her first season playing for the Saints in the Northwest Athletic Conference, which includes teams from Washington, Oregon and Idaho community colleges.

It's a big adjustment from McKnight's volleyball days at Willamina High School. Once she made it to the college level, her goal was to play all the way around in a game, which means to rotate through all the positions on the court.

"It's taken a lot of time, money, sweat, tears and pain," she said. "I worked as hard as I could every single day at practice, and with weights and training. It was really hard. (Sometimes) I wanted to quit because there were days I didn't believe in myself and that I could finish the drill or the sprints."

However, midway through her freshman season, McKnight is starting to see the rewards of all of her hard work.

"What got me through it was that I knew that even when I didn't believe in myself, my teammates and my coaches did and they were there backing me up the whole time," McKnight said.

A big supporter on and off the court has been her mother, Glena Berry. She has watched her daughter work hard to achieve her dreams, including traveling to Portland once a week to play with the Mount Hood team since February, graduating high school a year early and training up to seven hours a day in the summer.

"I feel an incredible sense of pride in my daughter for working so hard to achieve her goals. ... Her sense of dedication and commitment, even through the most difficult times will take her far in anything she does in life," she said.

Other family members include

stepfather David Berry, father Thomas McKnight, and grandparents Mike and Nichol Smith and Vivian McKnight.

McKnight graduated from Willamina High School in 2018 and grew up in Perrydale. She plans to earn an associate degree by next year and then transfer to a four-year university. She doesn't plan to continue with volleyball at that point, however.

"I'll be ready to start focusing on my career," she said.

McKnight began playing volleyball in the fourth grade and enjoys the defensive and outside hitter positions most, even though she is a middle blocker.

"Defense is fun just because you are the person that begins the play and defends your side of the court," she said. "Outside hitting is fun because it feels like you have the whole court to hit at."

Highlights of her first season at Mount Hood were a recent weekend traveling with the team to Coos Bay to play against Southwest Oregon Community College and then to Roseburg to play Umpqua.

"We were only able to bring eight of us due to injuries and along with injury our team has gone through a lot of adversity," McKnight said. "That's why this trip felt really special because even though we lost, we played and had a lot of fun together and with our coaches."

Although McKnight wasn't raised in Grand Ronde or around Tribal activities, as she got older adults like Tiffany Mercier and Chris Bailey began reaching out

and inviting her on Youth Education trips.

"I went on quite a few, but then as I got busier with high school and sports I didn't have the time," she said. "When I did go and hang out at Youth Ed or go on trips, I developed some of my favorite relationships. I met my best friend Kaylene Barry on a trip to a water park and we've hung out ever since then."

She said the department is always available to help youth in a variety of ways.

"I think more Tribal youth should take advantage of the programs offered to us and I wish I would have," McKnight said.

During her time at Willamina High School, McKnight played volleyball with fellow Tribal member Madison Leno, who is now a sophomore volleyball player at Chemeketa Community College.

"Madison was my setter my freshman and sophomore years of high school," McKnight said. "My freshman year I was timid and just kind of there trying to improve for the following years, but my sophomore year Madison and I really clicked and we made a nice duo. I was sad to see her leave, but excited for her that she was going to continue to play."

So far, the duo has played against each other once this season at Mount Hood's home court.

"Her team swept us in three games, but it was fun to play hard and to see her and her parents there," McKnight said. "I'm looking forward to playing some good volleyball with my team and maybe earn a win (next time)."

The two schools will face each other again at 6:30 p.m. Friday, Nov. 2, at Chemeketa.

McKnight encourages other youth to remember that the biggest rewards of hard work aren't immediate and require patience.

"Big goals take a lot of time and effort," she said. "If you want to reach your goals, surround yourself with people who are going to get you there and help you along the way."

**Madison Leno**

Leno, 19, has played volleyball since she was a Willamina second-grader and was a setter through high school. In college, she is a defensive specialist.

"I love putting forth my best effort



**Bethany McKnight**

every single play, saving the ball and getting good ups," she said.

Highlights of college play include winning the Northwest Athletic Conference championship last fall and placing first in the Southern Region.

Leno is the daughter of Gregg and Kelly Leno, and granddaughter of Merle and Claudia Leno, Mary Pankey, and Barsen and Sheila Herber.

She graduated from Willamina High School in 2017 and lived in Grand Ronde and Willamina until attending Chemeketa as a freshman last year. She said she plans to transfer to a four-year university after receiving her associate degree this spring and may continue to play volleyball as well.

Leno has lifelong ties to the Grand Ronde Youth Education program, having participated since she was a 3-year-old Head Start student.

"I always went to Youth Education after school and participated in many of the activities like Camp Westwind, Nike Camp and many day trips," she said. "The summer before my freshman year in high school, I started working for our Summer Youth Employment. I took advantage of this program all through high school."

Leno is looking forward to the rematch with Mount Hood and hopes to come out of the game with the win.

The advice she gives to other Tribal youth who want to accomplish big goals?

"(If they) put their mind to whatever they want to accomplish, the rest will follow," Leno said. "If they are willing to put in the work, they will be able to achieve whatever they want." ■



**Bethany McKnight, center, in action with her Mount Hood Community College teammates during a recent volleyball match.**



**Madison Leno (11) plays volleyball with the Chemeketa Community College Storm.**