

The Parent's View of College Volleyball Recruiting

Nebraska, Hawaii, and Florida Families Share Experiences

By Mike Falcon

Elite high school volleyball players face some difficult decisions in choosing a college. From estimating playing time to matching up a college's strengths with their interests, navigating the intricate maze of offers, promises, expectations, and geography of major college volleyball programs can drain a girl.

It's no better for the major power coaches. "There is a lot of pressure in virtually all areas of college volleyball," notes University of California, Santa Barbara's head coach Kathy Gregory. "The girls have their college career ahead of them and we coaches will be evaluated on how well we do – and without the right parts even the very finest automobile can fall apart. When you pause to consider that our careers are forged from what we can determine about girls in high school, it's pretty bizarre in some sense. Am I going to make the right decision for both of us? For the next four years? Either way, I have to live with it."

Multiply those dynamics by Gregory's 29 very successful years at Santa Barbara and you have to believe she picks, gambles, and coaches well.

But for the parents of these elite players, the decisions are not so deftly made. Their child's best interests weigh on them, their own desires and beliefs sometimes jarringly collide with both their kids and recruiting coaches, and they face the prospect and worry of being separated by hundreds of miles – or even an ocean – from the person that matters most to them.

And no matter how right the decision, how well the match has been made, or where the elite player winds up, someone gets hurt.



Nebraska corn
Photo Credit: University of
Nebraska State Museum

To Nebraska, from Canada



#13 Sarah Pavan will put up a tall block for Nebraska in 2004

“It’s tough on everyone,” says Paul Pavan, father of 6’5” Canadian sensation Sarah Pavan. “In the end, one college is where you wind up, and that means disappointment – sometimes deep disappointment – from other institutions. It’s particularly difficult if you or your child develop emotional attachments to the coaches.”

For the Pavans, this was the most difficult aspect of a long and difficult recruiting process. Paul Pavan is an experienced player and championship coach. He’s used to traveling, watching his kids venture far away from home, and the vagaries and mythologies that envelop players, coaches, and parents.

He even adapted to coaches appearing at Sarah’s club matches unannounced, buttonholing Paul for hours at a time, watching Sarah incessantly, and losing privacy and family time.

“But there is really nothing that quite prepares you for the recruiting process,” he emphasizes. “You’re initially flattered by all the attention your child is receiving.”

This sort of reflected glory or family halo effect can sway many parents, but Paul had seen it on the club level. “Sooner or later the novelty wears off,” he notes. “That’s when you realize that, no matter how strong your love of the game or your love for your child, that this is a very serious business. And it’s serious for everyone involved.”

Sarah Pavan had many inducements to stay in Canada to play volleyball and attend a Canadian university. Father and daughter share a strong academic bent and select universities north of our border can academically match any in the States.

If you’re going to play competitive women’s intercollegiate volleyball, however, you pretty much have to head south. “Sarah’s choices never revolved around the considerable inducements she had to stay here,” says Paul Pavan. “But this isn’t about money. It’s about competing at the highest level you can, and it’s a fact that she’ll get the type of competition she needs by coming to the United States.”

With that part of the decision-making process clear, other information became muddy. “What amazed me was that every university that we spoke with said that theirs was the best in the United States,” says Paul. “I’d just sit there and shake my head.”

“I’m a huge fan of the USA,” says Paul, “and if my daughter chose to remain there after college and live there I would consider that a very positive thing.”

But whether it’s Stanford or Samford, Harvard or Haverford, underclassmen do not sit in classes of 12 students where a Nobel Prize winner teaches and grades papers. While Paul and Sarah share an academic bent, Paul is in the humanities, while Sarah is interested in biochemistry. And they both knew better.

Sarah and Paul visited a few campuses, met coaches and players, tried to get a feel for the communities and the universities, and whittled the list down to two finalists. Both were Midwestern universities with exceptionally strong programs, supportive communities, and straightforward approaches. Most elite players would enjoy either institution, benefit from a top coach, and have the opportunity for a fine college education and volleyball experience.

But neither Paul nor Sarah were prepared for an utterly unexpected dynamic. “Sarah really liked one of the coaches,” says Paul. “And I grew to like him a lot too. He really cared about her as a person, he’s a good person himself, his players and other coaches hold him in high regard, and we got emotionally involved. It became part of the process, and that was the most difficult part for Sarah. And for me.”

Sarah, however, chose Nebraska. “In the time leading up to that decision she was not exactly herself,” says Paul, “or maybe it was just a part of her we don’t see much of – irritable, moody, and unhappy; the exact opposite of who she is. She knew she had to make a very, very difficult decision and that someone she liked would be hurt in the process. No matter how old or mature you are, that hurts you too. It’s painful.”

Sarah made the call. “She cried for 20 minutes afterwards,” says Paul, “and she was inconsolable. It hurt me too because there was nothing I could do but let her go through the process and agonize and suffer as my child suffered.”

The acceptance call to Nebraska was less emotional and much more a relief, says Sarah’s dad. “She made a decision based on how she would fit in and afterwards things got back to normal, or pretty much so.” Nebraska had pulled out all the stops, from the chancellor on down.

In the end it was the people as much as it was the program. “She wanted more than a campus,” says Paul. “Lincoln is a lot like our town, about the same size, and the people are really nice. It seemed everyone knew who she was and said hello, but it was that way around the entire campus and town, and it was pretty matter-of-fact.”

Nebraska is a lot farther from Canada than the other finalist for Sarah’s play. “It wasn’t a consideration for us, and we didn’t want proximity to be a consideration for Sarah, either,” says Paul. “She’s used to traveling with the Canadian team and knows we’ll see her play, as we can. But when all was said and done the distance wasn’t a consideration. She had to make the choice and be happy with it, and she is. But I’ll tell you that we’re all very happy with both her choice and the fact that the recruiting process is over.”



Hawaiian pineapple
Photo Credit: Maui Pineapple
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www.pineapplehawaii.com

Headed to Hawaii



Tara Hittle's Las Vegas
performance also attracted
Hawaii

For other parents, however, the recruiting process is not quite as disturbing. According to parents of two players headed for the University of Hawaii, the combination of a laid-back environment, friendly and accessible coaches, and an intense team atmosphere was just what their kids needed. Along with some sun tan oil.

“To tell you the truth, we kind of liked opening the mailbox each day and getting all the packages and letters,” laughs Linda Heffner, mother of 6’ outside hitter Tara Hittle, Colorado Springs. “It was like getting fan mail.”

But no university distinguished itself via the mailbox or overnight delivery. “It’s hard to recall if one stood out from what they sent,” notes Heffner, underscoring that the marketing mantra of differentiating products – or programs – still hasn’t penetrated collegiate volleyball promotion.

Without that, Hittle and Heffner went to the people who had helped Tara through club coaching, Judy and Bill Peer. “They basically told us which programs were good or real good, which were the ones where she might be needed immediately, and where she might be seen and appreciated,” says Heffner.

“We received calls from a lot of schools, so it was important that we had some sort of filtering process,” says Heffner. Narrowing the list to 10 schools, Tara included Florida and Florida State, Virginia, and Georgia. Stanford came knocking after an outstanding Las Vegas club tournament.

Florida State’s coach, Todd Kress, was an immediate favorite. Mom and daughter both liked him, the program upswing was a good selling point, and the campus and sunshine didn’t hurt FSU’s chances.

But Hittle’s big performance at Las Vegas also attracted Hawaii. The Peers suggested leaving Hawaii for the last official visit, but Tara took an unofficial visit. “The Peers

thought that visiting Hawaii first might tilt the decision,” says Heffner. “They thought the other schools should be seen first, and then finish with Hawaii.”

The connection was fast and solid. “They really connect with you as a person,” emphasizes Heffner, “but that’s within the framework of a really strict program. It’s an interesting contrast.”

Heffner notes a difference between head coach Dave Shoji and assistant Charlie Wade as well. “Shoji is calmer and a little more removed,” says Heffner, “while Charlie can get very enthusiastic and excited about what you do as a player.” Wade and Tara clicked, Heffner was convinced the family atmosphere reflected her own moral code and considerations, and Tara was signed.



Jessica Keefe is headed to the University of Hawaii for 2004

What fellow Hawaii recruit Jessica Keefe found and liked were just about the same things. While the recruiting process held a lot of challenges, the eventual outcome was well worth it, says her mom.

“The ‘feel’ at Hawaii is a lot different from some other colleges,” notes Deb Keefe, mother of the Ames, Iowa 6’1” outside hitter, “particularly in the Midwest. Jessica is what I would call a ‘warm, fuzzy’ sort of person and she does best when she has that sort of personal contact with her coaches. She’s driven and has a sort of a Type ‘A’ personality and she’s hard on herself, so making the connection with the coach as a person is very important to her.” Coaches Shoji and Wade were perfect matches.

Deb Keefe notes that she and Jessica took some unofficial “warm-up” visits to colleges that probably were not going to be in her daughter’s final plans. “Jessica has a huge sense of humor, and it shows,” says Deb. “We figured a couple of visits to get acquainted with the recruiting process might help refine the remarks and questions Jessica had, and minimize a goofiness quotient. Jessica is all business on the court, but her humor off it can sometimes be misconstrued. Since this is serious business, we wanted to be sure we could be comfortable with the coaching staff, but not kid with them too much.”

The University of Wisconsin might have been Jessica’s choice, except for two factors: “She wanted to be away from Iowa and the cold for once in her life,” says Deb Keefe, “and she also wanted to know she was valued and would have a chance to play.”

With Wisconsin already committed for all scholarships and a walloping cold spell that greeted the Keefes, Jessica had little difficulty turning down a walk-on proposal. “Schools recruit so far in advance now that it really puts everyone at a disadvantage,” notes Deb Keefe. “It was fine in this case. Jessica liked the coach, the program, and the university, but it wasn’t a do-or-die feeling.”

“The teams have to project and forecast their needs years in advance,” she notes, “but many girls don’t show a breakout performance until their senior year after those needs have been satisfied with early-decision athletes, and the process seems to be getting earlier and earlier.”

The initial call from Hawaii came after Jessica had a monumental series of matches at a Kansas City tournament. “They called, and they were very interested,” says Deb Keefe. “We thought the interest was genuine and that we’d take an unofficial visit and just bite the bullet for the plane fare and other expenses. We trusted them.”

The trip was something a vacation planner would have envied. Jessica went canoe surfing with members of the Hawaii volleyball team, got soaked, and loved it. The huge crowds she saw for men’s volleyball were convincing. Hugs from staff members showed the warmth and gentle humor she thrives on. When Deb and Jessica were walking across a street off-campus, they realized how much volleyball permeates Hawaiian life when a total stranger asked if she were “the volleyball player from Iowa.”

“But I think what really got her was watching the girls work out in the weight room,” says Deb Keefe. “They were in agony, and Jessica loves challenges.” It was the sort of demonstration and invitation to grueling strength and conditioning work that might make others cringe. Flower leis, sun tanning, and some beach volleyball that left Jessica determined to elevate her sand jump might have helped persuade the whirlwind player who epitomizes her high school mascot – the “Little Cyclones” – to sign with the Rainbows, “but it was seeing the other players work to exhaustion that convinced her that Hawaii collectively wants to win as much as she does,” says Deb Keefe. “She simply demands to be in the hunt and will drive herself until she succeeds.”

Those familiar with either of these hard-driving “talk it up” Hawaii recruits will not find it surprising in the least that they e-mail each other constantly, comparing notes, sharing tips, and readying themselves for exactly what they wanted – to be placed squarely in the line of fire, starting with Hawaii’s premier pre-conference tournaments. And for their parents, it likely means another trip or two to Hawaii. “I can live with that,” jokes Deb Keefe.



Florida citrus
Photo Credit: Florida Department
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www.floridajuice.com

Second shot of sunshine



Amber McCray is in her first year
at University of Florida
Photo Credit: University of
Florida Sports Information

Darlene McCray had been through the recruiting process before, and like the Pavans, she wasn't too thrilled about what she perceives as far more aggressive recruiting than occurred when older daughter Nicole, who became an All American at Florida, went through the process.

"The recruiting process with Amber was a lot different than what we had experienced with Nicole," says Darlene. "The big-time schools have become a lot more aggressive and I think it has a lot to do with the internet, and with keying in on players from the club tournaments," she observes.

Sadly, much of the internet information about Amber was misleading. "There was always a rumor that she was interested in this school or that one, and these rumors were harmful because schools she was interested in stopped recruiting her. They'd say something like, 'We heard you were going to this school or that one, and you were committed.' Obviously, you're not committed until you sign a letter of intent, but that's the other side of the coin – the internet information can be entirely false and yet people believe it."

The deluge of materials wasn't a blessing either. "When Amber first started getting them she filled out the long questionnaires, but there were so many she simply got tired of repeating the same information over and over, and stopped."

Darlene understands that coaches have to protect their interests as well. "It's kind of a vicious circle. The coaches want to know that someone is really interested before they commit to an offer or an official visit, and like the girls, they have a few options in mind. One thing that bothered me was that a coach will tell you that another girl is coming and so you don't get to take the official visit, and because of that the player really doesn't see how she'll fit in with the program or other players."

This pushes the recruiting process along, but limits the players' options. This is particularly the case where the family has struggled to pay for the club experience and coaching, and where extensive family paid travel is next to impossible. Both Darlene and her husband work fulltime jobs, with Darlene working nights.

Still, the McCrays made long trips from Texas, with almost uniformly poor outcomes. On their unofficial visit to Oklahoma, Darlene's car was hit in an accident. UCLA's highly touted communications school was a big hit with Amber, but the trip to Los Angeles left them feeling like something was missing.

"Our priorities are God, family, education, and volleyball, and in that order," says Darlene. "Sometime I feel like the child gets lost in the process and what are life priorities can get turned upside-down. When the college career and international play are over, they'll need to use the education they received, so we never looked at just a great volleyball program – we sought an environment where Amber could thrive and grow and learn."

Apparently planted and growing on their doorstep on the first day coaches could contact a player was Florida coach Mary Wise. “She made the effort, she let us know she was really interested, and she had no hesitation or second thoughts in offering a scholarship,” says Darlene.

“My only wish now,” says Darlene, “is that other parents learn from what we went through: online rumors are worthless, the child can get lost in the race for good players, and you have to be very careful that you are not rushed to make a decision, but make a good one when the offer is there.”

Sad goodbyes

All four parents came to the same internal decision when faced with the prospect of long distances and extended and difficult travel to keep up with their kids’ progress.

“It would have been nice to have Sarah play a little closer,” says Paul Pavan, “but we realized the decision that she had to make should not be based on whether or not we could squeeze into a car and drive to her matches easily. We made sure this was not part of her decision.”

“I’ll miss the matches and sitting on the bleachers week after week, talking with other parents, rooting for our team, and all of that,” observes Deb Keefe. “And I’ll miss my daughter, probably more than I now imagine. But in the end, you have to trust what you’ve done as parents, trust your child to make the best of a great situation, and let go as best you can.”

“Of course I miss Amber,” says Darlene McCray. “And initially I really wanted her to stay in Texas, so I could see her play and be with her more. But you always come to understand that what is best for your child is what you want most of all. I trust Mary Wise with my child, I trust God to help guide them both, and I trust Amber to work hard and make the most of the opportunities volleyball has opened for her. For all of that I’m thankful.”