

## **ECHELON SEASON RECAP**

*Barrett Schitka*

When I sat down at the beginning of this season, I knew that we had our work cut out for us to achieve, let alone surpass the results from last year. It was going to be hard to beat a Provincial Championship and a National silver medal. What we had done the year before was not going to be good enough; we had to take things to a new level; a higher level; a new Echelon.

We started this season with nine players from the previous year's team, and after three grueling tryouts, selected three more players to round out our roster. We also added two new coaches to our staff, making four including my brother and I. I knew at our first practice of the year that we had something special, these fifteen individuals with who I was going to spend the next ten months alongside were going to achieve something great.

The season began with a setting of expectations and objectives. Our team had grown accustomed to achieving at a high level, so it wasn't surprising when we set our team goal as winning each of the three championships we were going to compete in this year. Our team practiced diligently for the next two months before we hit our first competition in mid-November. This tournament, a 17U tournament (the next higher age division) took place at Humber College and was the first time we went into battle. Having spent the majority of the last two months training individual technique and skill execution I was pleasantly surprised to see how well the team performed under the stresses of competition. I knew we were on the right track.

For the remainder of 2010 the team continued to practice, competing in a few additional tournaments both 17U and 16U. Once training resumed after the holidays we had our first major challenge, the Can-Am USA Volleyball (USAV) Qualifier in Rochester, New York. In order for us to attend the USAV Boy's National Championships we were going to have to qualify at one of the qualifier tournaments throughout the continental United States. We had two such qualifiers in our competition schedule, the first in New York and the second a few weeks later in Chicago. Not knowing what to expect upon crossing the border, I prepared the athletes by focusing our expectations on performance and skill execution rather than tournament results. We knew we were going to have to finish in a medal position to win one of the qualifier bids. After a shaky first day, the boys went into the second day of competition and competed in seven grueling matches ousting some of the top teams from the Greater Empire and Great Lakes regions of the United States. Echelon ousted the renowned Sports Performance Volleyball Club in the semi-final securing a bid to the USAV championships in Minneapolis, Minnesota in July before falling to the host Pace Bootlegger. We had achieved our first major objective; get our USAV berth.

Upon our silver medal win in Rochester, the team had to turn around and prepare for competition much closer to home the very next weekend. Many people under-value the impact of a competition and training schedule on a team, but the boys still performed admirably in their Ontario Volleyball competition, having to adjust to both a new ball, new positions and a new rule set within the one week turnaround time. The team spent the remainder of the pre-championship season competing in the OVA tournament series and their second USAV qualifier in Chicago, IL. The pressure was off having already secured a berth, but the level of competition in Chicago was still high and the training opportunity that was presented was too good to pass up. The

team competed against some of the best teams in the Central and Midwest United States, ousting some strong teams such as High Performance St. Louis, Ultimate Chicago and made it to the final against Criollos Elite from Puerto Rico. The two foreign teams battled in an intense three set match before Puerto Rico emerged victorious. Two U.S. tournaments, and two silver medals later, Echelon put its US training on hold until after the Canadian Championships in May.

It is always hard to win a championship, yet it is harder yet to win a subsequent one. Despite being one of the teams favoured to win and playing in their hometown, Echelon's road through the Ontario Championships was anything but smooth. After an error filled first day Echelon advanced to the second day which would determine their seeding going into the final day of Tier 1 competition on Sunday. As a coach, how do you evaluate when you are successful? How do you know when you have done your job and prepared your team well? Some people might argue that as a coach you have done your job when your team performs well. However, the mark of a truly prepared team is not what they achieve while under the tutelage of the coach, but rather what they achieve when that coach is gone. Being in the final year of my engineering degree at the University of Waterloo, the evening matches of the second day of competition conflicted with one of my engineering final exams. Faced with little option but to write my final exam, I left my team under the capable hands of my three assistant coaches. Throughout the entire exam I stressed as to how the team was doing, but I needn't have worried as the boys remained true to their training and trusted in their coaches to win all three matches that day and advance to the final day of competition seeded third overall. Competition Sunday saw the Preds play some of their best volleyball of the season. Repeat dreams were not to be as the Preds lost their semi-final match to the eventual champions Pakmen before finishing fourth overall.

I wasn't sure what the atmosphere was going to be like in practice that next week, but was pleasantly surprised to meet the athletes at their next practice and see them with a renewed sense of purpose and discipline. We spent the next three weeks improving our defense and blocking, two areas that had shown some deficiencies at Provincials. After two weeks of intense training we headed off to the Canadian East National Championships in Sherbrooke, QC. This renewed purpose drove the team to play some of their best volleyball all year and we advanced once again to the National final for the second year in a row. Echelon got out to a quick head start and maintained the lead and momentum all the way through the first set. At the brink of defeat, Pakmen rallied to take the second set and take the National final to a deciding set. Both teams battled fiercely but Pakmen's size proved to be too much and Echelon emerged with their second National silver medal.

The volleyball season in Ontario is already quite long, lasting from September to the middle of May and I knew that it was going to be tough to keep the focus of the team for another two months. Remembering the law of diminishing returns, I opted to give the team a few weeks off before resuming training again in June. This allowed the athletes to rest, rejuvenate and return ready to train and compete for their final tournament of the year. Once again adjusting to the US rules and ball, Echelon worked to adapt a new system and an optimized offence over the month of training. Leaving shortly after school finished, Echelon travelled to the City of Lakes. In Minneapolis the Preds competed against the top 72 teams in the United States over four days. On July 5<sup>th</sup>, the competition concluded with the Preds finishing in the Top 10 and having ousted teams such as Northern California, Santa Monica, Wisconsin,

Pacific Palisades, etc.

As I look back on this season, I am so grateful to have spent the year with these twelve amazing young men and my three amazing coaches. Many people do not realize what it takes to compete at the highest levels of competitive sport, yet these fifteen individuals have dedicated their minds, bodies and souls to the pursuit of something higher and I cannot be more proud. Perfection is something that cannot be achieved, yet it is still worth pursuing. 11 months, 10 tournaments, 220 practices and 450 towels later Echelon ends their season with a second National silver medal and a top 10 ranking in the United States. A job well done gentlemen!

Team Roster

1 – Braden Cok

2 – Dan Howell

3 – Zach Newman (Captain)

4 – Juan Paolo Maranan

7 – Grant Lynch

10 – Greg Terlecki

11 – Seth Siegfried

12 – Aidan Simone

13 – Adam Anagnostopoulos (Captain and National All-Star)

14 – Mikhail Kazhamiaka

15 – Jalen Noronha (National All-Star)

18 – Jack Cao

Head Coach – Barrett Schitka

Assistant Coach – Brandon Schitka

Assistant Coach – David Horne

Assistant Coach – Brieanne Gallant