



"Energy Is What You Choose to Bring": A Conversation with Saints Varsity Volleyball

Liz Torrey Jan 7 2019

This fall, the St. Andrew's girls varsity volleyball achieved their best season record in more than a decade. We sat down with the team's eight seniors—Noor El-Baradie '19, Elise Hogan '19, Cristle Ike '19, Nicole Lopez '19, Frances Malley '19, and Kate Paris '19—and Head Coach Mike Mastrocola to explore the attitudes and actions behind the team's success.

You guys had a fantastic season, both in terms of your record and in terms of the spirit of your team, which you can really sense even in the stands. How would you describe yourselves as a team?

Cristle: The team had an amazing dynamic this year. Whenever I was upset, or put myself down, everyone was so willing to help pick me back up. Not only me, but if *anyone* was down, everyone was so willing to pick each other back up. Everyone was really positive, and really encouraging. The dynamic was honestly, just a lot of fun.

Frances: The cool thing about the seniors on this team is that we all started on thirds or JV. I think Noor is the only one who actually started on varsity. So I think we've each seen ourselves grow along with the program and I think that's part of what made this year really exciting for our team. We were all on the same team, finally, and we were all excited to show how much we've grown as volleyball players and athletes.

Elise: Everyone on the team really wanted to be there. Everyone was so committed and giving 100%.

Was this not the case in years past?

Noor: I can speak a little bit to this. My freshman year and sophomore year, the program was struggling in the way the team carried itself. We didn't really validate our own

legitimacy as a team. Our conference is very competitive, and we always felt like, yeah, we can compete with other teams outside of our conference, but within our conference, we didn't expect to win. My junior year, I worked consciously, with Coach Mastrocola, toward re-establishing the tone of the team and how we were going to move forward rather than to hold on to the past. Last year, with the addition of Miles [Abney '20] and Lila [Feldman '20] to the team, and with Cristle and Elise and everyone moving up, it was like a brand new team. We were turning the page, and that was huge.

What were some examples of things you did to build that team community?

Elise: I think part of it is how we handle ourselves in practice, and how seriously we take the sport. But some of it is just... there. We all had the desire to be a better team than we were before, so that desire is part of what led to the really great dynamic that we had. Our team community came from something we all had within ourselves.

Coach Mastrocola: I don't want to talk too much about how we're different [from past teams]. I would just say that one thing I preach, and I think they're all on the same page, is that they need to demand excellence of themselves at all times, in everything that they're doing, whether it's running a sprint or doing a passing drill in practice. The expectation is that everything should be perfect, and over the years, they've seen that they are in fact capable of doing things perfectly very frequently. Seeing that happen hundreds and thousands of times then gives them the confidence that, in an actual game against a good team, they're going to do well, and that they're going to win. It's not settling for mediocrity and being surprised by excellence. I'm not someone who's going to jump up and down when someone makes a great play, because that's what I expect them to do. And I think that's what they expect of themselves.

How does being on a strong really strong team impact the rest of your life here? Does it have any kind of ripple effect?

Cristle: I apologize a lot for everything, and that's been a really bad habit. But my mindset in volleyball has been seeping over into everything else. I expect perfection [from myself], but I also am learning not to beat myself up over a mistake. If I make a mistake in class, or if I don't get the perfect score on a test, I apply that same mindset of positivity that I have on the volleyball court, and say to myself, "It's okay. You got the next one. You can do it."

Noor: It's like Coach always says—short memory.

Frances: Short memory means when the next play starts, you forget what happened before. That's both in good and bad situations. Even if we just had an incredible play and we're in the lead, we have to forget that. The score is still zero-zero. And if we mess up, same thing. You can't beat yourself up about it, and your teammates won't beat you up about it.

Elise: Being a part of the volleyball team made me realize how much one individual person can affect a whole group of people. Before I came to St. Andrew's, I had never played an organized team sport before. And volleyball is the ultimate team sport—it's absolutely impossible to be a ball hog or win on your own. You literally can't hit the ball more than once so you all depend on each other in a way that is so unlike any other sport, and so unlike anything I had experienced before. It's taught me so much about things that I would never have learned otherwise.

Noor: There's just such a dependency you have to have on your teammates in order to succeed in volleyball. I wish everyone could play volleyball to know what it feels like.

Cristle: I'm doing the musical this winter, and one thing that transfers over for me is the idea of trust—in myself and in the people around me. A lot of acting is also all about trust. Being about to break down the walls that hold me back from building trust with other people is what volleyball has helped me with for the past four years.

Was there a game this year that stands out to you guys as something you are going to remember in ten years?

Noor: I think the game that stands out to me, even though we lost, was the Wilmington Christian game. Every team in our conference is so good, but in this [conference] game, we were the better team. In terms of skill, maybe they were slightly better than us, but we played to a level where we could have beat them. That was a wake-up moment for us. We realized that we are playing at the same level as the teams in our conference, and we can achieve the same things that they are achieving.

Frances: What Coach always points out is that they might have good players, but we have a good *team*. We know that when another team messes up, even if they're 10 points ahead of us, you can see their team dynamic break and they get mad at each

other. For us, we could be 20 points behind, or 20 points ahead, and no matter what happens, we still try to keep the same energy and hold ourselves accountable to that.

Noor: Energy is what you choose to bring. Nothing on the outside affects that. The team has whatever energy the players bring.

So where did you guys end up in your conference standings?

Elise: Fifth out of sixth.

Coach Mastrocola: With an 11-4 record.

Elise: The only games we lost were to teams in our conference. But they were all really good games.

Kate, you were injured for much of the season. What was that experience like for you?

Kate: I broke my foot and sprained my ankle [in practice] the day before our first game. I was really, really, very upset—Frances can tell you, because she is my roommate. They originally told me it would be a two to three month recovery, so I thought I was going to miss the entire season!, Coach Mastrocola came to the hospital and helped me so much. He said, "It's going to be four weeks. We're going to get through this." So I had the mindset that I wanted to get back [on the court] and I wanted to finish [the season], and I got to play for the last week and a half of the season.

When I came back from the hospital, I was still a part of the team. You think that if you're injured, you're just gonna sit off to the side, but I still felt 100% a part of the team. I went to every single practice and every single game and no one ever treated me like I wasn't meant to be there. It helped me keep my mindset so much. If I hadn't had this team and hadn't had this season, it would have been even worse for me [to be injured], in every part of my life.

It sounds like your cohesion and success as a team is really due to the support you've given to each other, and the support that you get from Coach Mastrocola.

Noor: I think so much the success of this team is due to the support that Coach has provided and how much time and effort he's put in. It's so visible, the way he comes to

practice each day. He coaches every single player differently. I'm a player who likes to be challenged and is driven through frustration and competition, and the way that I'm coached is specific to that. The way he talks to each player is so specific to what they need. That's what helps us to grow individually, but that also adds to our team growth. Our team would not be where we are if it wasn't for Coach.

Frances: At the beginning of the season, I was so quick to doubt myself and make a joke out of that—"I'm going to be on JV again, somebody's going to take my spot." Coach would say, "If you keep working, you will earn your spot here." Every time I came to practice early, he was there early too. He dedicated his life to us for the past three months, and that paid off hugely for us.

Nicole: When someone's expecting a lot of you, you expect them to be in turn disappointed when you mess up. Because he had such high expectations of all of us, messing up was something that you thought was like—*Oh my God, this is it*. But every time you got off the court after a bad play, he's always stand up and give you a fist bump. That silent support was just really reassuring.

Coach Mastrocola: I've coached probably 20 or so different teams in my life, and this is the most fun that I've had coaching. They come to the gym every single day with a good attitude, ready to work. I think the biggest reason why things have turn around [for this team] because of this group of seniors. The underclassmen are in a good position to lead the program going forward, and that's 100% because of what they've done. Their leadership by example has been phenomenal.

Cristle: When I took off my uniform for the last time, I looked at all the holes that I made in my elbows, and I got really sad.

Frances: Coach *cried* at our last game.

Coach Mastrocola: I would like to go on record that I teared up. There was no precipitation.

Noor: He turned around for a good whole minute. He was crouched down.

Coach Mastrocola: A minute—it was more like five seconds.

Frances: It was SO long. It was like 45 seconds.