



Women's Volleyball Team Nets Over The Top Talent

"It's Awesome To Have One High Standard We Hold Ourselves To Here... It's A Very Competitive But Friendly Environment." - EMMA PENCE

BY CYNTHIA LOGAN

You would never guess that Bobcat volleyball's key middle blocker Emma Pence experienced her stellar freshman debut as "an absolute shock." Thrown in during fall of 2019, she proved herself a force to be reckoned with right off the bat. Averaging 1.10 blocks per set, she established herself as one of the best in the Big Sky Conference,

was ranked second in the Big Sky in league and was an all-Big Sky Conference Academic selection. Now a sophomore, Pence took the past year to work on her blocking since, in her mind, "my freshman year was not really there—the level of play increased so much from senior high school, it was a whole 'nother game," she says.

At 6'2," Pence considers she 'got the good genes.' "There were

definitely times in my middle and high school years when I didn't appreciate it as much; I couldn't find clothes that fit and was taller than all the guys for a few years." Growing up, Pence played baseball, softball and soccer, and participated in swimming, karate, gymnastics, dance, basketball and volleyball. "My parents put me in every sport," she laughs. "I loved basketball, but I loved volleyball more. "Once I found my path in volleyball, it sort of helped me find love for my height." Pence finds reading the setter on the other side of the net the most challenging aspect of her position. "She's got two or three

options for her offense," explains Pence. "My job is to put up a block against every hitter. A lot of them run a fast tempo so it can be hard to react to that set."

Super senior Hannah Scott (she graduated last fall, but due to Covid has an extra year of eligibility) says the most challenging aspect of this dynamic sport is taking care of her body. "I'm jumping a ton," says the 5'11" outside hitter from Hawthorne, CA. The daughter of two chiropractors (her dad is 6'7" and her mom is 5'5"), she grew up with health as a mindset. "I've had great nutrients and chiropractic care to perform at the highest level. I'm super conscious of the foods I put in my body, and take vitamins on a regular basis," she says. A four-time scholar-athlete and a three-year letter winner at Mira Costa High School, Scott is just 232 kills shy of becoming the 16th member of MSU's 1000-kill club. "Am I?" she asks. "That seems like a lot!" After her breakout junior season, she made the all-Big Sky Conference First-Team as an athlete and an Academic honoree.

While both women love being on the MSU volleyball team, the commitment adds to an already challenging time management load. During the season, practice is two or three hours five days a week, with another day reserved for a 'serve and pass drill' to get some touches in prior to a game, without jumping. There



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are also team and individual meetings, and film to watch; on average, it’s about 20 hours a week. In addition to athletic training and academic pursuits, Scott works in one of the campus advising offices weekdays, and has a second job on weekends. Pence works as a Door Dash driver for the flexibility it offers. A double major (psychology and sociology with a minor in Hispanic studies), she grew up in Carson City, Nevada with her brother, Jacob, and attended Bishop Manogue Catholic High School, where she played for head coach Jason Sterrett. “The challenge for me in the coming year is to be more external on the court,” says Pence, who points to Nebraska middle blocker Lauren Stivrins as someone to emulate: “She’s an incredible, versatile, clear presence on the court.” She notes that Nebraska’s

Cornhuskers are having a big effect on the game through both defense and offense. Of Stivrins, she remarks; “You can almost see it through the screen—she is such a threat, the other team has to respect that. She holds the block. On her own team she carries a confident and calming presence. You have to show the excitement you offer the game. She shows it.”

It’s hard to imagine either of these young women as anything but exuberant, energetic, and extroverted. Even their voices convey genuine enthusiasm—not to mention the exhilaration they exhibit and elicit on the court. Asked about her favorite contest, Pence answers; “It’s a tie between our win at NAU in 2019, when we beat them in five; the other one was our opening sweep against UNC this year. We

were swept by them last year, so beating the team that won the conference last year was meaningful, ‘cause we put in a lot of work and we wanted to be the best.” Scott agrees that the University of Northern Colorado was a fulfilling victory. “We just beat them this past season, in January. We swept them right out of the gate,” she says, also citing the quarter final game in the tournament against Sacramento State as particularly satisfying. Neither Scott nor Pence has had any serious injuries, though Scott’s back has gone out a time or two and Pence hurt hers while working out during her freshman year. “Hannah and I work out similarly in that we’re both attackers; we both block and hit,” says Pence. “I have to work on ankle mobility, whereas she might work on a different exercise for strength goals.” The

team works out five days a week with an off day mid-week during the season. “Off season we’re lifting three days a week,” says Scott. Our strength coach, Alex Jardine, measures our personal goals.” Scott plays all six rotations—three in the front row, then three in back. That’s usually about two hours per game—a lot of impact. “When you dig and pass, you’re supposed to use your forearms; over time it will build up the nerves,” she says. Pence and Scott credit their coaches for inspiring outstanding performance on the court. Head Coach Daniel Jones and Assistant Coach Cole Aiazzi balance each other out, says Scott. “Daniel analyzes the team as a whole, while Cole is more tactical and super individual,” she notes. “I have great relationships with both Cole and Daniel,” says Pence. “Daniel has done a great job pushing me individually to be the best middle blocker in the Conference. I told him that was my goal, and asked him to treat me like one. He’s held me to that standard. He’s very well-spoken when it comes to motivational words and has done a great job saying the right things. She credits Aiazzi’s defensive strategies as a big factor in her growth this year. “I’m self-motivated but there’s days when you walk in the gym and you’re tired and it’s great to have coaches pushing you because they know you have so much potential. He pushed me blocking wise, and knew off-season would have to get worse before it got better—it would be a long process to destroy bad habits.” Her worst habit? A stutter step that caused her to lose her balance and ‘give up her load.’ “When your knees are bent at the net, you’re loaded,” she explains. “I’d give that up and be late on blocks.” She considered it the result of attempting to adapt to a



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change in the level of play. “After being top dog in high school and coming in as a freshman with not a lot of experience... overcoming that compensation was an ugly process.”

“When I was first starting, all the UCLA girls from 2008-2010 were my inspiration,” says Scott, who had plenty of opportunity to play beach volleyball in California and participated on a championship team in the 2016 Ann Kang Tournament in Hawai’i (where she was first spotted and recruited to MSU). “Playing on sand is a completely different experience than on a court; shoes don’t make a big difference,” says Scott, “other than providing arch and ankle support. When sand gets hot it’s a drawback since you get blisters, but it’s nice because you’re outdoors and in the elements.” The oldest of five, Scott remembers watching her uncle play volleyball at UCLA and win a national championship. At the age of seven she would ‘hit the ball on the wall’ in her backyard, practicing her serve over and over.

With a degree in human development and family science, Scott is now pursuing her masters’ degree in financial planning through the Great Plains Interactive Distance Alliance. “The GPIdea is kind of a unique program with 25 universities participating,” she says. Since she elected to take her extra eligibility, Scott isn’t sure about the future. She had planned to go to grad school and possibly study abroad (she’s “super interested” in living and traveling in Spain, particularly since both her mom and brother are fluent in Spanish) but says she’s been “super competitive” lately and has fallen in love with the sport of volleyball.

“I think our team has great chemistry,” says Scott, who is enthused about the recent recruitment of five freshmen she feels will be ‘full on talent’ and fit in well with the team. “We get along off the court and work well cohesively.” She found post-pandemic play “super weird with the element of not having fans (though immediate family

members were allowed to watch from the stands), because we play really well off the fans. Shroyer is small (the gym holds 1500) and intimate. It rocks.” When not on the volleyball court, Scott enjoys fly-fishing and says she ‘kind of took up cross country skiing.’ “There’s also cornhole,” she laughs. “I love it.” She also coaches high school volleyball players and spends time playing with her Bernese Mountain dog, Roger Federer (her mom was a tennis player). With the fall schedule set to resume, Scott thinks MSU has ‘a pretty good team.’ “If we can pack Shroyer every night we play, that will be huge for us.” Pence is proud of the entire Bobcat athletic department: “It’s awesome to have one high standard we hold ourselves to here. We all push ourselves all the time. It’s a very competitive but friendly environment.”



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