

Loyola Women's Volleyball Feature: Maureen Carls

Off-season improvements create a star

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A little home cooking is paying big dividends for Loyola women's volleyball. Sophomore right hitter Maureen Carls has emerged as one of the Ramblers' leading producers while playing an hour away from home.

Coming out of Andrew High School in Tinley Park, Ill., Carls made proximity a priority and chose Loyola over schools in Indiana, Pennsylvania and Montana.

"I love it," Carls said. "I get to go home on weekends and my parents get to come to all the home games."

Carls set the school record for kills at her high school, and that's the type of explosive production Ramblers fans have become accustomed to seeing from her this year.

In 11 games she has racked up 71 kills and 83 points, ranking her second and third on the team, respectively. She has also posted a career high 23 blocks.

But as a freshman last season, she struggled to find a way to fit in with the team.

"I had no idea what to expect coming in last year," Carls said. "I was coming in completely blind. Preseason basically determined who would play, and I didn't really do well."

Carls earned more time on the court as the season progressed, leaning on her raw skills as well as mastering Head Coach Chris Muscat's gameplan.

Strong performances during the spring tournaments proved her worthiness to be named a starter this fall. After that improvement was applied on the court, Carls spent a good chunk of her summer in the weight room to fortify her strong foundation.

The intense preparation has translated into an explosive start to this season for Carls, highlighted by her exploits at the East Carolina University (ECU) Tournament.

She took home tournament MVP honors as she led Loyola to a weekend sweep of three matches. She set the tone for the tournament in the opener against Morgan State University by smashing a career high 17 kills.

In that match, the Ramblers let an early two-set advantage slip away. But Carls came up with multiple kills in the decisive fifth set and peppered in multiple set-clinching kills in the following matches.

The ECU Tournament proved that Carls is a carrier of the "Clutch Gene": When the lights are brightest, and the pressure is the highest, she just sees it as an opportunity.

“I don’t really think about it,” Carls said. “If it’s game point or anything, I don’t think about that. I just go up and do what I’ve done a million times before.”

Muscat said he is impressed with the way Carls has built on her innate athletic abilities to become one of the team’s most consistent performers on offense and defense. And according to him, there’s still room for her to grow.

“I think she is someone who’s still trying to find out what kind of player she can be,” Muscat said. “I think we’re just starting to scratch the surface of the player that [she] can be.”

Carls has two factors on her side that will help her reach that potential: the right mindset and a tightly knit bunch of teammates.

The same thought process that took her from prospect to key contributor is the one she is using to try to reach the next level.

“I’m going into practice every day with a mindset that I want to get better and not just stay the same,” Carls said.

And without any seniors on the roster, she’ll be playing most of her career with the same group of girls. Both Carls and Muscat said they are excited to take advantage of that rare opportunity.

“It’s just a lot better for a team when you’re so close and there’s not just a freshman here, a senior there,” Carls said. “It’s better to have more time to gel with them.”

“We’re creating a comfortable feeling with one another,” Muscat said. “Everyone is starting to understand each other’s role. It’s important to keep that core together for a long period.”

Any journey will have its peaks and valleys; while the ECU Tournament represented a great triumph for Carls and the Ramblers, this past weekend put a damper on things.

At the Shamrock Invitational on Sept. 14, Loyola suffered a loss to the sixth-ranked Washington University Huskies in its home opener.

Over four matches, the Ramblers only managed to win one of the 13 sets they played while posting a .116 attack percentage (144 kills, 95 errors, 423 attacks).

Things weren’t much better for Carls, who only appeared in seven sets and recorded just seven kills and three blocks.

But Carls isn’t going to let the recent struggles stop her from believing that this Ramblers team can make a deep NCAA tournament run.

“We’re all really athletic and determined, and we’re just as good as any team out there if we work hard,” Carls said. “It’s going to take a lot of practice and a good mindset.”

The Ramblers now stand at 5-6 and will open their M VC Conference schedule this Friday, Sept. 20, when they welcome the University of Northern Iowa Panthers to Gentile Arena.