

Hutz helps Men's Volleyball Obtain No. 1 Ranking

By Joe Flaherty

There was no hour-long ESPN special chronicling where he would take his talents, but sophomore setter Peter Hutz did take a page out of the LeBron James recruiting book during his club volleyball days in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin.

In 2010, he had just completed the season for North Shore Milwaukee. Meanwhile, fellow Loyola sophomores and Wisconsin natives Nick Olson and Trevor Novotny were playing for the rival West Allis Lightning.

In search of a national club championship, another 'Big Three' was born.

"We were all really good but not the upper echelon," Hutz said. "We pretty much decided that we all had to come together and that if we did we'd be really good and win a national championship... Since then, the rest is history."

The trio ended up doing just that not once, but twice, winning the Boys Under-16 national championship in 2010 and the Boys Under-18 title in 2012.

Following that season, all three found themselves on Volleyball Magazine's 'Fab 50' list with schools from across the nation, including Loyola, pulling at their sleeves.

The 'Big Three' would face yet another decision.

While Novotny was seriously considering Penn State and Olson was being heavily recruited by schools from both coasts, Hutz had his heart set on Loyola from day one.

After watching his older brother Mike have a successful five-year career as Loyola's setter under Coach Shane Davis, Hutz felt like the logical choice for continued success was to become a Rambler.

"I knew the relationship [Coach Davis] had with my brother, they were really close," Hutz said. "I hadn't really gotten the best advice or coaching on setting because I pretty much started setting when I was 18, so I knew I was going to get really good tips working with Shane. It's always great when the head coach was your position."

With Hutz committed, Olson and Novotny decided to get the band back together and follow his lead.

During the recruiting process, Coach Davis saw Hutz as a huge asset. He knew his brother Mike was set to graduate in 2011, and setter Matt Mirick would be leaving the team in 2012.

It was clear Hutz filled a need; it wasn't clear on when he'd be asked to step into the starting role.

“We weren’t sure if we were going to red-shirt Peter and let him grow a little bit or if he was going to be a guy we threw into the fire right away,” Davis said.

The answer: trial by fire.

Looking to shake things up during a mid-season two-game losing streak, Coach Davis gave Hutz the starting nod against Ball State. He responded by racking up 34 assists, eight digs and three blocks in a breakout performance, propelling the Ramblers to a sweep in straight sets.

The starting job has been his ever since. He finished 2013 with a team-leading 678 assists.

But with Hutz making the switch to setter late in his club career, Coach Davis still needed to spend his freshman season going through what he called ‘Setting 101.’

“Last year was focused on the footwork and the technical stuff,” Davis said. “Now it’s taking a look at the other team’s block during the play and trying to get a little bit of an advantage and giving a guy the right ball at the right time. It’s kind of like a quarterback reading the defense.”

So far this season, Hutz is passing ‘Setting 102’ with flying colors. He leads the team with 249 assists through its first seven matches, including a season-high 48 in a win against Sacred Heart. His 35 digs are good enough for second.

Catching onto the finer details has allowed Hutz to think through each situation ahead of time and make better use of the immense amount of firepower behind him on offense.

The question is no longer ‘how should I set?’ It’s ‘who?’

“It’s almost tough to choose ‘who do I want to get the kill this time?’” Hutz said. “I know whoever I’m going to set is going to get the kill. Do I want to set Nick [Olson] or Owen [McAndrews] or Cody [Caldwell] or Joe [Smalzer] or Dainis [Berzins]? Everyone is up and ready to go, which I think is the biggest part of the offense.”

Hutz thinks the key to success lies in continuing to feed off of each other’s energy while tuning out distractions. He knows the number two national ranking puts a target squarely on their backs, so the team has to be focused to take their opponent’s best effort on a nightly basis.

At 6-1 on the season, the Ramblers will be looking to keep their winning formula intact as they open up MIVA play at home against No. 15 Ohio State this Saturday.

“That was my first loss as a starter... at Ohio State,” Hutz said with a grin. “There’s a little revenge factor.”