

REACHING



Status



A historical season ends all too soon

By **MICHAEL CARNES**

To say the 2023 Wayne State Wildcat volleyball season was a magical one would be a bit of an understatement.

It's hard to find the words to describe a season that included playing in front of the world's largest audience for a women's sporting event, holding down the No. 1 spot in the nation for two months, going unde-

feated in the toughest conference in the country, having four players selected to All-American honors and a coach selected as the national Coach of the Year.

Sadly, it ended all too soon — but what a historical ride it was.

The season started at the end of August in, of all places, a football stadium.

Volleyball Day in Nebraska was

an idea cooked up by a number of people, led by Nebraska volleyball coach John Cook, who wanted to give the sport the kind of platform it deserved to have in a state that has built quite a reputation in the sport over the last couple of decades.

Scott Kneifl, who is good friends with Cook, needed no time accepting an invitation to be part of the big day, which included an exhibition game between the Wildcats and in-state Div. II rival Nebraska-Kearney, along with a Div. I matchup between the Huskers and Nebraska-Omaha.

The buildup for the game was big here at home as Wildcat fans looked to make an impression inside Memorial Stadium and around Lincoln to cheer on their team. A pregame tailgate party and pep rally at a nearby Lincoln hotel left quite an impression on the girls as they made their way through the crowd to the team bus that would take them about 4-5 blocks to the stadium for the big game.

"It was something that none of us will ever forget," Kneifl said. "All that black and gold in Memorial Stadium and seeing that many people at our hotel during pregame, there were so many former players and alumni and friends of the program, so it was great to see that kind of turnout."

The event was everything it was promoted as and more, with notable volleyball figures like sand volleyball legend Kerri Walsh Jennings among those in attendance. The Wildcats swept Nebraska-Kearney in straight sets, which lit the fuse on what became a historical season for the team.

Having that opportunity to play in that environment served to knock the preseason cobwebs off in time for the team to cruise to a tournament title in California and reach the finals of the always-challenging Colorado Premier Tournament in Denver, where the Wildcats lost to conference rival Concordia-St. Paul in a five-set thriller.

"Playing at Memorial Stadium definitely helped," Kneifl said. "Even losing that match to Concordia in five sets where we didn't play our best, we turned around four days later and swept them here at home."

That started a winning streak that reached 21 games, moving the Wildcats up to the top of the Div. II polls, a spot they held for nine consecutive weeks before a semifinal loss to St. Cloud State in the Northern Sun Conference tournament at Rice Auditorium.

Running the table in conference play is tough enough, but doing it in what is unquestionably the toughest

conference in the country was quite impressive.

"It's pretty much unheard of," Kneifl said, adding that the last team to do it was Minnesota Duluth almost 10 years ago. "It was really a testament to our girls in how they showed up every day at practice and continued to get better as the season went on. They were a pleasure to coach."

Even after that loss to St. Cloud State in the conference semis — which ended the Wildcats' hopes of hosting the Central Regional tournament for a second straight year — the Wildcats bounced back and won the regional championship in the same Gangelhoff Center they won it back in 2015 in St. Paul, Minn.

Wayne State entered the Elite Eight with a number of impressive postseason honors, including Kneifl being selected Div. II Coach of the Year. Juniors Maggie Brahmer and Taya Beller were named first-team All-Americans, senior Kelsie Cada was a second-team honoree and senior setter Rachel Walker earned honorable mention honors. Senior Jordan McCormick also was also honored as the Elite 90 Award winner for Div. II volleyball academic efforts.

Wayne State lost a heartbreaking five-set match to eventual champion Cal State-Los Angeles in the quarterfinals in Moon Township, Pa., a loss that seemed to sting even a few weeks after the tournament as the Eagles went on to claim the national title in dominating fashion.

"We were three points away from winning that match, and nobody tested them the next two matches, so that loss might even hurt a little more," Kneifl said. "The played left it all out on the floor, though. I don't think we played our best match, but our effort was maxed out and that was our goal the entire season. Through the course of the entire year we did that, and I couldn't be more proud of our team and what we were able to accomplish."

Losing three talented seniors in Cada, Walker and McCormick will be a challenge to replace, but with two returning All-Americans back in Beller and Brahmer and emerging talent like freshman Channatee Robles coming back, Kneifl said the future is still very bright for the Wildcat program.

"We're working hard already with recruiting and I feel we have a nice recruiting class coming and have some players who are working real hard," he said. "We could also find some help in the transfer portal to make our weaknesses stronger, so we're already looking forward to next year . . . and having two first-team All-Americans back is also good, so I can't think of a better way to start."

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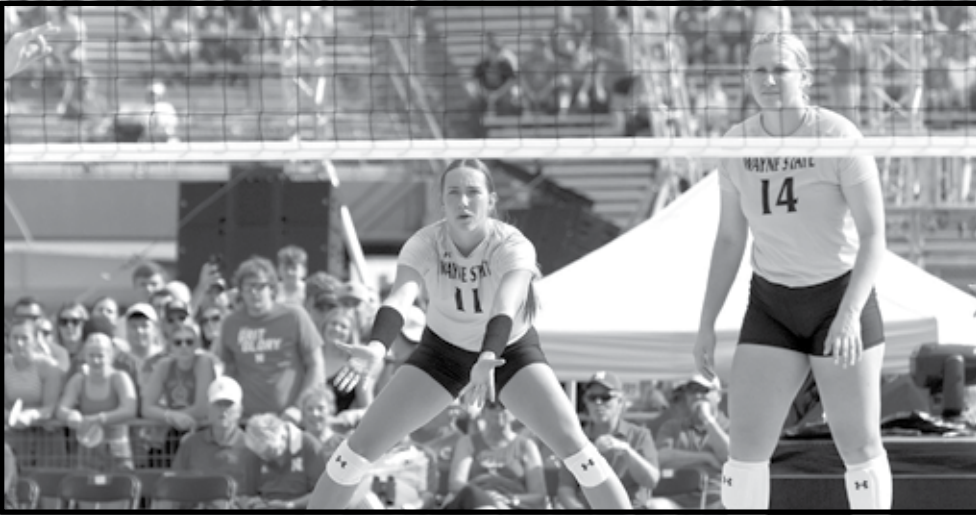
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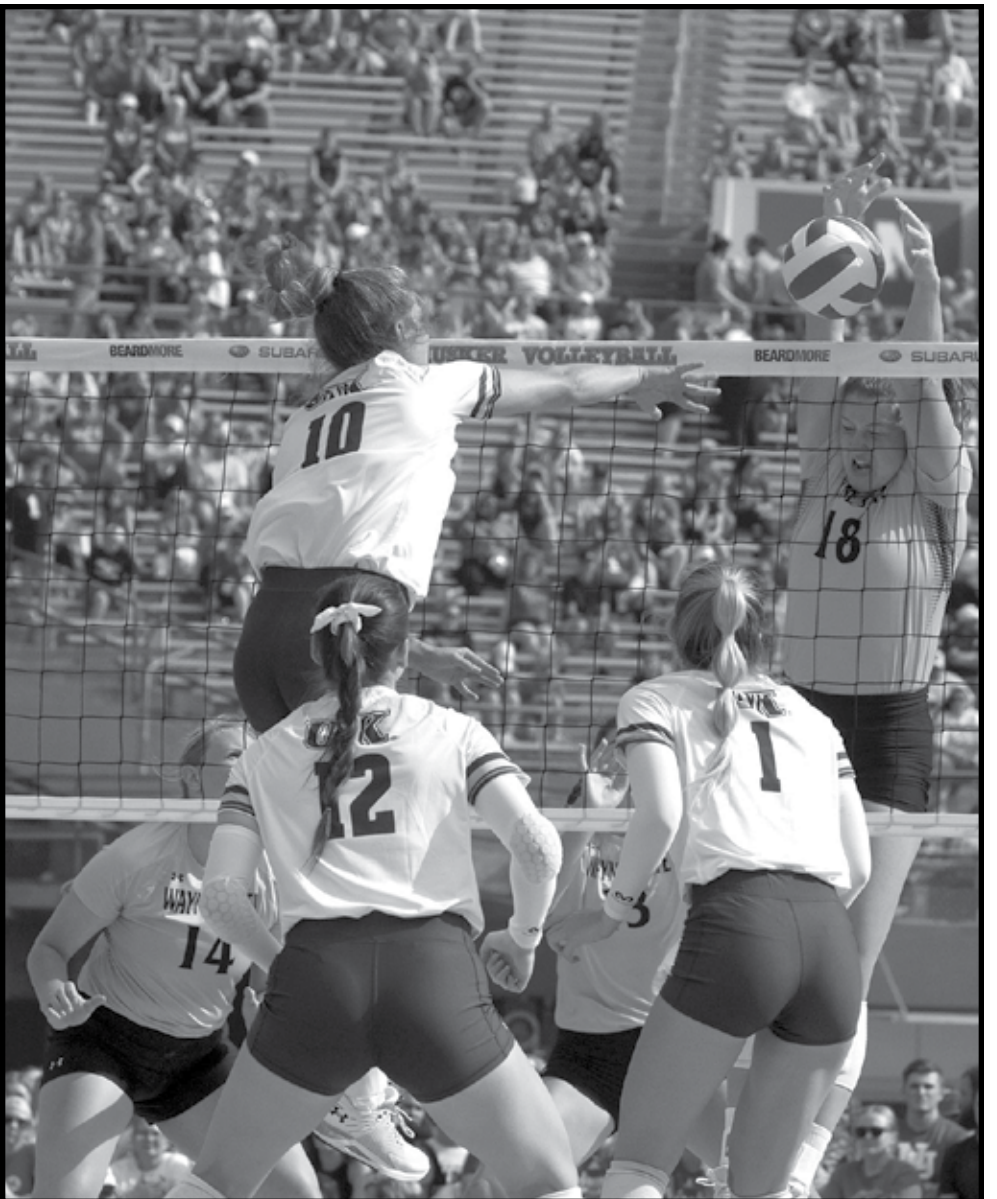

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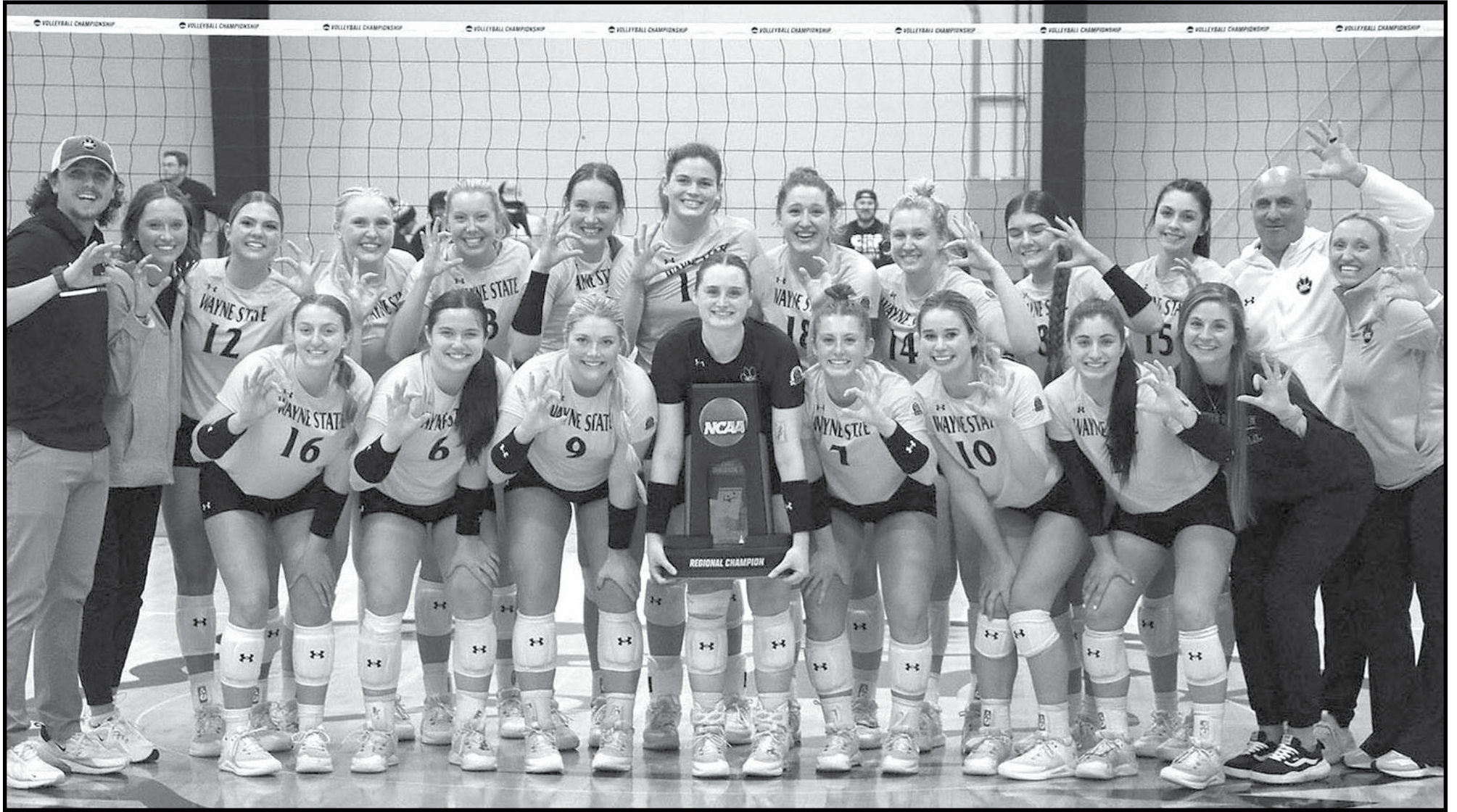


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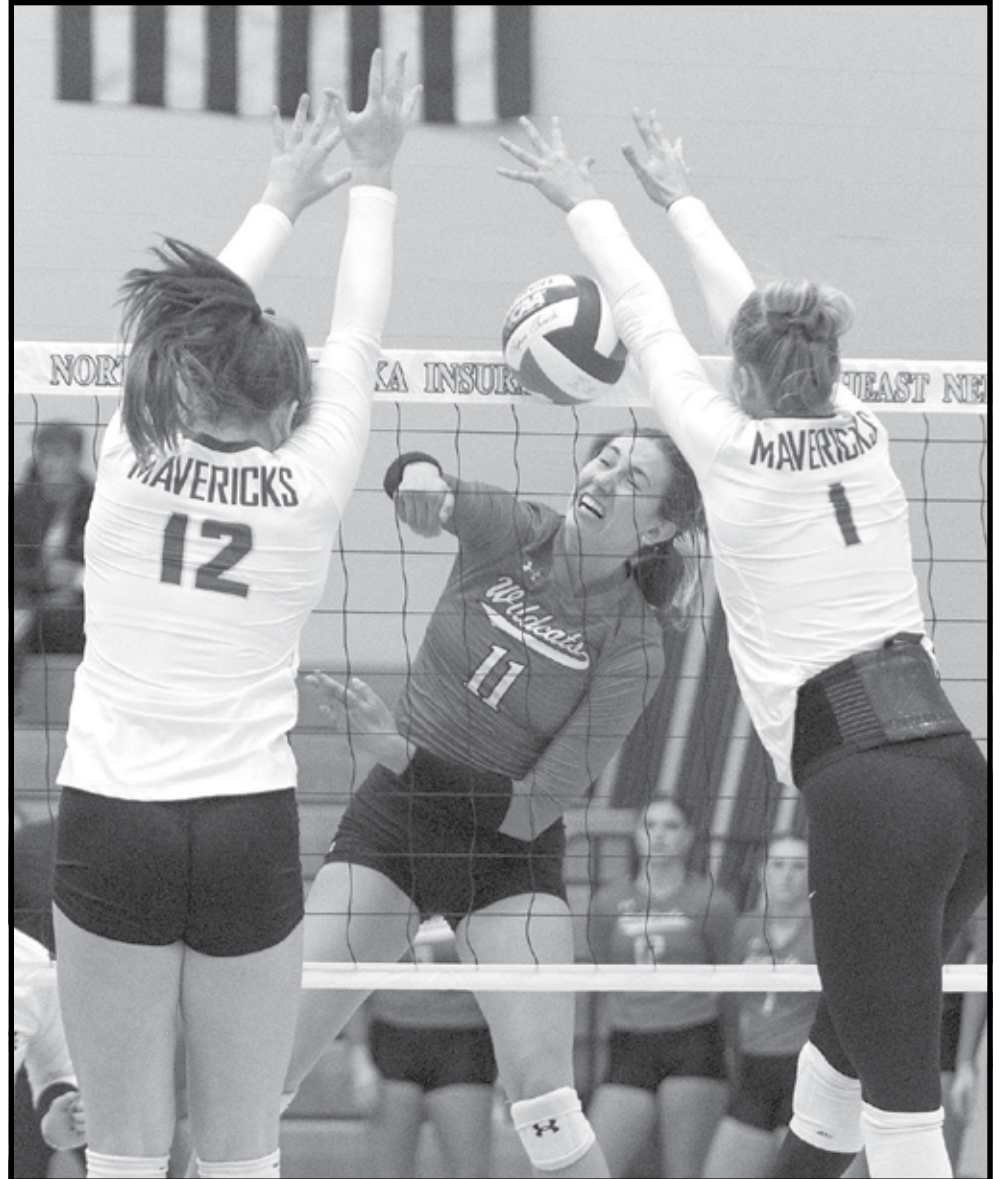


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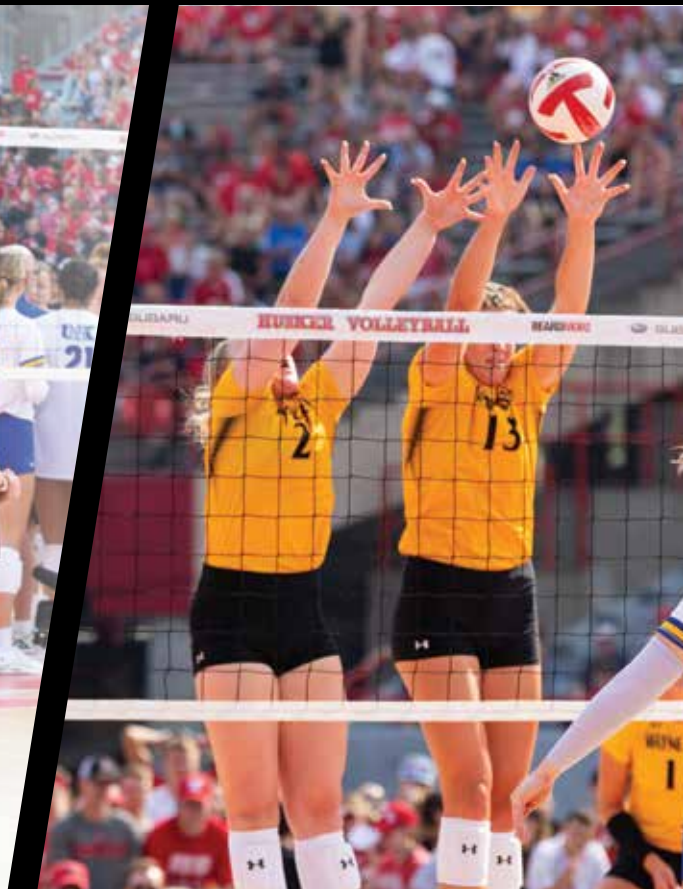
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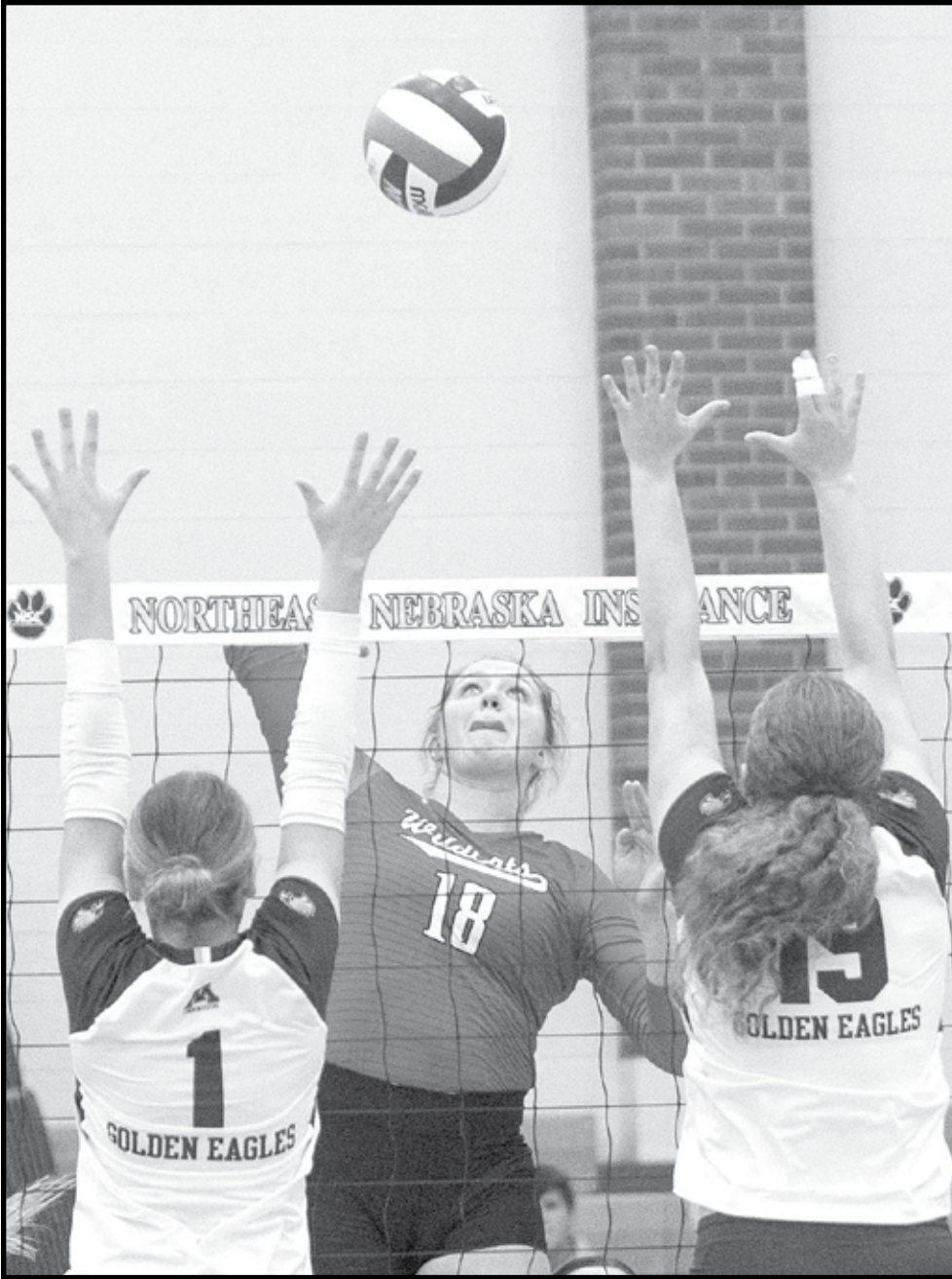
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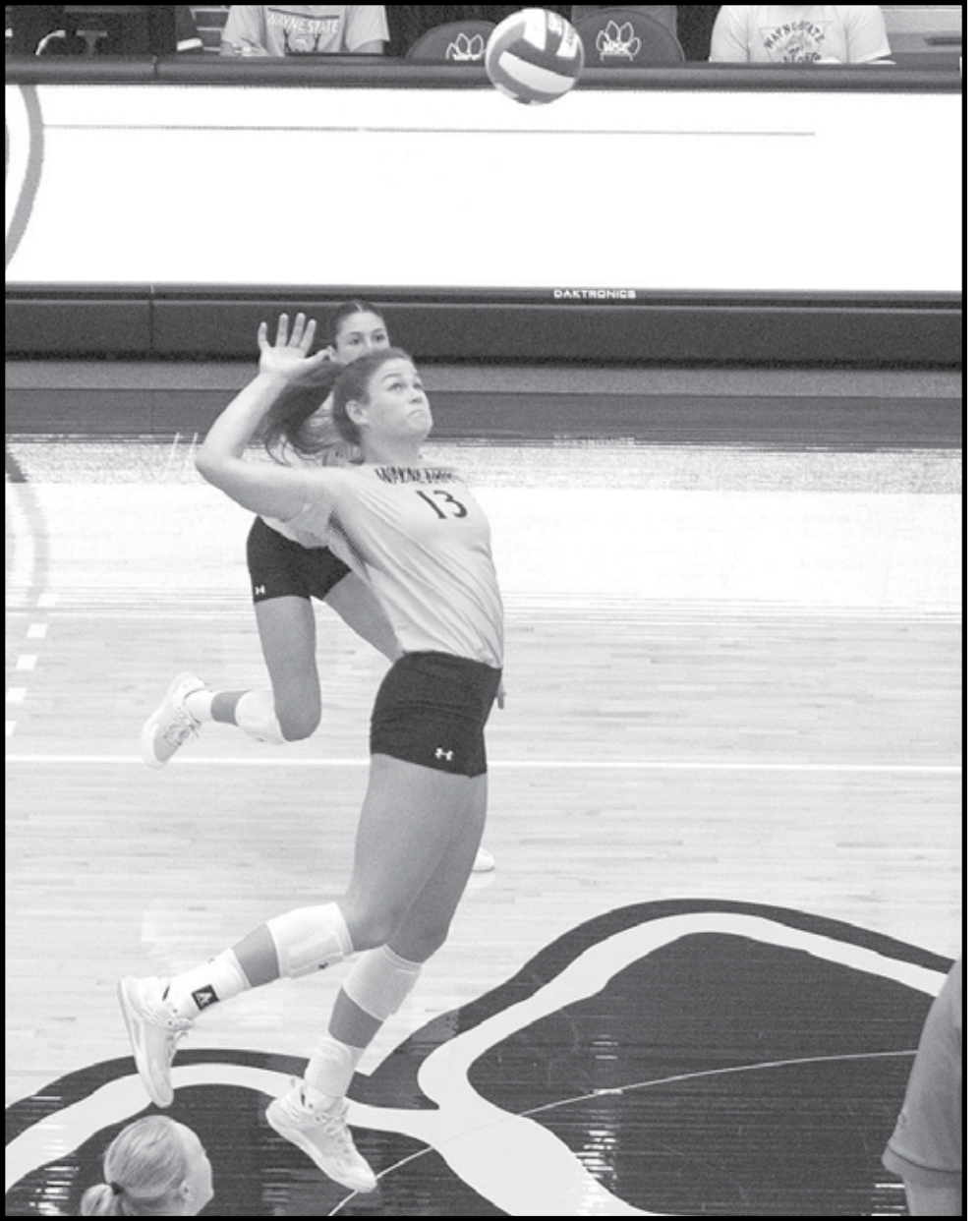
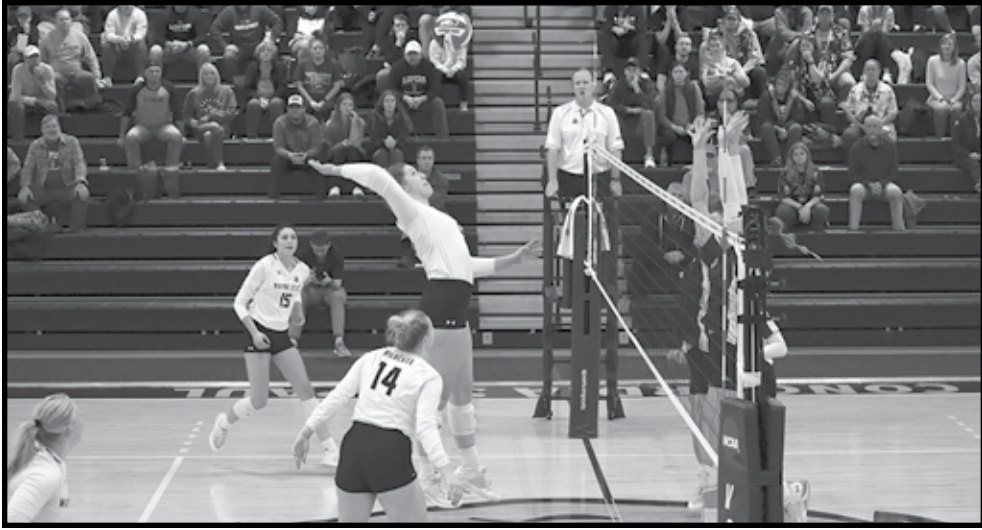


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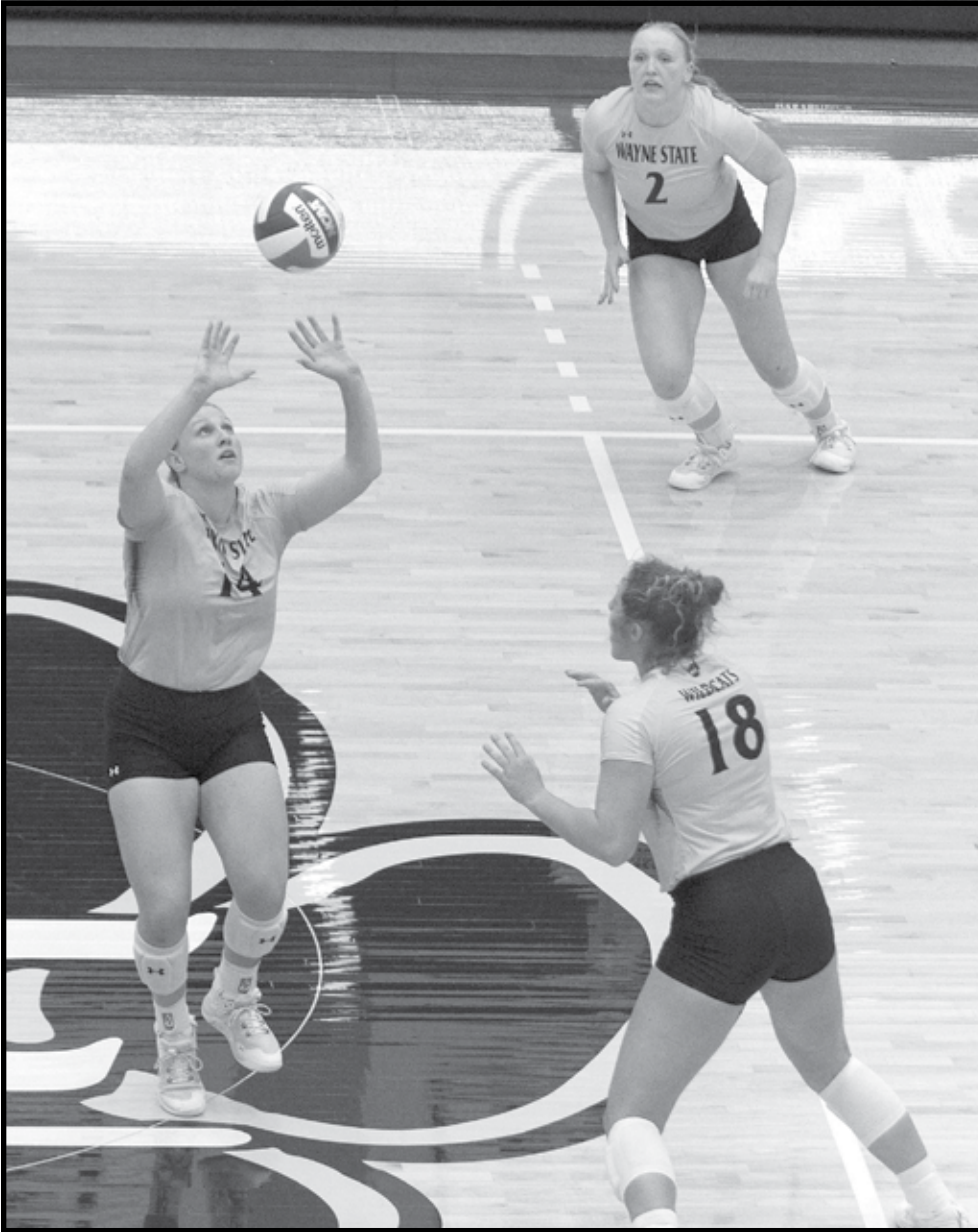
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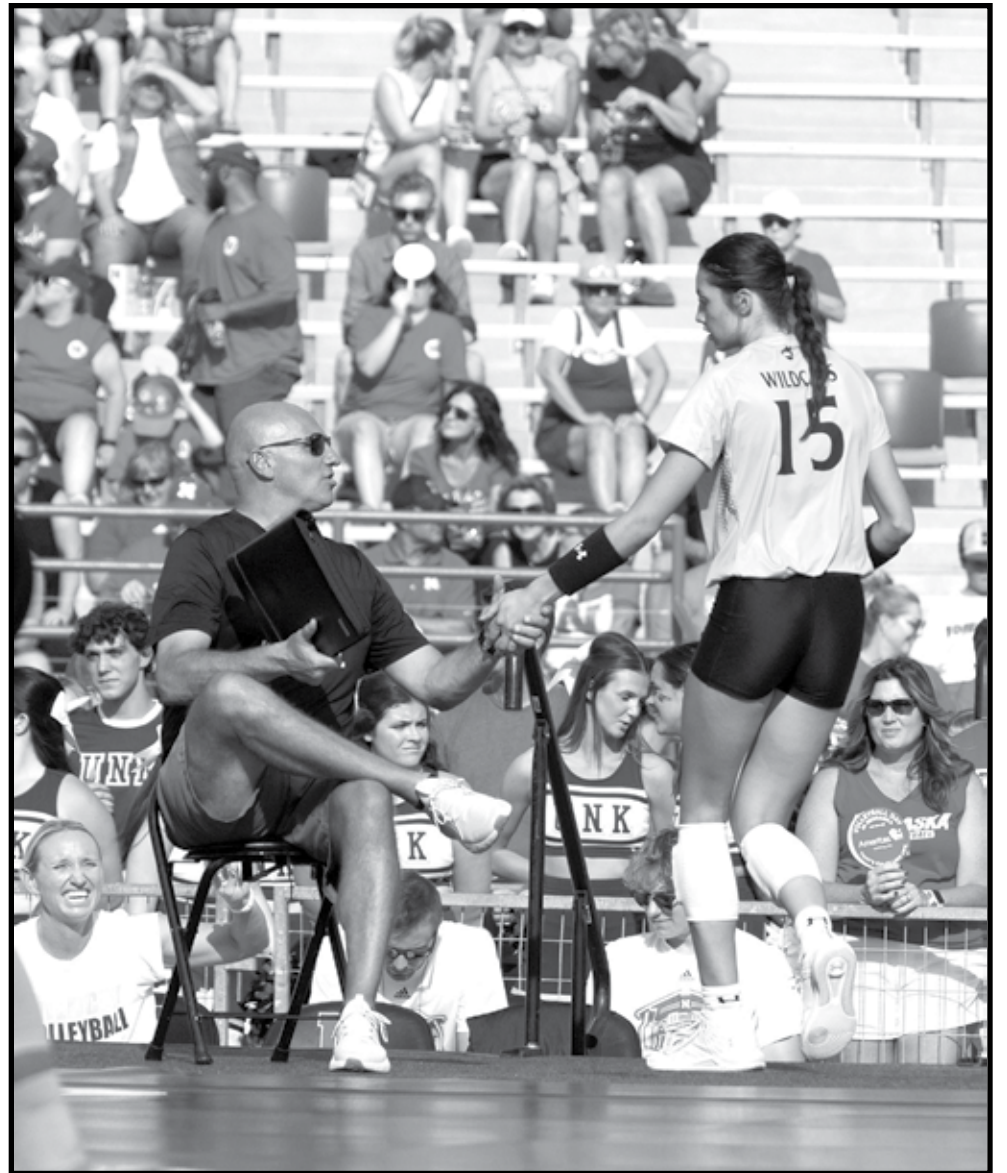
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