

DAYS OF SUMMER

Strickland emerges as standout for Texas A&M Volleyball Team

BY JASON LINCOLN
The Battalion

The Texas A&M Volleyball Team is ranked No. 16 in the nation and is tied for the Big 12 lead. The surprising part of the Aggies' success is they have achieved it without any dominating, headlining players.

A casual glance at the Aggies reveals no standouts. But a closer look shows a team dominated by seniors with consistency and talent that is often underestimated. Despite not attracting much attention, one of these seniors, outside hitter Summer Strickland, is emerging as a standout for the Aggies.

"No one realizes how good she is," A&M volleyball coach Laurie Corbelli said. "Summer is often misjudged, and she exploits it."

Strickland has emerged as a player that can be effective in most areas of the court. The combination of her skill and strength has allowed her to become one of A&M's most versatile players.

Her multifunctional role for the team is highlighted with her position as a primary passer. By receiving the serve and passing to the team's setter, Strickland is key in setting up A&M's offense.

She also is a right-side, second-tempo hitter. Because the right side is often the weak side, Strickland is able to alter the direction of the Aggie attack and catch opposing defenses off-guard.

In her role as back-up setter, the senior can be relied on in case the designated setter is forced to field a ball.

All of these roles are in addition to the blocking power and strong defensive presence that has always characterized her play throughout her career at A&M.

"She brings a lot of athletic ability, long training hours and consistent performance to the team," Corbelli said. "She is somewhat mellow, but there is a ton of skill and a ton of talent there. She contributes a lot of speed and power for the team."

Strickland is often underestimated by opponents, which is a major factor in her blocking success.

Even though she stands a respectable 5 feet, 11 inches, defenders often misjudge her size because her appearance is very slim and belies her height and strength. Unsuspecting opponents try to hit over Strickland, and she is often able to get the block.

In her first collegiate game in 1996, Strickland showed defensive ability that has highlighted her style of play ever since.

"My first play in my first game of my freshman year was a stuff," Strickland said. "And then right after that I had another block. It was an awesome way to start off."

Strickland's casual, easy-going approach seems to help bring the team together and set the tempo, yet her style can shift drastically as a result of big plays and on-the-court success. She often goes from mellow to wired as the result of a single block or kill.

"Summer gets a lot of energy from her blocking; it really pumps her up," senior teammate Celia Howes said. "It also pumps up the team in a couple ways. Just to have that physical force there as a blocker really gives the team confidence."

"She has that 'snarl' after a big play, and everybody gets excited by her energy."

The change in attitude also shows a shift in her level of play. Strickland performs with better efficiency when she is fired up, a transition that affects the team positively.

"Her natural mode is not very intense," Corbelli said. "She is not an obviously-driven player. Yet she is very consistent and very predictable and the team responds to her play."

As a team leader, Strickland helps A&M become a team that sports a well-balanced attack from all positions on the court.

"Summer really balances us out as our passing leader," Howes said.

Without a headlining player, such as last year's All-American Stacy Sykora, the team has found success through its seniors.

"Stacy was an awesome player," Strickland said. "This year, instead of having one dominating player, it's nice to have a whole team."

This year's seniors — Strickland, Howes, Lauri Leahy and Amber Woolsey — have combined to form a more stable and consistent team on the way to their goal of winning the Big 12 Conference.

"Our main hope this season is that we can win the Big 12," Strickland said. "This year probably marks our best chance and the seniors' last."

"I think we have the talent and chemistry to get it done this year."



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With her strength and skill, senior Summer Strickland stands out as one of A&M's most versatile players.

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