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New NP coach both excited, nervous

But mainly, Plunkitt just ready to get season started

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New Palestine

Some athletes turn to coaching as a way to stay involved with the sport they love.

But even in high school, Penii Plunkitt knew she wanted to someday be a head coach.

So while at an Indiana University volleyball camp when she was in high school, Plunkitt was asked to fill out a list of career goals. Topping that list was her aspiration to one day have a prep volleyball program of her own.

On Monday, Plunkitt will get that chance.

Plunkitt takes the reins of the New Palestine volleyball program when the Dragons open practice Monday morning, the first official day fall sports teams can practice in Indiana.

While there are some nerves for the first-time head coach, she's mostly excited to get the season started.

"I'm just ready to get going," Plunkitt said. "I'm excited to see what we look like and how we're going to match up with our opponents. We have a lot of work ahead of us, but I'm excited about where we are and what we've accomplished over the summer. I've seen so much improvement from all the girls.

"But I am a little nervous," she added. "I want to impress other teams, the parents. I want to be that person who comes in and makes the program what it should be."

And what Dragon volleyball should be is a program that wins year in and year out, she added.

To do that, Plunkitt wants to build the program from the ground up with an increased focus on the younger grades to cultivate a culture of success. She said she would be heavily involved in the middle school program, and wants the current varsity players to work with the younger levels as well.

That way, players will know what to expect and "what to look forward to" when they get to high school.

Players can expect to work hard from a coach who stresses discipline and a strong work ethic. She's already instituted summer conditioning sessions and other workouts, as well as got the team involved in the Warren Central volleyball league.

"I've come in and let them know that I expect them to work hard, and they've really responded to that," she said. "Everybody has bought into what I'm trying to do."

Plunkitt is also hoping to develop a family-like atmosphere to improve team chemistry, which she said she's been told was a problem a year ago.

"I'd like to build a family-like relationship — a program where everybody is cheering for each other and everybody feels like they are part of a whole team," Plunkitt said. "I want them all to feel apart of the program."

She's also not afraid to be both the good cop and the bad cop.

"I'm hard, but I'm fun," Plunkitt said. "One minute they're going to hate me, and one minute they're going to love me. I'm going to expect a lot out of them, and those who don't perform or don't work hard are not going to be the ones out on the court."

She's been pleased with the attitudes from the Dragons, especially those of seniors Jaimeson Wright and Julie Whitaker. Their leadership will be needed for an underclassmen-heavy squad.

"This going to be a young team, but we have great senior leaders," Plunkitt said.

There isn't much height, but the new coach promises that NP will be scrappy.

Which could be the adjective used to describe Plunkitt when she was a prep player.

She was the defensive specialist for state-powerhouse Mishawaka, and led the Cavemen to a state title in 1988, and state runner-up honors in '86 and '87. Plunkitt later went on to play outside hitter for the University of Indianapolis.

"I was a very competitive player," she said. "I expected my teammates to do their job, and as a coach, I'm going to expect each player to do their job."

Plunkitt has been a club coach for Indy Select and Team Indiana, and was an assistant at Scecina from 2000-2003, which included a sectional title in her final year. The past two years, she's been at Brebeuf Jesuit, where she helped the team win two sectional championships and a regional title last fall.

"It's huge," Plunkitt said of her experience coaching and playing in successful programs. "I got training from some great coaches like Brian Murray (at Brebeuf) and was able to see how he handles girls and the way he handles different situations."

She's been thankful for the support she's received from players, parents, the NP community and athletic department.

But in an ideal world, Plunkitt wouldn't be getting ready to start the season as the Dragons' head coach.

If she had it her way, Plunkitt would be getting ready to play.

"I would drop everything to play again," Plunkitt said. "I'd much rather be a player than a coach. I just love playing volleyball."

"I enjoy the fast pace, the people," she added. "Everything about it is fun."

But when asked if there was anything else she wanted to add for the story, the coach in her came out. One could almost feel the adrenaline in her voice. It was almost as if NP was about to go out for a fifth came in a tight Hoosier Heritage Conference match.

"Go Dragons," she said in a statement worth an exclamation point. "Let's do it."