

# Stars Aligning for Senior Star

Smalzer Leads Men's Volleyball

By Joe Flaherty

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Fear. If you stand nearly seven feet tall, you likely experience that feeling a lot less than most. But Joe Smalzer, red-shirt senior for Loyola Men's Volleyball, has an intimate relationship with fear. It's what drives him.

"I think it resonates from a fear that I have of not being successful," Smalzer said. "That drives me to do as much as I can because the other guy is working just as hard as you. What are you doing to differentiate from that person? It's that fear of 'oh God, that guy is going to pass me up.' That's my motivation my five years here at Loyola."

Smalzer has applied that continuous drive across all walks of life. The four-time MIVA Academic All-Conference honoree is pursuing a Master's degree in International Business, all the while being a founding father of the Sigma Chi fraternity, coach of the women's club volleyball team, and an active member of the Cooking Club. He's also known to go for a round of Quidditch or two.

Head Coach Shane Davis wonders where Smalzer finds enough time in the day.

"Is he getting enough sleep for matches and stuff like that?" Davis said with a laugh.

Luckily for Davis, that clearly isn't the issue. Smalzer's accomplishments on the hardwood read more like a chapter in a book than merely a list. He captured MIVA Freshman of the Year honors in 2011 and hasn't looked back; he's in line to become the first Rambler to be named to three consecutive All-America teams.

Last year's MIVA Player of the Year currently leads the nation with 50 service aces on the season, all part of a program record 218 aces and counting for his career. He recently moved into fourth place on the all-time kills list with 1,354 and has a legitimate shot to ascend to third place come season's end.

For as much success as he's had on the courts, his first intentions were to play out his sports dreams on the diamonds.

"In high school, baseball was what I did year round," Smalzer said. "Everything was lined up: I was going to play in high school and college and continue on after. But I just got burnt out playing summer ball, fall ball, spring ball, having a pitching coach and all that jazz."

He credits his sister, Claire, with pushing him to make the switch to volleyball for good.

“She went from softball to volleyball, so that was the extra push for me to kind of move on a try something new and try something else that I liked a little bit but didn’t really know if it was what I wanted to do,” Smalzer said. “Luckily, I stuck with it.”

Claire became an excellent player in her own right, eventually playing out her college career for the Duke Blue Devils. Her brother took the newfound love and ran with it, starting for the Marist High School varsity squad. Though his teams would never go on to win a state title, he earned a spot on Volleyball Magazine’s “Fab 50” list as well as AVCA All-American honors in his senior year.

Loyola wasn’t the only school to take notice of the talent they had sitting in their backyard. Smalzer fielded scholarship offers from Ball State, Lewis and Pacifica. He admittedly doesn’t remember many details of the recruiting process that took place nearly six years ago, but he does remember what put Loyola over the top in his mind.

“It’s everything, everything from the coaching staff to the players,” Smalzer said.

Being close to his home in Palos Heights, Illinois, didn’t hurt things either. He wanted to study architecture in college, but since Loyola doesn’t offer that as a field of study, Smalzer opened up his horizons and picked International Business after enjoying some preliminary business classes.

That willingness to try unique things is what has opened so many doors for him to pursue activities that he truly enjoys.

“You don’t know what you like until you know what you like,” Smalzer said. “You have to try everything out until you find what you like, and if you don’t give yourself a chance to figure everything out, you’re kind of limiting yourself.”

That same logic applies on the court as well. Though the initial plan was for Smalzer to become the team’s next setter, Davis realized his adaptability would force those plans to change.

“We did all of the training with Joe with the setters, and on the second team he played opposite,” Davis said. “He became a really, really good opposite after his red-shirt year and we had a big void at pin hitter. He was able to pass too, so he was passing out of the opposite and hitting for us, so he filled a void for us at that time and we just let it go. He’s one of those guys who whatever you ask him to do, he’s going to do it. No questions asked.”

That red-shirt season is where Smalzer said he made his biggest strides as a player. He spent the year building a better strength base in the weight room and consulting with his sister for tips on his newfound role with the team.

That red-shirt year is also when he began to fine-tune his jump serve into the lethal weapon it is today.

“In the gym, I would toss up a ball and just hit it as hard as I can,” Smalzer said. “I took that throughout my entire career and really just learned to control it. There are a lot of components when you talk about serving, but you really have to narrow it down to a few things that you really focus on. Working on getting your feet to the ball and making sure you have a high toss, reaching and finding where your contact is in front of your body. It sounds easier explaining it than it is but just putting the pieces together is where the challenge comes.”

The nation’s top server is making it look just as easy as it is to explain. His rise in skill on the court was coupled with a rise in expectations off of the court. The team captain became the face of the program, earning him the nickname “Rambler Joe.”

“I was just being social,” Smalzer said. “From my freshman year dorming here, one of my greatest memories here at Loyola was that social atmosphere and just leaving the door open whenever you’re there so people can walk in and out. It was really relaxed and really awesome. I just wanted to transfer that social atmosphere to the team and the administration here.”

When Smalzer does move on after the end of this season, he doesn’t believe the off-court leadership task should fall on any one player’s shoulders. He hopes a number of players step up and take the reigns; much like the team is doing on the court this season.

“It’s a huge comfort factor that it’s not all on me,” Smalzer said. “I have guys I can lean back on, Peter [Jasaitis] has guys he can lean back on, the other starters and other guys on the court that are always working to get us better as a team have people to lean back on. It helps us build our trust with the team.”

That trust factor has helped push the team to a 21-1 record overall and has allowed the Ramblers to claim the number one spot in the nation for the past nine weeks. Smalzer doesn’t think there’s any kind of secret for the team to maintain their success.

“I’m trying to say something cool, but it’s more like just continue playing the way we’re playing,” Smalzer said. “We have to understand that even though we are where we’re at right now and we have the record we have, we still need to improve even though we only have a few matches left. We still need to get better in order to win that national championship.”

The Ramblers will have three more shots to improve during the regular season, as they finish up their schedule with visits from Lindenwood and Quincy before traveling to Columbus, OH, to take on the Ohio State Buckeyes.

The MIVA Tournament kicks off on April 18<sup>th</sup>, preceding the Final Four that will be hosted at Gentile Arena. Should the Ramblers continue on their torrid pace, Smalzer could potentially walk away from his final home match as a national champion.

“It seems like all the stars are aligning,” Smalzer said. “All we have to do is keep working hard and playing as a team and executing as we have been. It’ll be a very, very rewarding thing if that should happen.”

## So Long, Smalzer

*Those in the trenches with Smalzer sound off on the impact he’s hand on them and the program.*

“Between him and Peter Jaisitus, I don’t think I’ve ever seen two guys work harder at everything they do. Joe is a big guy, but you wouldn’t expect him to put up the kind of weight he does. I’ve never seen him not work hard in the weight room. He’s rehabbing all the time, and he cares so much and works so hard. That’s the biggest thing; you watch those guys and see just how much time and effort they put into it. That’s the biggest thing to take away from him; the work ethic. He’s a senior, but he’s still working his butt off. He doesn’t walk around like we’re just supposed to hand stuff to him like he’s Prince Joe. That’s not him. He’s super humble and a super good guy.” – Thomas Jaeschke, sophomore outside hitter

“He’s shown me to not be afraid to go and take a swing. He goes 110% every time and I love that. I love that he’s not afraid. If he gets blocked, whatever, next play. Give me the ball again, I’m putting it away. I love that. He’s my buddy, he’s my teammate. He’s Joe.” – Nick Olson, sophomore middle hitter

“Many guys on the team think he’s up for player of the year nationally. I know that if it’s a perfect pass, he’s going to get a kill. I just know that. Perfect pass, I give a good set, and he’ll get a kill. Now it’s just fun to watch him in practice when it’s a bad pass and a bad set. I’ll just be like ‘I’ll let Joe hit this and see what he can do with it.’ And almost every time it’s a kill. It’s amazing to watch really. And his serving, he was the national server of the year last year. I just love watching him play and being able to play with him is awesome.” - Peter Hutz, sophomore setter

“It’s been great, He’s a very good volleyball player and we just let his role develop with him. He did a heck of a job with that transition [from setter to opposite hitter] and he was Freshman of the Year at that position. Then he kept getting better at that spot and kept improving. He’s a great kid. He does everything big picture and all the little things you’d want a student to do for your program. That’s why they call him Rambler Joe.”- Shane Davis, head coach