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Skills and Smarts

By Steve Stone for MSNsportsNET.com
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MORGANTOWN, W.Va. – Junior middle blocker [Abby Norman](#) has been a vital cog in the West Virginia University volleyball team's fast start. But for as much skill as she has in blocking her opponent's attacks, she is even more impressive as a student with a tremendous future in sight.

Coming from a well accomplished family full of academic degrees and steady jobs, Norman is sure to be the next in line as she pursues a career in public relations. Having fond memories of the tough love her parents gave her over school grades, the Indianapolis, Ind., native seemed destined to excel in the classroom as she makes school work her number one priority in college.

"It's very important," Norman said of excelling in the classroom. "Growing up, my parents stressed to me and my sisters how academics are so important. My mom is one of the most intelligent people I've ever met in my life – she's a veterinarian and knows so much about science. My dad is an accountant and knows so much about math, so they stressed academics to my sisters and I so much.

"I have memories of when I would miss two questions on a math test and my mom would say, 'Well why didn't you miss zero?'" They always had very high standards for us. I think that has always been instilled in me. I knew when I came to college that there's time to have fun and volleyball is also very important, but my academics always come first."

Norman has already achieved a 4.0 GPA in two of her four semesters at WVU. She is a member of the National Honor Society, and her high school GPA ranked 38th out of 814 students. Possessing plenty of smarts to pursue all types of endeavors, Norman has the goal of promoting and publicizing within the athletic realm following her stint at WVU.

Although she now has a clear focus on her future objective, Norman originally wanted to travel down a much different avenue.

"When I first came here I really thought I was going to be a teacher," Norman admitted.

"My parents' best friend from college is a sports communications director at North Carolina, and I would hear cool stories about what he did. His job always sounded like so much fun, and I did yearbook writing in high school for the sports section – it was so easy for me to do.

"When I was here for orientation my dad said, 'This is what you do, this is what you like to do. Why don't you try it?'" I switched my major right before my freshman year."

The future PR professional would have no problem promoting her team's 5-2 start. The Mountaineers had two good showings at the WVU Classic and most recently, the Denver Invitational. Norman has emerged as one of the team's best players at the net, tallying 20 blocks, including a team-best 18 block assists.

After struggling through much of last season, Norman believes the instant improvement comes from two key factors: experience and commitment.

"Lisa (Hough) and Tammy (Wolf) were seniors last year and were a real key part of our team, but there's only so much you can do with two or three experienced players on the court," Norman said. "Our starting center last year was a freshman who never played a collegiate game in her life. That's a tough transition, and our two main outside hitters were freshmen last season.

"We all worked very hard in the offseason to improve, and it has shown on the court this year. We don't make as many mental errors and last year when games got tight, we would panic. This year it's more chill. When it's 20-20 with five points left, we know we can make it through and we know we can do it."

Norman admits that her ability to redirect her opponent's attacks is just as much mental as it is physical. Standing 6-foot-1 with much athleticism, Norman carries all the tangible attributes to build a wall against oncoming hitters, and can respond with a blast of her own as she averages 2.22 kills per set through seven matches.

As the old saying goes, "In order to be the best, you have to beat the best," which proved true for Norman at Ben Davis High when she slammed down a fast-approaching hit by her school's best all-around athlete during practice. That moment sticks out in Norman's mind when she thinks about the first time she developed enough confidence in her blocking.



[Abby Norman](#) has helped volleyball to a strong 5-2 start to the 2009 season.

WVU Photographic Services photo

“Once this girl at my school who was an All-American basketball player and was good at volleyball – she would hit the ball harder and stronger than anyone I knew,” Norman added. “We were practicing one time during my freshman year and I blocked her, and it hurt so bad. I thought to myself, ‘If I could block her, then I could block anyone.’”

Her immense pain was all for the best. Now she is known by her coaches and teammates as one of the most motivated and driven performers on the team. Her willingness and sacrifice is apparent on the court as she is willing to go up for any ball whether it is within her reach or not.

“I pride myself on my determination,” Norman said. “The coaches tell me how surprised they are sometimes about how willing I am to go up and hit a ball. That’s how it’s been since my freshman year. Even if there are two blockers up – it’s a challenge that I love and something I have to overcome.

“Staying here this whole summer and working with Corey (Twine) and training and being more mentally ready has helped. Last year, I had the experience of my freshman year but I don’t think I took the summer too seriously. This year I feel like I’m way better.”



Norman’s tenacity is something that the Mountaineer coaching staff got to witness firsthand at a special showcase back in the Midwest. With several college coaches present, the competition for each skilled performer was hot and heavy, but Norman was swayed on her official visit when Coach Veronica Hammersmith and the rest of the staff were respectful, helpful and committed to helping her enjoy the Mountaineer experience.

“Volleyball is really big out in the Midwest – Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky – it’s all very big out there,” Norman said. “I was being recruited by other colleges too and I had no idea about West Virginia. My dad was with me when I was at the showcase and told me that WVU was interested, and I visited in January and really liked it. The coaches were very personable and were with me every second I was there, the girls were very nice and I got a good feel for the campus. My dad thought it was a real good fit for me too, WVU offered me a scholarship, and I was like, ‘Why not?’”

The athletically-gifted, outgoing junior has stood out for all the right reasons ever since she was in elementary school. She see-sawed between soccer and volleyball when she was in the third and fourth grade, then balanced volleyball and track and field when she was in high school. Specializing in the high jump, she received an extra boost in her high-rising ability that has helped her become one of the team’s best blockers.

“In third grade I was all about soccer when it was the big Mia Hamm era,” Norman said. “I used to have to play with all the boys, so in fourth grade when I saw that all the girls were on the volleyball team I chose to start playing that. Everyone thought I was such a natural at it.

“At public schools they usually don’t start teaching you how to play until seventh grade, so I guess I had a one-up on everyone (being at a private school). In seventh and eighth grade I would play some club volleyball, and then I took a couple years off. When I got to high school I started to play more competitively and starting making national teams.”

Carrying all-BIG EAST potential, Norman is determined to lead the Mountaineers down the prominent path that stands before them. And when her on-court career wraps up, she is sure to have all the skills and smarts needed to reach her peak in life.  [Print View](#) 
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