

# WSC FOOTBALL, VOLLEYBALL TEAMS NOTCH HISTORIC SEASON





# ‘Power of 12’ carries Wildcats through special season

By MICHAEL CARNES  
For The Herald

There are more than 250,000 words in the English language, but only one Wayne State volleyball coach Scott Kneifl really needed to describe the 2022 Wildcat volleyball squad: Special.

Indeed, 2022 was a special season for the Wildcat volleyballers, who enjoyed a number of firsts in a season that saw them go 30-3 and reach the semifinals of the NCAA Div. II Central Region volleyball tournament, which was hosted — also for the first time — in Rice Auditorium.

“It was just a great group of kids that worked hard for a lot of goals,” Kneifl said of his 19th Wildcat team. “Ultimately, our goal was to make it to the NCAA since it had been a few years for us to make it. But to have the schedule that we had and go 30-3 overall and 19-1 in conference, with the one loss going 15-12 in the fifth, to come that close to running the table in a Northern Sun Conference that was that tough was special.”

The beginning of the year held the promise of a lot of potential in a conference that, as always, is unquestionably the toughest in the conference. By the end of the regular season, half of the teams in the American Volleyball Coaches Association Top 10 Coaches Poll were NSIC squads, and it was Wayne State who led the bunch for the first time in school history.

Kneifl and assistant coaches Kim DePew and Katie Morris made the decision heading into the season to play with a 12-woman roster. While most college teams field squads of 15-18 players, Kneifl said that 12 was a

number they felt comfortable working with.

“Covid had a little to do with that, along with some transfers,” he said. “We had some opportunities to take people last spring, and during the summer we decided as a coaching staff not to. If we’re going to take someone, it has to be the right someone and we felt like we didn’t need more than we had.”

The decision could have backfired, but Kneifl said the volleyball gods were smiling on the Wildcats this year as they only had one varsity player lose any time due to an injury.”

“We dodged some injury bugs and had players fight through stuff as the season went on,” he said, noting that junior outside hitter Kelsie Cada’s absence for a week due to a knee injury was the only significant injury the team experienced. “We did have some nicks and bruises, and when you only have 12 players there aren’t as many options. When Kelsie got dinged up, Brooke (Peltz) stepped up and played outside hitter for the first time, and it’s one of those things where these players love playing together, so it doesn’t matter what position they’re playing.”

Wayne State began the year ranked 17th in the AVCA preseason coaches poll and were picked to finish behind NSIC powerhouses Concordia-St. Paul and 2021 conference champion St. Cloud State at the start of the season, but quickly escalated up the charts as they came out on fire to start the season.

After sweeping their first four matches at a tournament in New York, Wayne State was put to the test at the Colorado Premier Challenge and passed it with glorious flying

colors.

Wins over then-No. 5 West Florida, eventual national champion West Texas A&M and eventual runner-up Concordia-St. Paul — sweeping their conference rivals in the process — shot the Wildcats up into the top five, an area they would remain at through the rest of the season.

Led by all-tournament selections Maggie Brahmer (the tournament MVP), Taya Beller, Rachel Walker and Kelsie Cada, Wayne State’s 25-17, 25-23, 25-23 over the Golden Bears vaulted Wayne State all the way up to No. 5. Home-opening sweeps of the Golden Bears and Minnesota State continued their march up the poll, and after wins at Upper Iowa and Winona State, the Wildcats reached the top of the national poll, a position they would hold for more than a month as part of a team-record 24-0 start that was halted at Southwest Minnesota State on Oct. 22.

Wayne State would go on to finish the season with their first-ever outright NSIC title, battling back from a 2-1 deficit on the road to beat Concordia-St. Paul for the third time this season, 25-19, 16-25, 21-25, 25-18, 15-8. They took a 29-1 record and the No. 1 seed into the conference tournament that following weekend, but were upset by Augustana.

That weekend, the Wildcats waited to hear the good news that they were going to be host of the Central Regional, unquestionably the toughest of the eight regions in Div. II, for the first time in school history.

“To host a regional is a rare thing, and this team accomplished a lot and deserved that honor,” Kneifl said.

Although Wayne State had suffered a first-round upset in the NSIC tournament, their strength of schedule was easily the toughest of teams that were in the mix to host the eight-team tournament. In fact, Wayne State’s strength of schedule was the second toughest in all of Div. II, so even a first-round loss to the eighth seed wasn’t going to hurt their chances of playing on their home court.

Wayne State notched their 30th win of the season in the opening round with a straight-set win over Great American Conference champion Harding (Ark.), reaching the 30-win plateau for only the fifth time in team history. The team’s hopes of advancing further were stopped, however, as St. Cloud State defeated the Wildcats in a four-set thriller, winning 30-28, 25-16, 22-25, 25-22.

The loss was the final match for two Wayne State seniors, including libero Jessie Brandl and outside hitter Elly Larson, who

didn’t see much playing time this year due to injury.

“Elly was a great leader for us even though she didn’t get to see the court because of injury, and Jessie really had a breakout year and it will be tough replacing her at that position,” Kneifl said.

The Wildcats received numerous conference and national awards at season’s end. Kneifl was named Northern Sun Conference Coach of the Year for the third time. Middle hitter Taya Beller was named the conference’s Player of the Year and led a group of five Wildcats on the All-Conference team. She was joined on the first team by middle hitter Maggie Brahmer, outside hitter Kelsie Cada and setter Rachel Walker, and libero Jessie Brandl was named to the Second Team.

Additionally, Beller, Brahmer and Cada were named to the All-Central Region team, with Walker receiving honorable mention and Kneifl named Coach of the Year. Beller and Brahmer were AVCA First Team All-Americans and Cada and Walker received honorable mention. Beller and Brahmer were both named by the Div. II sports information directors to the D2CCA First Team All-American list as well.

The Wildcats were also outstanding in the classroom, carrying a team grade-point average of 3.82 and having Walker and Beller listed as Academic All-Americans.

In the end, the Wildcats came up short in their quest to win a national title, and going 4-0 against the two teams who wound up playing for the title still stings a little. But the Wildcats’ coach said he wouldn’t trade this year’s team for any other.

“It’s one of the most tight-knit groups we’ve ever had here,” he said. “Nobody cared about who got the credit or the awards. We have a lot of big-time awards on this team and all of us would trade those in to keep playing. They loved playing together and it was a unique season seeing those kids come together and fight for those little things.”

Would he limit his roster to an even dozen in the future? With two seniors graduating and six recruits already on board for next year, Kneifl said it’s probably unlikely, but there has to be a chemistry there for him to bring new people on board.

“It has to be the right fit,” he said. “We feel like we have a lot of great players on the team already and we do have some really good incoming freshmen in our recruiting class who will help us, but these ‘Cats have a great chemistry and we want to keep it that way.”

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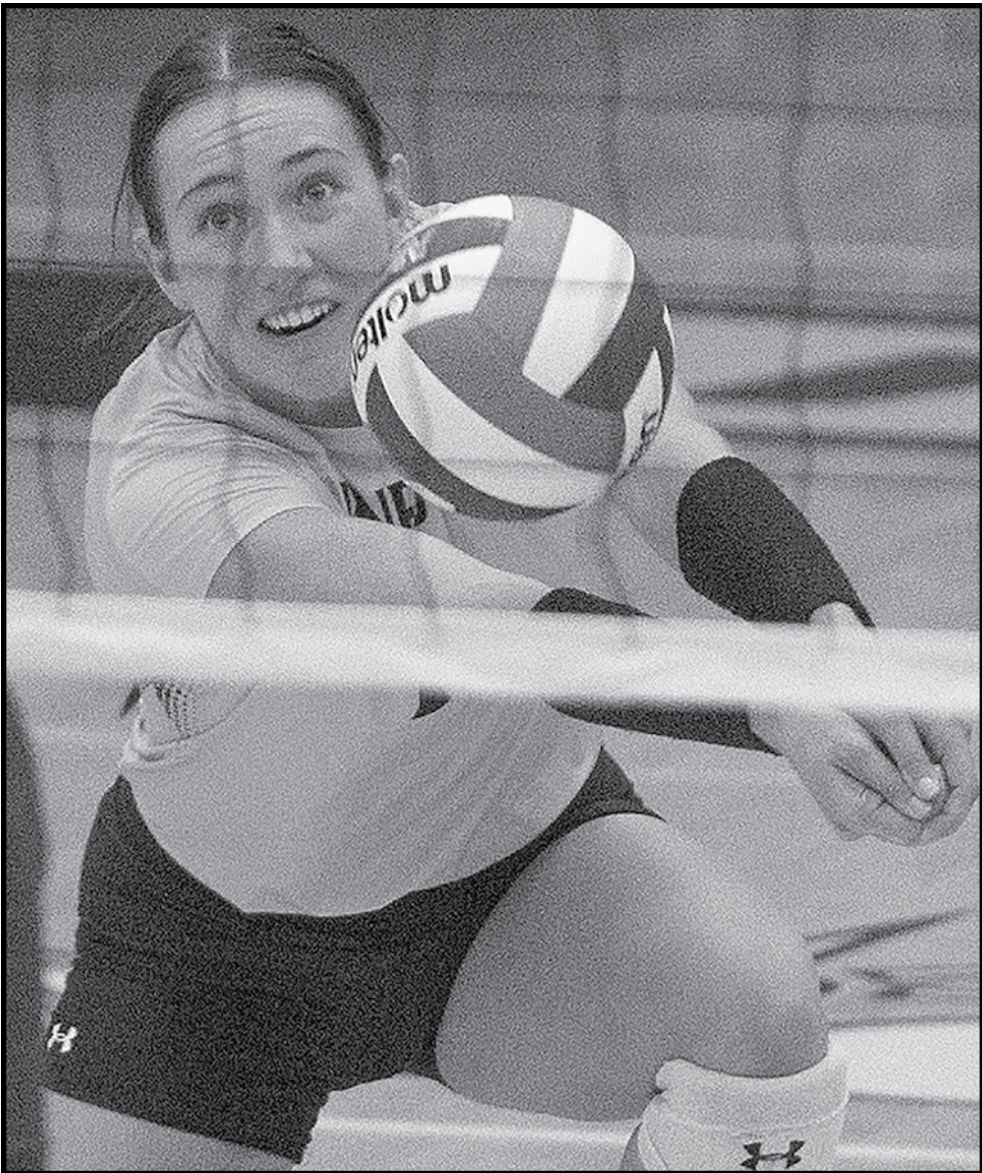
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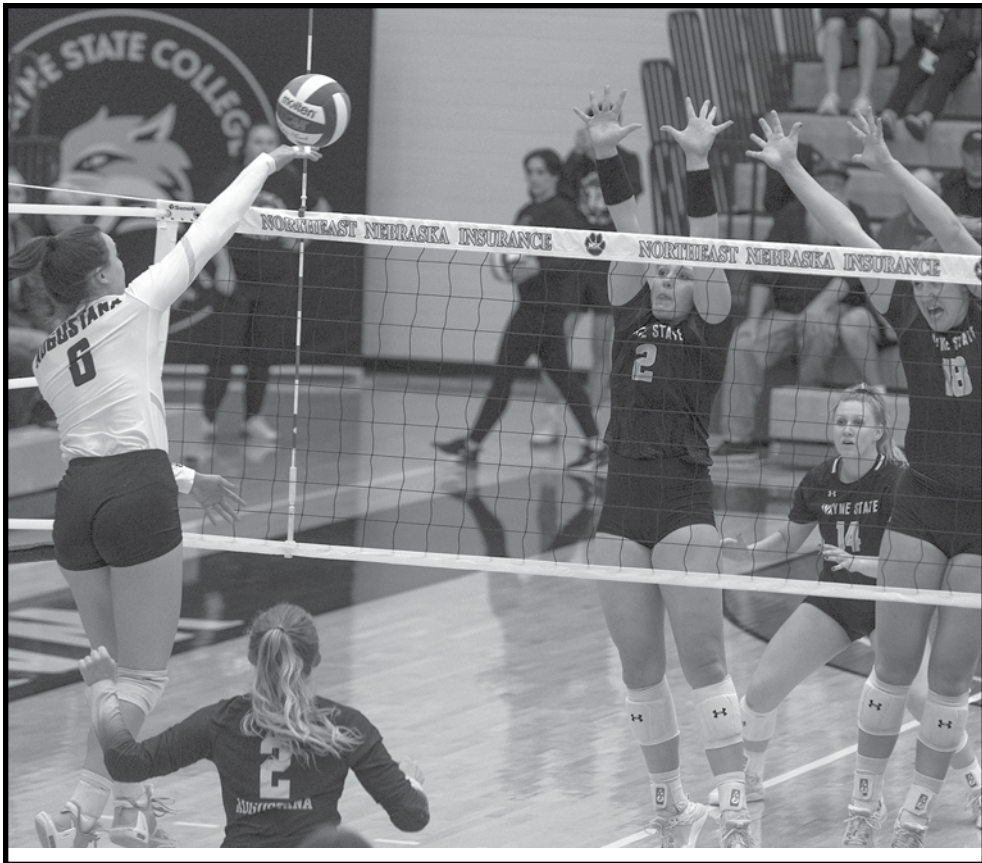
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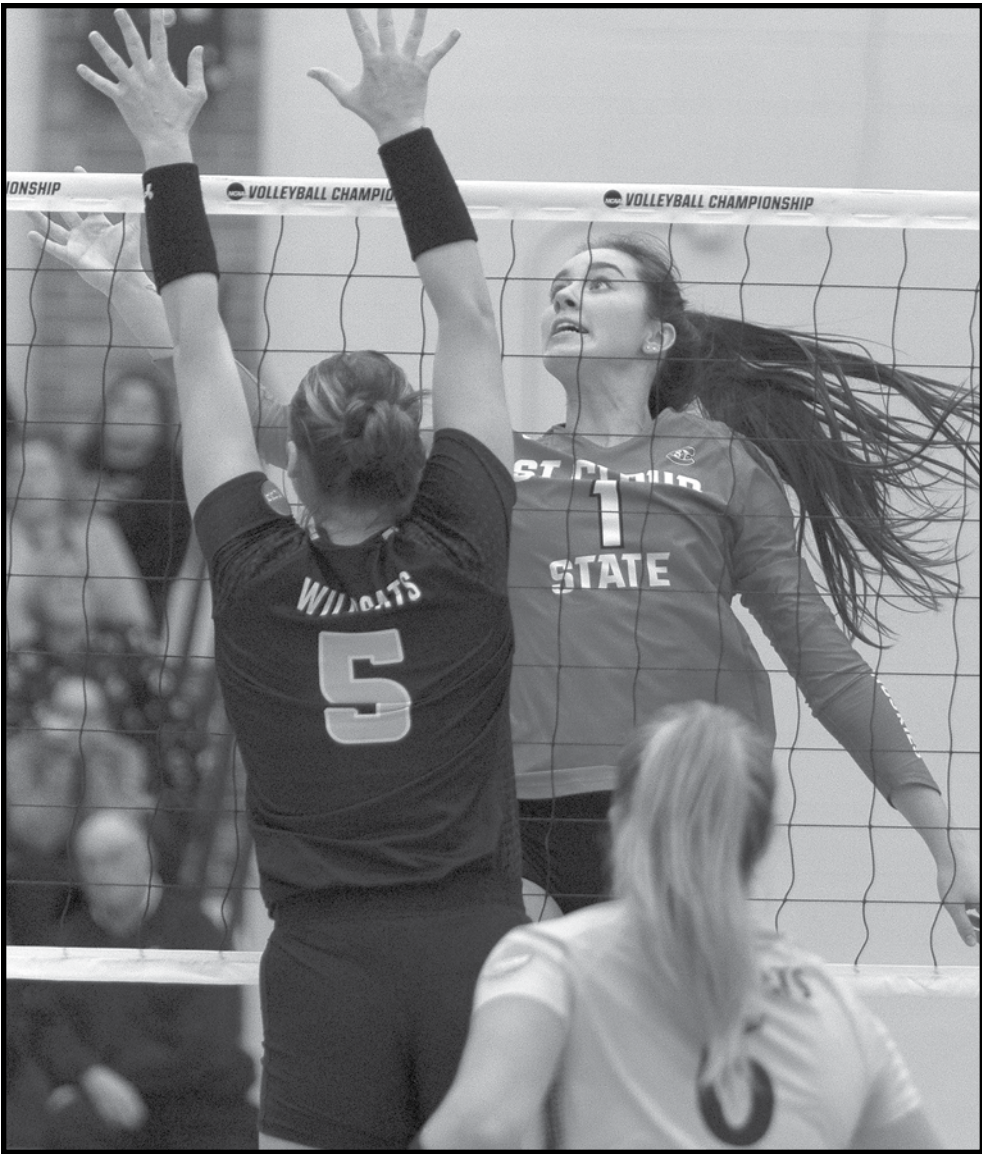
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# WSC FOOTBALL, VOLLEYBALL TEAMS NOTCH HISTORIC SEASON





# Wildcats make believers with first playoff run since 2009

By MICHAEL CARNES  
For The Herald

As the days drew nearer to the start of the 2022 college football season, Wayne State coach Logan Masters felt his team COULD be good.

Just HOW good, though, was the question.

Coming off its first winning season in four years and starting with its third coach in as many seasons, the Wildcats answered those questions with an incredible 9-2 season that saw the Wildcats reach the Div. II playoffs for just the second time in school history and finish for the first time as Northern Sun Conference champions.

Masters said that if you had said back in the days before the season-opening 33-28 win at University of Mary that this is how the team would finish, he's not sure he would have believed you.

"I knew we had a chance to be pretty good," he said. "We had a lot of guys who had played before and a good chunk of seniors who had been through it all a few times, and we were trying to get better every day on the little things and handling adversity. By halfway through the season, I thought we had a chance, but if you had said that before the season (started), I don't know if I would have bought it."

The Wildcat offense fired up early in the season as Wayne State got off to a 4-0 start, winning a defensive home opener against Northern State (13-6) before posting blow-out wins at Minot State (49-10) and at home against Concordia-St. Paul (48-21). And it appeared the Wildcats were on their way to

a fifth straight win the following week until Winona State came back in the second half and slapped Wayne State back into reality with a 38-14 win.

The game was tied at 14-14 going into the fourth quarter, but missed opportunities by the Wildcats were turned into Winona State points, and it served as a wake-up call for the team, Masters said.

"That might have been the best thing to happen to us," he said of the fourth-quarter meltdown. "Two weeks before, we got up big at the half and then just rolled over, and with a team like Winona State and all the tradition that they have, they're going to fight you to the end. That was the first time we got punched in the mouth and really woke us up and made the kids realize you have to play all four quarters."

With perennial Div. II power Minnesota State coming to town the next week and having never lost to the Wildcats in Wayne before, the following week looked, on paper, to be a tall task — one that the Wildcats handled brilliantly.

Playing in front of a crowd of more than 2,100 at Bob Cunningham Field in Memorial Stadium, the Wildcats played one of their best home games in some time, building a 27-13 halftime lead against the Mavericks and hanging on for a 41-33 win, the first ever against Minnesota State at home and the second in as many years against the NSIC powerhouse.

"Winning last year for the first time in school history was great, and this one was awesome," Masters said. "It was our homecoming with one of the best crowds I'd seen

at a Wayne State game since we played Kearney back in 2009. We were so locked in and didn't get caught up in the moment, where the week before we were letting the little things bother us like a missed block or a missed assignment. Against Mankato, it was a laser-like focus on everything we did and we didn't let the outside noise bother us."

The excitement of that win was short-lived, however, as the Wildcats went to Augustana the following week and saw the Vikings scored in the final minute to pull out a 31-27 win.

Looking back, Masters said it was a game Wayne State very easily could have won, were it not for some self-inflicted miscues that the Vikings were able to take advantage of.

"We didn't play very well in that game, and yet we had a chance to win it," he said. "We had turnovers the first two series, and then we'd get in the red zone and have to settle for field goals. Our defense played well the whole game and were eventually able to come back and take the lead, but we left too much time on the clock and they got one big play that helped set up the winning touchdown. It was a game against two good teams, but you can't turn the ball over against a good team."

That loss could have sent the Wildcats over the edge and ended any hopes of playing in the postseason. Instead, the team was able to buckle down and win their final four games, capped by a hard-fought 10-7 win over MSU Moorhead that put Wayne State in a three-way tie with Minnesota State and Bemidji State with 9-2 records and a share of the conference title.

"After that (Augustana) game, you could tell how much we hurt after the game and I told the guys we were at a fork in the road, and it we take the right road that goal is still there for us," Masters said. "From there on out, we didn't lose again and got that conference title and into the playoffs."

After finishing off the hard-fought win over Moorhead on a frozen Saturday afternoon in Memorial Staidum, the players, coaches and families all celebrated, knowing that they had probably reached a goal and were headed into the postseason for the first time in 13 years.

"It was really cool to see all the celebrations on the field and it's pretty special since it's my alma mater and in one of the best Div. II conferences in the country," Masters said. "The staff really bought in and the guys we recruited believed our vision and helped us reach it. It took everyone to get

to that point and it was really super cool."

The team gathered in Garner Hall that Sunday afternoon after the Moorhead win to learn their fate, and they were the No. 7 seed in the seven-team Super Region Four bracket, which earned them a rematch with Minnesota State that following Saturday in frigid, below-zero Mankato, Minn.

The Wildcats played the Mavericks tough during the first half and were tied 3-3 at intermission, but a safety ignited a key third-quarter rally for the hosts and they posted a 26-9 win to end the Wildcats' amazing 9-3 season.

"You're going to play someone good no matter who you play, so it didn't matter to us who we were playing," Masters said. "We controlled the first half, but when we got to the red zone we had to settle for three instead of getting seven. We had one bad play in the second half that led to a safety and then we had to kick into that brutal wind, and that kind of turned the tide an we weren't able to overcome it."

Nine Wildcats were honored by the Northern Sun Conference at the end of the season, including Masters, who was named Coach of the Year. Assistant coach Collin Prosser was named the NSIC Assistant Coach of the Year. Five Wildcats earned First Team honors, including quarterback Nick Bohn, wide receiver (and Wayne native) Mason Lee, placekicker Alex Powders, defensive back J'Von Frane and linebacker Alex Kowalczyk. Second Team honors went to offensive lineman Jett Jansen, wide receiver Jadon Johnson, defensive lineman Jaxon Johnson and linebacker Jaylan Scott.

Two Wildcats were named to the Super Region 4 Team, with Kowalczyk earning a First Team nomination and Powders tabbed on the Second Team.

It was a year to remember for the Wildcat football team, and one that they can certainly build on in their hopes of continuing their ascension up the Div. II and Northern Sun Conference football ladders.

"The exciting part is that we have a lot of really good players coming back, and now we have to prove that this year wasn't a fluke and that we aren't a one-hit wonder," Masters said. "It starts after the holidays when we get back to lifting. Our young guys are now leaders and they know what it takes to bring us along. There was a lot of hurt on our faces after the loss at Mankato, and that should be the internal motivation we need in the offseason. Hopefully, next year, we can get a playoff game at home here in Wayne and can win and move on."

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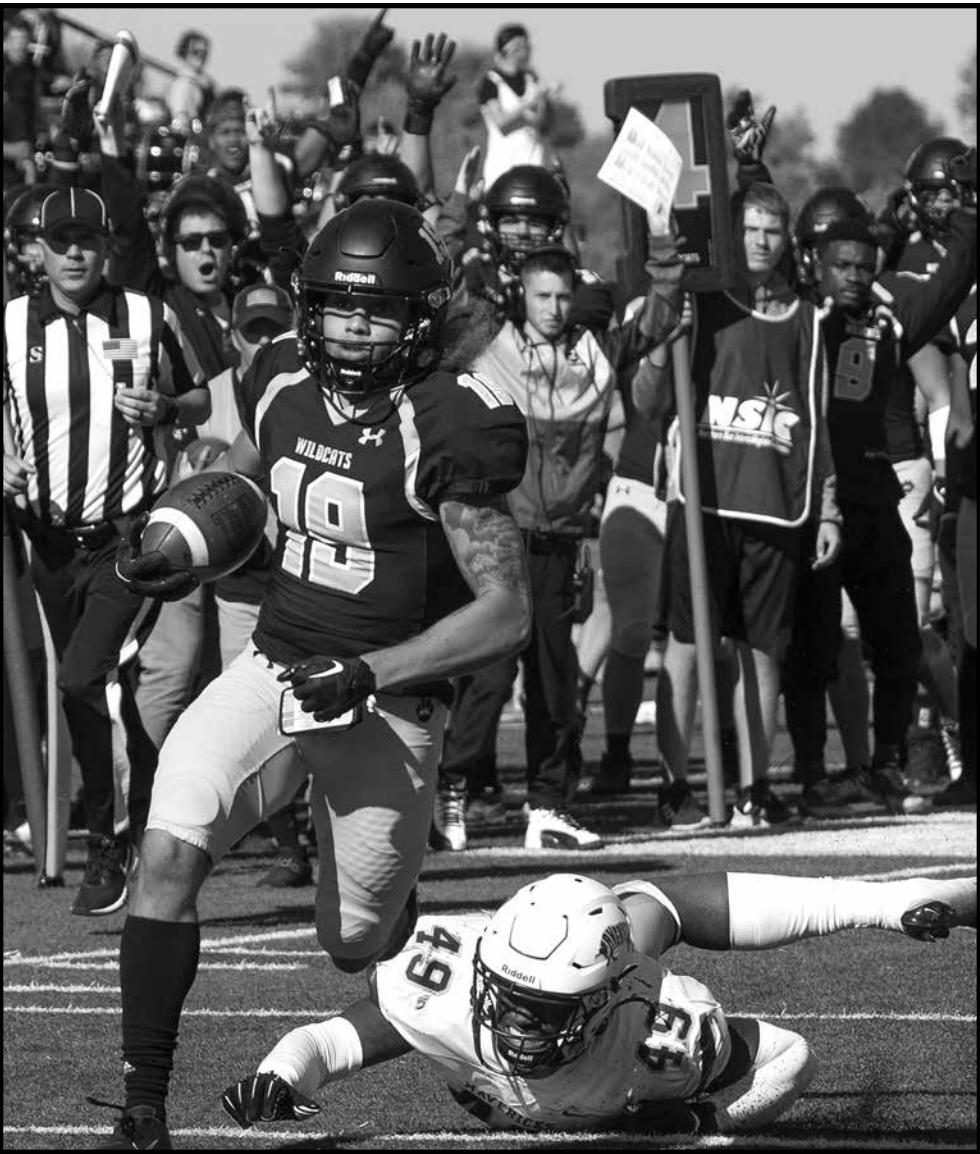
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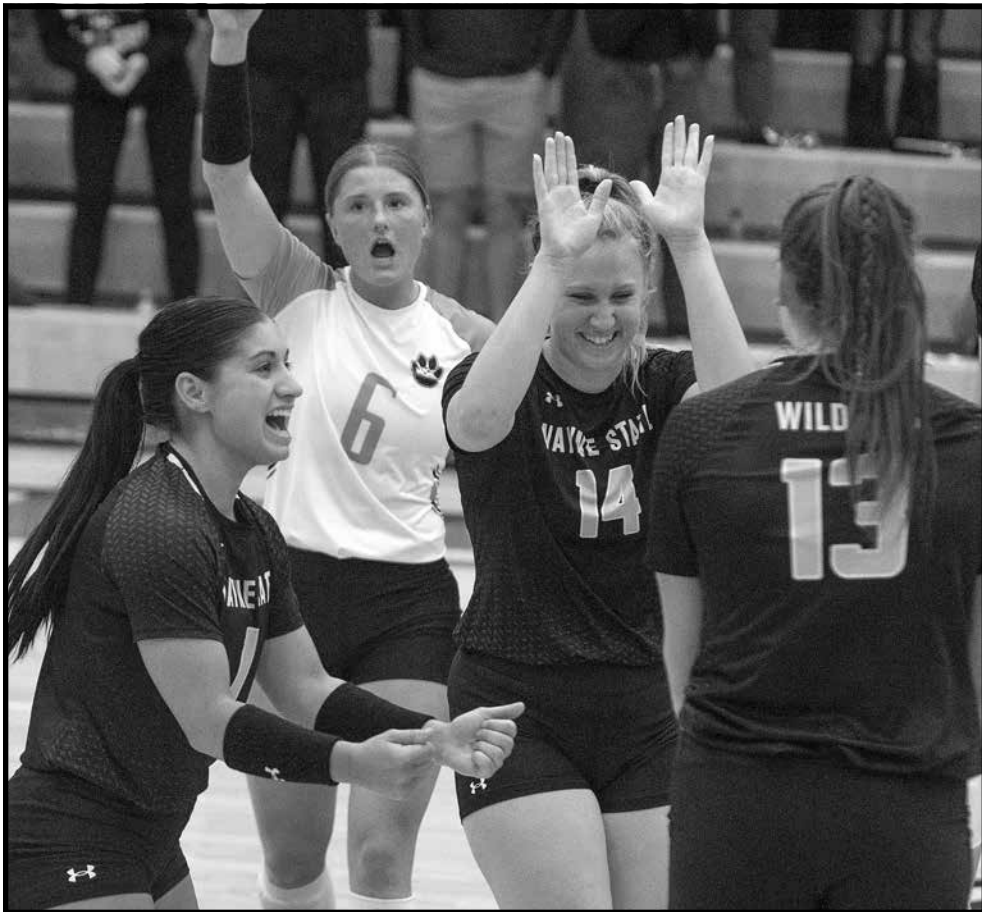
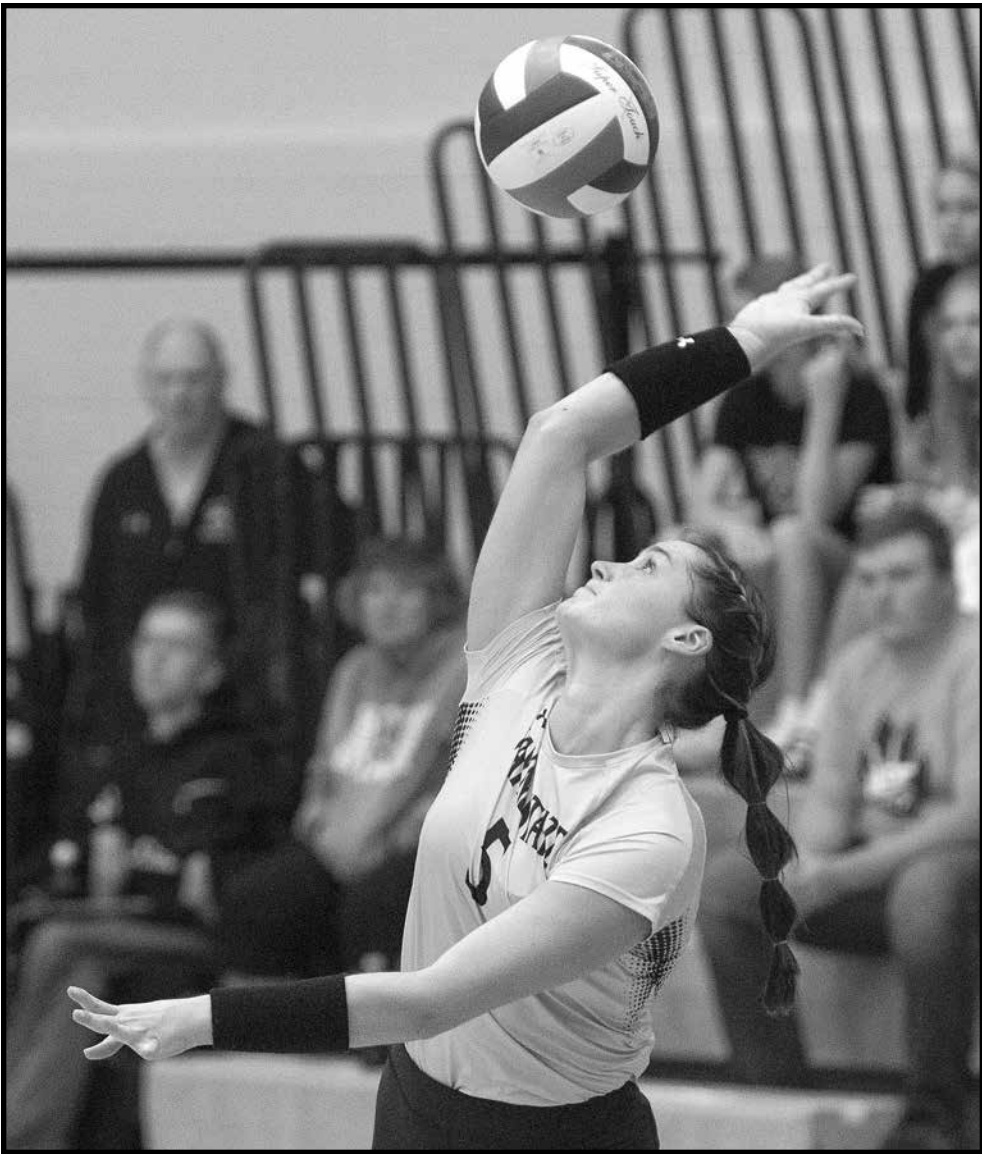
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