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SPORTS

Leading the pack

Carina Saunders' volleyball journey has been a winding one, but one that has served her well

BY KEVIN MORALES/ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR

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[MATC Wolfpack Athletics](#)

Carina Saunders never pictured herself as a college volleyball coach.

In fact, she rarely thought about volleyball at all as a girl growing up in Oregon.

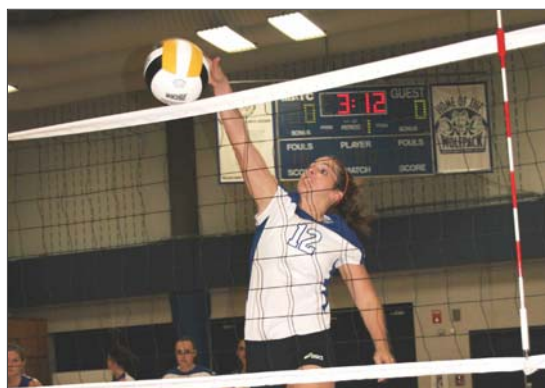
"I was big into basketball, basketball was my life at the time," said the 2003 Oregon High School graduate.

But from a coach's seed of inspiration grew a tree of opportunity for Saunders, who now serves as assistant coach for Madison Area Technical College in hopes she can give back to a sport that has given so much to her.

Saunders has come a long way since her humble beginnings on the court. It was fifth-grade gym class and Saunders had caught the attention of current OHS volleyball coach, Stan Eddy.

"I just kept serving the ball and he was like, 'oh, you should play volleyball.'"

Saunders gave Eddy's suggestion little thought.



"This voice in my ear was like, 'you're an idiot,'" Saunders said.

By the time Saunders rectified the situation with the Mount St. Clare coaching staff, a partial scholarship was all she was offered.

Saunders took it in stride and soon headed off to Iowa.

By the time she got to campus, the school's name had changed. First it changed to The Franciscan University, then The Franciscan University of the Prairies, then finally to Ashford University.

The school's name didn't matter to Saunders. She was had a blast as a freshman playing the sport she loved.

Then came another twist in the road.

A coaching change left Saunders reeling. She had a tough time adjusting to the new staff and decided to leave the team four matches into her sophomore campaign.

"It just wasn't really working, I wasn't having as much fun," she said.



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But seven years and many, many kills later, Saunders found herself the recipient of numerous recruiting letters and scholarship offers.

One offer particularly stood out – a full-ride package from Mount St. Clare College, an NAIA school in Clinton, Iowa.

Saunders deliberated over the opportunity, but with so many of her close friends headed to UW-Milwaukee, she declined the offer.

It was a move she soon would regret.

With her athletic scholarship still on the table, Saunders decided to try out for the Saints' seven-person track and field team in the spring.

She soon came to the realization it was time to make another important decision in her life – she wanted to return to Madison.

Saunders enrolled at MATC in 2005 and earned a spot on the volleyball team.

But just before Saunders arrived, she encountered another coaching change, as Toby Parker was named head volleyball coach.

"We had a hard time connecting," Saunders said. "For a while I didn't think I was going to play volleyball."

But once they did connect, Saunders and the Wolfpack excelled.

"I loved it," said Saunders, who after just one season at MATC finished top-20 in the school record books for career digs and hitting percentage.

Three months later Saunders found herself in the unenviable position all athletes face at some point – her playing days were over.

But as fate would have it, Parker decided to bring on two assistants for the 2006 season.

As soon as she got her former coach's e-mail in her inbox, she pounced on the chance to be assistant coach.

In the fall of '06, she helped the Wolfpack to a program-best 33-6 record and a No. 3 national ranking.

MATC reached the NJCAA national qualifier, only to fall one game shy of advancing to the national tournament.

In the spring of '07, she began coaching with the Midwest Juniors Club Volleyball team.

The role of coach is one she's adjusting to, but one that has been rewarding.

"When it comes to teaching, coaching, I never pictured myself being able to demonstrate or instruct anything," Saunders said. "Coaching (Midwest Juniors) this spring was really fun. Watching them develop as players and love the game much more."

The experience has given her the chance to reflect on those who have helped her along the way.

"I definitely look back at my coaches that I've had in the past and I have a different respect for them," she said. "They did teach me a lot of things and I wouldn't be where I am now if I didn't have that kind of coaching."

Saunders now looks forward to the 2007 season with the Wolfpack. She's feeling more comfortable with her coaching role.

"It's just a matter of problem solving," said Saunders, who also holds a full-time job at Harbour Investments, in Madison. "Something's not working, what's going to work? That's just part of life as far as I'm concerned, you have obstacles every day."

That's been the story for Saunders' volleyball career as a whole, turning a potential roadblock into an opportunity.

Will her journey lead her to a head coaching job one day?

"I enjoy doing what I'm doing," said Saunders. "Like I said, I never pictured myself as a coach. But I'm getting used to it... step-by-step."

Just how her journey will continue.