

Right Side Threat

Wells, Polak, Strickland compete for one vacant A&M Volleyball position — right outside hitter



Ryan Rogers, THE BATTALION

Senior Jennifer Wells (top), junior Brooke Polak (middle) and freshman Summer Strickland (bottom) manage to preserve their friendship and the laughs despite competing for the right outside hitter position.

Wells' height influenced her to try sport she never considered playing

BY JAMIE BURCH
THE BATTALION

A basketball coach foams at the mouth when he finds the rare combination of height and youth in an athlete, said Lee Breyer, who is envisioning the numerous possibilities of utilizing that deadly combination of physical traits. That scenario is no different in volleyball — as Lady Aggie Volleyball outside hitter Jennifer Wells.



Wells

At 26 of the Lady Aggies' 33 matches and just 70 of 126 games, Wells recorded career highs with six kills and 15 attempts against the University of Lamar and 12 digs against then 12th-ranked University of Notre Dame.

Wells increased her playing time at the middle blocker position as a sophomore.

Drawing the starting nod in four matches while appearing in 26 matches and 59 games, Wells tied her career high with six kills against Southwest Texas State University and posted a personal best .417 hitting percentage.

During the off-season, Wells moved from the middle blocker position to outside hitter.

A&M Head Coach Laurie Corbelli said Wells has made the transition with little difficulty.

"I think she's done a nice job," Corbelli said. "I think the fast transition can be attributed to her two years of training in the middle, which requires quick attacks, a lot of shots and blocks. It's a real good transition for most, going from the middle to the right."

While making the transition, Wells has played a larger role on this year's squad. Corbelli has instituted a three-man rotation on the right-side. Wells, junior Brooke Polak and freshman Summer Strickland are battling for the role. Wells has played in 36 of 54 games, posting 30 kills, 68 digs and 18 blocks.

Wells said the competition between the three outside hitters has raised her level of performance.

"I think it's definitely a friendly competition," Wells said. "All of us get along very well and we all push each other to perform. You always know that someone's at your heels waiting to take that position, so you've got to work hard every day."

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Consistent Polak serves as a role model for younger Lady Aggie players

BY SARA DUESING
THE BATTALION

She jumps straight up in the air, her 6-foot, 2-inch frame towering over the net. With arms extended, outside hitter Brooke Polak slams the ball back to her opponents' side. Known for her strong blocks and powerful hits, Polak has been a consistent force for the Texas A&M Volleyball Team.

A junior from Needville, Polak began playing volleyball in the seventh grade as a way to get involved with her friends. However, Polak now finds herself a part of the nationally-ranked Lady Aggies, an accomplishment not to be taken lightly.

"I love to play volleyball," Polak said. "It has given so much to me, especially bringing me here to A&M."

Following a family tradition, Polak said she had always wanted to be an Aggie, and strives to do her best to represent A&M through both mental and physical preparation.

"I try to get some quiet time before a competition to focus and to set goals for the day," Polak said. "It is important to have something to work for, something to get accomplished."

Formerly a middle blocker, Polak has worked throughout her college career to adjust to being successful as an outside hitter.

"It has been challenging for Brooke to adjust to different sets, and that's one of the things she's been working on," A&M Head Coach Laurie Corbelli said. "She's got the size and swings high and hard and concentrates to keep her errors down."

Competing with teammates Jennifer Wells and Summer Strickland for the starting outside hitter role this season has

not diminished the camaraderie between the three athletes. Conversely, it has strengthened it, along with each player's individual talent.

"[The competition] is only making us better players," Polak said. "It pushes me every day at practice to get better."

As advantageous as the competition is, there is still only one position available. However, Polak said there is no jealousy when the starting lineup is submitted and two players are left on the sidelines.

"We know that only the best gets to play," Polak said. "We really get pumped for those on the court and focus on the team effort."

Junior setter Farah Mensik said all three hitters have different styles and contribute in different ways.

"Jennifer and Brooke were middle blockers before, so I have to adapt to their style," Mensik said. "They're all really good techniques; one isn't better than the other."

Despite her limited role in past seasons, Polak has managed to have an important influence on the team as a whole.

"Brooke's longevity on the team has made her a good role model for the younger players," Corbelli said. "She is very positive and has a pleasant personality."

With long-term goals that include being a high school coach, Polak said she looks to Houston Rockets star Hakeem Olajuwon for inspiration.

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Despite recent ankle injury, Strickland is making a name for herself on court

BY DENNIS RAMIREZ
THE BATTALION

Most Texas A&M freshmen are not concerned with playing a vital role on an Aggie sports team in the hunt for a national championship. But one freshman is an exception.

Trying to make a name for herself on the A&M Volleyball Team, Summer Strickland has inherited a big responsibility at the right outside hitter position for the Lady Aggies.

Strickland came to A&M a ballyhooed recruit. At Eastwood High School in El Paso, she led her team to back-to-back district championships her junior and senior years. A member of the Texas All-Star team, Strickland was ranked as one of the nation's top 50 high school recruits by the Student Sports Magazine last year.

Strickland attributes her high school success to concentration and her love for the game.

"I got interested in playing volleyball during middle school, but I didn't get serious about volleyball until my freshman year in high school," Strickland said. "I gave up my tennis game to concentrate on volleyball. I simply love to play the game."

A&M Head Coach Laurie Corbelli said she is ecstatic with Strickland's performance so far this season and is looking forward to bigger and better things from the freshman.

"She's done a super job, not only on the court, but also off the court in adjusting to college and

academics," Corbelli said. "She has pretty much set her own goals and realizes the competition for the position. That is important and it shows that she wants to win and be a champion."

Competing with Jennifer Wells and Brooke Polak for the starting right outside hitter position, Strickland has displayed great poise and a team player's mentality.

"A big goal of mine was to develop well enough to become a starter this year and carry that on to next year," Strickland said. "As far as the competition goes, it's more of a friendly competition. I just want to develop into a better player, and I especially want what is best for the team."

Strickland's immediate goals were put on hold last week when she sprained her ankle in practice. She was forced to sit out the Lady Aggies' matches against Baylor and Texas Tech last weekend and is currently undergoing physical therapy to speed up her recovery time.

Strickland hopes to return to the court this Friday when the Lady Aggies host the University of Missouri, but Corbelli wants to take it one day at a time.

"There is no need to rush her back onto the court," Corbelli said. "For now, we are just going to take it day-by-day and make sure she is ready to come back. Because the ankle takes a lot of stress, we will slowly let her try some moves. We have to be very careful, because we don't want her out for the rest of the season."

As far as the rest of the season and her career at A&M are concerned, Strickland admits there is a lot for her to learn and grow on.

"I have to learn to calm down in front of a big crowd," Strickland said.

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Ranger's collapse must be remedied in offseason

It ain't over until the fat lady sings." Ranger fans listened Saturday night as the fat lady performed her season finale at The Ballpark in Arlington, signaling the Rangers' premature exit from the playoffs.

Sportswriter



Jamie Burch
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The Rangers, playing in the post season for the first time in its 25-year history, were ousted by the New York Yankees three games to one in the best of five Divisional Playoff Series. Some fans are content just having witnessed the Rangers playing in October. Diehard fans feel the Rangers cheated themselves and their loyal fans out of a much attainable World Series berth.

There is no doubt that if you examine all the intangibles, this season should have resulted in much more than a first round exit from the playoffs.

The Rangers began the season with reserve shortstop Kevin Elster, who had just ended a two-year hiatus from baseball, during which he made a cameo appearance in the movie *Little Big League*.

Elster, a shoe-in for the Comeback Player of the Year award, exceeded and buried his previ-

ous career highs by belting 24 home runs and driving in 99 RBIs.

Second year outfielder Rusty Greer emerged as a solid producer on both sides of the ball. The red-headed Alabamian made spectacular catches all season in left field, robbing countless batters of extra-base hits and home runs. At the plate, Greer hit .322, with 18 home runs and 100 RBIs while assuming the third spot in the batting order after first baseman Will Clark was shelved on the disabled list.

Free agent acquisition Darryl Hamilton solidified the center field position using his explosive speed and ability to read the ball to catch virtually anything hit his way. Hamilton, who owns a .994 career fielding percentage, didn't commit an error all season. If baseball writers and broadcasters would pull their heads out of the sand, they would award Hamilton with a Golden Glove instead of wasting their nomination on Seattle Mariner outfielder Ken Griffey Jr.

Johnny Oates utilized a platoon in right field while All-Star Juan Gonzalez spent 20-plus games on the disabled list. The platoon consisted of much traveled veteran Warren 'the Deacon' Newsome and rookie Damon Buford. The duo provided both run support and solid defense.

Third baseman Dean Palmer rebounded from a torn bicep which sidelined him for much of last

season. Palmer provided spectacular defense on the left side corner in addition to leading American League third basemen in home runs with 38.

Gold Glove catcher Ivan 'Pudge' Rodriguez continued to prove that he is in a league of his own. Rodriguez gunned down just under 50 percent of would-be base stealers and picked off six runners at first base. Rodriguez also broke the major league record for most doubles by a catcher (previously held by Johnny Bench at 42) while hitting 47 doubles and batting .300.

A team that has been synonymously associated with errors over the past 24 seasons, not only committed the fewest errors in the league but also made the spectacular defensive gems that win close games. During the regular season, the Rangers put together a 15-game errorless streak.

So why the premature exit from the post-season? While the team insists that there is no one specific area that is to blame for the collapse, statistics show otherwise.

Against the New York Yankees, the Rangers faulted in several areas. The most glaring problem — the bullpen. The biggest worry of the season came back to haunt the team at the time of year when defense and pitching wins ballgames. In 11 innings the relief surrendered 12 hits, five runs and five walks, while allowing five of 17 runners to score. They posted a putrid 0-2 record and a 3.85 ERA.

Their performances resulted in the Rangers relinquishing the lead in each of the final three games.

On the other hand, the Yankees bullpen recorded just nine hits, two runs, and nine walks in 19 innings, while holding at bay every runner they inherited in scoring position. The result — an impressive 3-0 record.

Second problem: offense. Juan Gonzalez hit .438 with five home runs and nine RBIs in the series. The rest of the Rangers hit just .190 while driving in seven runs. Clark, Palmer and Greer were a combined 0-for-12 with runners in scoring position. The Rangers never scored after the fifth inning in any of the three defeats.

Third problem: defense. Although the Rangers posted no errors in the series, they lacked the spectacular defense that wins close games. Three times in key situations Texas failed to turn possible double plays.

Verdict: The Rangers cheated themselves and their loyal fans out of a reachable World Series berth. The only proper way for the Rangers to correct such an injustice is to make improvements during the offseason. And just in case Doug Melvin, Tom Scheiffer and the rest of the front office have failed to notice, the offseason began Saturday evening.

But remember, Ranger fans, there's always next year.