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Grit and Heart

By Eric F. Spina

“We had a motto of getting 1% better each day and playing with heart for each other,” reflected middle blocker Alayna (Laney) Yates after the Flyer volleyball team’s historic 32-3 season. “We were all in.”

I saw that grit and heart firsthand time and again this season during home matches, where our nationally ranked team left it all on the court. Undefeated in A-10 conference play, the Flyers set a program record with an incredible 27-game win streak, the longest in the country. They notched Atlantic 10 regular season and tournament championships and led the conference in nearly every category — points, hitting percentage, assists, kills, blocks, and service aces. Going into NCAA Tournament play, the Flyers averaged 2.31 aces/set, tops in Division I.

The team jubilantly sprayed Tim Horsmon, A-10 Coach of the Year, with water after they defeated Loyola Chicago for the A-10 tournament title and danced with the coaches in the locker room after topping Pepperdine 3-2 in the first round of the NCAA Tournament. The 19th-ranked squad ended their remarkable season with a 3-1 loss at No. 10 Washington State in the second round.

The only matches this team lost all season came against top-15 teams. Wow!

The Flyers are not only extraordinary athletes who worked together seamlessly as a team, but they're also exemplary students with high academic achievements and a strong community service record. Head coach Horsmon and the coaching staff are exceptional in developing players — and leaders.

That's evident in the volleyball squad's year-after-year success. The Flyers have won an impressive 16 Atlantic 10 championships and have honed a reputation over the years for their competitiveness, toughness on the court, and strength of schedule. Their most loyal fans are fellow students, who pack the Frericks Center and accompany the Dayton Pep Band and cheerleaders in creating a "this is our house" atmosphere.

This year's squad was led by A-10 Player of the Year Lexie Almodovar, who was just named honorable mention All-America by the American Volleyball Coaches Association. A phenomenally gifted outside hitter and six-rotation player, she also earned AVCA Midwest Region Player of the Year honors.

As a testament to this team's depth and unselfish play, six different players received A-10 weekly honors, including Amelia Moore, who is one of only three players in UD history to achieve 500 blocks and 1,000 kills. The middle blocker was named to the 2023 Academic All-District DI Volleyball Team and ended her Dayton career as the longest-serving volleyball student-athlete after taking a medical redshirt one season and accepting an additional year of eligibility after the pandemic postponed and shortened the 2020 season.

Beyond sheer talent, this team's success comes down to one word — teamwork.

"We trained hard over the summer and made our relationships with one another from player 1 to player 18 a priority," said Laney, a redshirt junior journalism major from Cedar Falls, Iowa. "Our sense of what it takes to be champions has been renewed."

But they became more than a championship team who represented UD on the national stage with such grit and heart. They became a family.