



WNCC Players Earn Scholar Baller Honors

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The volleyball court isn't the only place the Western Nebraska Community College volleyball team has experience success. The team now is receiving success in the classroom.

WNCC coach Giovana Melo has instituted the Scholar Baller program that many NCAA Division I schools, including the Nebraska football program, use to recognize the athlete's work in the classroom.

"Scholar Baller is a program that reinforces the connection between sports and academics," Melo said. "I was fortunate to be a part of the program at Arizona State as a player and I think that it has helped many athletes across the country. I am hoping to help our girls as well."

This year's first recipients of the WNCC Scholar Baller awards include Emily Hoehn of Kearney (4.0 GPA), Ariel Austin of Woodland Park, Colo., (3.69 GPA), Kathryn Stock of Thibodaux, La., (3.94 GPA), and Tania Torres of Camuy, Puerto Rico, (3.87 GPA). Also receiving recognition for academics was student assistant coach Cesar Benatti, who has a 3.5 GPA. Melo said Benatti has been a good example of excellence in the classroom for the girls.

"I think they have been working extremely hard in the classroom but it is not just a semester award. It is a 2 year thing," Melo said. "I want to see it grow within our program and see more players to achieve the same honor. I want to see them competing to get it every semester."

To become a Scholar Baller athlete, athletes must have a 3.6 GPA. The four recipients received a T-shirt to wear and next fall, they will get to wear a patch on their uniform to indicate their work in the classroom.

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The volleyball team, as a whole, also excelled in the classroom, finishing with a combined 3.28 GPA, which is the highest grade point average among any WNCC team this season. The team was recognized for its honors at the annual awards ceremony earlier this month.

Individually, though, the four volleyball players that received the first WNCC Scholar Baller recognition, said they are honored to be the first recipients.

" I worked really hard to get the academic honor. I was really excited when I received it," Stock said. "In my opinion I think academics are more important than athletics. I put that before even volleyball. I think that it is more honorably to excel in the classroom than on the court because you are not going to play volleyball for life. I will have to get a job one day and get through school. I think it is really important for an athlete to excel in the classroom and on the court."

Hoehn said that she wasn't surprised in getting it; it was something that she knew she wanted because of her past academic accolades in high school.

"After she mentioned the award, I made it my goal to be a Scholar Baller," the Kearney native said. "It is a nice award and something that you can put on your resume and show that you are not only an athlete, but you are also a scholar and not only an athlete. I really expect myself to keep and maintain a 4.0 all year. That is one of my biggest goals here. Whatever amount of study that I need to keep my 4.0, I will keep doing it."



Hoehn said this Scholar Baller program is good for the team.

"I think it is a great program because so many people are focused on athletic ability and it is nice to prove that you are here for something else than sports ability," she said. "I think it puts pressure on the athletes of the school to help maintain a GPA. If sports didn't work out for me, I would be able to rely on my grades."

Hoehn, who is a biology major, said that keeping that high GPA next year will be even tougher when she takes calculus, chemistry and trigonometry.

"It does take dedication to stay on top of your studies because it is pretty easy for you to want to slack off and not do homework," she said. "But in order to keep the high GPA that the Scholar Baller asks for, you really have to buckle down and get your work done."

Hoehn said having good study skills is the ingredient to getting good grades.

"I learned to study in high school," Hoehn said. "When it comes down to slacking off and having fun compared to getting good grades, you really have to buckle down and get your work done. If you don't understand something or if you need help, you really need to go and talk to the teachers. You shouldn't be ashamed to go and talk to your teachers to help explain stuff to you."

Torres is another volleyball player that has excelled in the classroom and she had the same study habits as Hoehn. She said don't leave things to the last moment.

"Since I was little, my parents told me that every time I get new material, to read a little bit and then the next day read it again. By the time the tests come, I will know what I need to know for the tests," she said. "Studying might take some of your time in having fun, but it is also important to take time to study. You just need to divide your time to be successful. You can't have more time to have fun then to study. You have to know where your priorities are and that is how you are going to get good grades."

Torres is a perfect example of getting good grades as she came to WNCC in August with a slight language barrier just like her coach did. Torres, though, put that behind her for a 3.87 GPA. Torres is planning on obtaining her bachelor's degree in biology and then transfer to a medicine school in either the states or Spain to be become a surgeon cardiologist.

"Being a scholar baller is not easy because you have to be doing good in volleyball and also do good in your classes; you have both sides of the pressure," Torres said. "It shows that it is not only sports but that academics is a really important factor in our lives. We love volleyball but we also choose that we also need to study to achieve our goals."

Torres definitely believes this program is something that other colleges or other WNCC athletic teams should consider.

"I would recommend the program because it tells athletes how important it is to be a good athlete and a good student at the same time," she said. "It shows how much you can achieve in being both at the same time. You can only be an athlete for a certain amount of time, and when you get old, you won't be able to keep playing, you will have to do something else. That is when academics come into play. That is why it is important to be good in school, too." Austin said that the honor this year shows that she can buckle down and get her studies done.

"I am kind of honored because I was really motivated to work for it and I got it. It is all about focusing on your work," she said. "I was surprised because I have not been the best academic person. It is kind of surprising."

Austin said that what helped her to her 3.69 GPA was the mandatory study halls.

"I think having mandatory study halls is what really helps so you can just sit down and focus," she said. "In high school I really wouldn't have time because I didn't have a set schedule. Now study halls is mandatory and I just sit down and do my work. I get it done and you can definitely tell it

has improved my grades."

Stock just missed a perfect 4.0 GPA, receiving an A minus in English Composition in the fall. It was a grade that made her mad. Stock said to get good grades, you have to be motivated and set goals.

"I just work really hard and academics mean a lot to me," she said. "I get mad at myself if I don't do well. That is how it has always been because my parents think school is also important. I just say to myself and others to keep working hard the whole time and don't give up.

"I am not awesome and I don't easily do well in school. I work really hard studying and I go and see my teachers and ask for help if you need it. Don't be afraid to ask other people for advice. You have to learn to put your priorities in order first and that will help you succeed in life in general and not just school."

The volleyball players have a perfect motivator in getting good grades in their coach. Melo was a Scholar Baller recipient when she played volleyball at Arizona State. Melo came to WNCN to play volleyball in 2001 and 2002 when she spoke very little English. Still, she overcome everything to do well academically, as Hoehn said she told her that she received just one C in all of her college courses.

Melo said she stresses academics first and foremost.

"It was a long journey for me starting from learning the language, getting good grades, and earning a master's degree," she said. "It is not easy to be a student-athlete in America. I think it takes a lot of hard work and dedication. It demands a lot but I also think it prepares you for the future and that is what I try to pass to them all the time. I believe the hard work will pay off in the future."