

Holly Clay: court jester

By Jordan Meserole
THE BATTALION



The first time you meet Holly Clay, you're bound to notice one of two things about her: the twinkle in her eye or the smile on her face.

If one is missing, the other is sure to be there. And by the time she's done talking, she's bound to have made you smile at least once. Those qualities are things that are rarely missing from the Texas A&M junior's persona — even on the volleyball court.

"She's great for comedic relief," said junior teammate Kari Kelle. "Sometimes when the intensity gets high, she smiles or says something funny that really eases the situation."

The energetic Clay came from Cypress Creek High School, where she played volleyball all four years. She helped her team advance to the third round of the state playoffs in 1999 and 2000 and was named the 2001 District 16-5A defensive specialist of the year. But despite all her achievements in high school, Clay was so sure she wanted to continue playing in college.

"I had played so long and I was starting to get a little worn out — 13 years is a long time to do anything," Clay said. "But I had a lot of players go through that in their junior and senior year. And when colleges started talking to me, it helped change my mind a little."

A&M head coach Laurie Corbelli saw the twinkle in Clay's eyes when she was evaluating Clay, but saw even more — fire. "Holly is definitely a fiery competitor," Corbelli said. "I could see she was serious about her game and a fighter."

Clay didn't see much playing time her freshman year, getting only six minutes on the court. Corbelli said she wasn't benched for lack of talent, but to allow her to adapt to collegiate level of play and work on her defensive skills, especially her footwork.

Even though Clay wasn't making an impact on the court immediately, she was making an impact on her teammates with her personality.

In spring of 2001, the team was at a tournament in Arizona. Clay and freshman teammate Jayna Babin (who now plays for Winthrop University in South Carolina) heard there was a high school prom being held in the hotel where they were staying. Clay and Babin put on some regular street clothes and found a friend of the high school to escort them in as his dates.

"It was pretty evident that we didn't go to high school," Clay said. "We didn't care though — we were just having a good time."

Just the thought of the story brings a smile to Corbelli's face.

"It might be one of the funniest stories I've ever heard," Corbelli said. "And I wasn't going to punish them because they weren't doing anything wrong or outside of the rules. I think it's a lot of guts to do something so funny like that."

Clay jumped from seeing little playing time her freshman year to receiving a lot of action sophomore year, participating in 27 of 28 matches and was voted as the team's co-defensive player of the year.

Although Clay is having success with volleyball, she said life in the future possibly won't have sports in it.

"I love volleyball, but I don't think I'll still be in it," Clay said. "I'm obsessed with fashion. I watch fashion shows, and I'm evaluating what the stars are wearing instead of actually watching it for the awards. I just want to be a buyer."

Until Clay achieves her future ambitions, her current job remains patrolling the back row of volleyball courts, encouraging teammates and especially making them smile. And after working with Clay for two years, Corbelli sees more than Clay's abilities make people smile.

"She's a very serious worker. Winning is the only acceptable thing for her," Corbelli said.

"But then again, she can be pretty funny."

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