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Nagel Keeps Adding to Volleyball Resume

Volleyball has taken Jolene Nagel around the country and to the heights of the sport, but the Panama native still enjoys when Chautauqua County visitors drop by her office at Duke University.

"I love it when people from that area stop in and say hello and I'm able to take them up to the hall of fame area here at Duke and they can see some pretty spectacular history," Nagel says.

She has added her own share of sparkling Blue Devil moments as head women's volleyball coach.

With over 400 career victories, over 200 at Duke, and nine NCAA tournament appearances in the past decade, the Panama Central School graduate has built an elite resume. Her program just wrapped up one of the most successful seasons in the school history as Nagel led the Blue Devils to the NCAA Elite Eight for only the second time, and the first under her guidance.

Duke's season finished with a 27-7 record and an Atlantic Coast Conference championship before falling to No. 4 Penn State on Dec. 11.

"We continued to get better all through the spring and summer," Nagel said of this year's team.

The same could be said of the team's mentor.

AN ELITE RESUME

Success on the volleyball court began for Nagel three decades ago in Panama, where she was an all-around athlete, earning 12 varsity letters as part of championship teams under Deb Palmer. A member of the West volleyball team for the inaugural Empire State Games in 1978, she graduated a year later and headed for Edinboro University. There, she was part of three state and regional title winners and played in one NCAA and two AIAW national championships as a captain.

"I wanted to do something I was passionate about. At the time it came down to music or sports. I think I followed my heart with sports," she said.

After Edinboro, Nagel began her career on the sidelines in 1983 as a graduate assistant at Kent State. Then it was on to the University of North Carolina as a first assistant for three seasons before earning her first head job at Cornell in 1988.

Success came nearly immediately. While at Cornell, Nagel's teams finished first in the Ivy League regular season standing from 1989-1991 before notching the first league title in school history during the 1991 season.

By then the volleyball world had begun to become acquainted with the name Jolene Nagel. Georgetown University offered Nagel its women's volleyball vacancy before the 1992 season, allowing her to jump to the ranks of the Big East Conference. The move took her from Cornell, a school with no athletic scholarships for her program and no automatic bid into the NCAA Tournament as part of the Ivy League, to a chance to compete on a national scale.

"I wanted to compete at the highest level and that's when the Georgetown opportunity came along," she said. Though with more resources, building a team at Georgetown remained an uphill battle against other Big East powers.

"We were competing against teams with 12 scholarships and at Georgetown we just didn't have that type of scholarship money," she recalled, noting that her team shared a gym with the school's men's basketball team and legendary head coach John Thompson.

"We had a lot of things go right to be successful, she said.

Nagel built the Hoyas' program up to its first ever Big East regular season crown in 1998 with a 24-6 record and the first-ever NCAA Tournament bid. It would open the door for one more great opportunity – rebuilding the program at Duke, a job she would take following the '98 campaign.

Nagel took the reins of a downtrodden Blue Devils program, a team which limped to a 9-20 season before she moved to Durham. Two years later, Duke was a 21-win team.

"I didn't know how long it would take, I just got back to the idea of starting from the ground up and really develop," she said. "The success of those early teams was really exciting. Those early teams really laid the foundation of where our kids are right now."

Where Duke stands right now is among the top programs in the nation. With five straight seasons of 25 wins, this year's team became just the third in NCAA history to reach the Elite Eight, and the first Duke squad to earn three ACC Volleyball Championship victories. It was a step forward for the Blue Devils after reaching the second round in five of the previous six seasons. This season's accomplishments earned Nagel East Regional Coach of the Year honors from the American Volleyball Coaches Association earlier this month.

From a struggling program to a national contender, Nagel has to continue working toward the goal of national championship.

“Our seniors have left higher aspirations for the young group to aspire for the higher goals.” she said. “We’re getting there because of the steps the team has taken the last few years. A lot of things have to go right in order to be successful. We have great support at Duke and the sky is the limit because of our leadership at the University.”

UNDER THE DUKE SPOTLIGHT

Any sports program at Duke has a little added spotlight, and as the program has grown to a national power under Nagel, the demands of wearing the Blue Devils’ color have only increased.

“When we go on the road, these are not easy environments to play in, that’s the cost of representing Duke,” she said. “We get opponents’ best crowds and best hecklers, our kids take on a huge responsibility on themselves understanding that’s what we took on when we signed on for Duke.”

Nagel takes any good natured heckling from ACC rivals, even archrival North Carolina, in stride. Her passion for the sport began years ago in her small hometown and burns just as brightly today.

“I’ve been passionate about volleyball all these years and still just absolutely love it,” she said. “It’s one of those things where it’s in your heart and in your blood and you just don’t get sick of it.”

All along the way, Nagel has seen women’s volleyball and women’s sports in general change in the ways unimaginable as a high school student during the 1970’s.

“Looking back on those days, I was part of the evolution of women’s sports”, she said. “It went from AIAW to NCAA my senior year. We drove 10 hours in a van to get to games, that’s how it was back then. When I started coaching we were still driving vans and eventually got buses at Cornell.

“It’s just a whole different world now to young females who want to focus on a sport. The opportunities are so much greater. Kids can travel the county to play now. My first flight was to compete in the national championship as a sophomore in college.”

‘CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY MADE ME WHAT I AM’

A 1997 Edinboro Hall of Fame inductee, Nagel joined the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 2007. Though part of volleyball’s coaching elite now, Nagel counts some of her fondest memories as those close to home, a place she returns to multiple times per year, as often as her schedule permits. She keeps in close contact with family remaining in the area, friends, and Palmer, who she counts as a continued mentor.

“Chautauqua County has made me what I am,” she said. “It’s such a wonderful community and I was lucky to be able to grow up there and learn the keys to being successful as far as having work ethic and having great mentors.”

Another season behind her, Nagel plans to return home once again for the Christmas holiday. After the new year, the work begins on getting another step forward in the quest for a national crown.

Both trips - the one taken home and the road back to the NCAA Tournament - are ones she's eager to take.

"I feel fortunate to have come from such a great place, I was lucky enough to grow up in the environment I did and take what I had learned to other places and be successful," Nagel said. "I'm still doing today what I absolutely love."