

Hi ladies,

Sarah, Annie and Darcy D. all asked to hear, so I thought I would just write an email - and use this as an opportunity to catch up!

In case you didn't run across it on Facebook, the club sent a team to Women's B at Nationals this year - and took first place in the Gold bracket. That's right. Your MIT club team is #1 in the nation in Women's B!

It almost didn't happen at all...

The desire to go to Nationals started late, but after Lindsey sent out the email, she was worried we were going to have too many players! All SIX of the varsity seniors came and played with us to some degree this year, so we had the potential for a stacked roster. We tried looking at scenarios where we stretched it to two teams, but weren't going to be able to pull it off.

In the end, we took Sharon Hao, Jess Fessler and Emma Gargus (all of whom you may remember from varsity). They joined our Nationals veterans Sarah Oberhelman and Marti Borkent along with Lindsey Gilman, Jody Fu and Kayla Ngan. The one newcomer this year was Eva Maria Novoa Pardo, a postdoc and really good outside hitter from Spain. At the very last minute, we added Kate Kelly who just really really really wanted to go to Nationals. She SO wanted to go that she offered to pay her own way and a share of the registration fee and she didn't care if she didn't play at all. Well, geez, what can you say to that?

Unlike your year, this group of 10 never actually practiced together. Not even once. Literally, the first time all 10 of them got together was the first day of Nationals. There were all kinds of reasons. People got sick. People had work. Kate had already committed to a Wednesday night league. Sharon got hit in the head at the triples tournament and had a concussion. You can imagine how pleased I was at the lack of time together. You may also remember how much emphasis we put on backrow hitting and targeted serving. Nope. Didn't get to work on either one really. Too busy just trying to figure out who was good at what and where were we going to play them. Needless to say, I was not feeling great about our preparation.

The other constantly looming spectre was playing time and positions. 10 players is a lot (by club standards). I really didn't want to go this year, but I figured that if I didn't go, there was going to be no way they could juggle 10 players. I tried to curtail this by just flat out telling everyone that no one was guaranteed playing time, but that everyone had better be ready to go if their number was called. That kinda worked. We also had issues because no one really wanted to play opposite. You can imagine how easy it was to figure out lineups when you couldn't all practice together and no one wants to play a position.

So anyway, I am headed to Phoenix resigned that we will be under-prepared and expecting that at least things can't get worse.

And then I see our pool.

And it gets worse.

The first name I see is Montana Epic. Who calls themselves Epic? That's some kind of confident. Then I do a little Google investigating and find out that nearly every one of them played in college and/or is still a volleyball coach. So basically, we're facing the all-star team of the entire Evergreen volleyball region. Awesome. The next name I key on is Lady Chickens. You may remember this name. They won B last year. They won 10 matches, lost 1 and only dropped four games all tournament. Awesome. Then I see there's a team from the Aloha region. If there's one thing we are bad at as a club, it's dealing with shorter, smarter, ball control teams. So now I'm thinking, great. We get Hawaii's all-star team of shorter, smarter, ball control teams. Awesome.

So the first day of the tournament, we show up to the court and our first match is Montana Epic and they look as good as I feared. They're all tall and lanky, just the right balance of cheerful and serious, good-looking the way you imagine tall, uber-healthy, athletic, outdoorsy people from Montana would be. When they pepper, they display impeccable form and great arm-swings. Great. Just perfect. We start the match and things get pretty serious right away. We're tentative serving and hitting and Montana just starts treating it like hitting lines. One of their big middles is just pegging the ball at the 10-foot line just around/over Marti. Their outsides just keep abusing our shorter block. We lose 25-12. TWELVE!! I tell the team to not worry about it, first day is about getting your feet under you and settling in, finding rhythm, we'll play better. Second game, we race out to a 13-3 lead on the strength of Emma's jump serve. Ten points. No problem right. Eeeek. Montana comes storming back and we barely manage to win 26-24. Third game goes pretty much like the first and we go down 15-9. I tell the team that Montana has the look of the best team in the tournament and they should feel reasonable about how we did. They're not buying it, but it turns out I'm right.

We move on to play Kapow-EXTREME. This is another relatively short team with that old-school, KSA-volleyball feel. We do very solidly here and win in a crisp 25-13, 25-20 match.

Then we play the Hawaii team, RedStar. This team has one of the best outside hitters I see at the tournament. She looks like she might be anywhere from 35-45 years old. She's about 5'7"? Not built like the classic volleyball player at all. But she's absolutely unblockable. I watch her hit the whole game before we play and she never hits the same shot twice, doesn't commit a hitting error, tools the block with abandon and scores about 80% of the time. Buuuut, no one else

on this team can handle our serve. Plus, this is an older team and they are just exhausted by the time they hit us. We roll 25-9, 25-18.

Finally, we play the Lady Chickens. Fortunately, it's not the same team at all as last year. But I do recognize one of their new players from one of the teams we played last year (Bumpettes). The Lady Chickens are athletic, but nowhere near as skilled or coordinated as a team as you would expect from the defending champs. We win in two 25-20, 25-17.

So we come out a very respectable second in the pool. Montana has just been crushing people and comes out first. For instance, they beat Redstar 25-12, 25-5. FIVE!! In rally scoring!

Overall, I'm feeling okay about how we're doing. I've been flip-flopping between our two primary lineups, trying to make sure everyone plays and trying to figure out who's hot. I even manage to sneak Kate in for one game and Kayla in for one game, so I achieved my goal of having everyone play at least one game. I can see problems coming though. We have a shortish block outside that's getting burned by taller hitters and we are having problems generating enough offense.

But off we go to dinner... and then to bed. Buuuut, not before a drama check. Everything turned out fine, thank goodness, but at some point, Marti is out drinking/counseling one of our players while I'm busy wondering why another of our players is all weepy. Gah. As I said, everything turned out fine and it wasn't actually inter-team issues - just real life. I stay up until 2:30 AM (Phoenix time) waiting for our lost lambs come home. I tell them I feel like their Dad, waiting for them to come home from a party.

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Day 2 dawned bright and hot, just like every day in Phoenix apparently. I had a light, early breakfast with Lindsey and Marti. We met a cowboy from Montana - burly dude, cowboy hat, drawl and all - who had the cutest little lap dog. Seriously, adorable little dog. Big cowboy. Generally, I don't like little dogs, but this one had some character. The contrast between owner and dog was hilarious. Really one of those "only in a different part of the country" types of moments. Later on, several of us enjoyed a nice breakfast by the pool while the rest of the team sleeps. We had an afternoon schedule, so we didn't have to be at the convention center until 2:30 for our 3:30 match.

The format was a little different this year. Last year, we got reshuffled into the lower division in the second round of pool play based solely on our finish in the first round of pool play. We were fourth, so we went straight to Round 2, Division 2. This year, they added challenge matches in between the different rounds. These gave you the chance to make it to a higher division, even if you

had a lower finish because of the difficulty of your pool. As the second place team, we had to beat the third place team from another pool to advance to Round 2, Division 1.

The trick was that it was only one game. I didn't like this at all. The loser of the game went to Division 2 and that meant you couldn't end up any higher than Copper. This team was really too good for that, but you never know what can happen in a one game situation. We played VBLI-Uptown. They were okay and stayed with us for a little while. Fortunately, we didn't have the slow start that I was fearful of and we managed to pull away late and win 25-14. I breathe a huge sigh of relief.

The challenge match win put us in one of 6 three-team pools. The 6 winners of the pools would go to Gold. The 6 second place teams would go into a set of challenge matches (two brackets of three teams) and the winners of those brackets would also go to Gold. The remaining 4 teams would end up in Silver. The 6 third place teams would end up in Bronze.

So it was really important to finish first if you wanted to go to Gold. You did get the chance to fight your way through the challenge matches, but you would go a couple extra rounds to make it.

The first team we played was BOOM. I remembered them from last year. They won Silver in B, so they are a pretty solid group. They looked the part. They had a really effective middle (Darcy Duke - reminded me of Fernanda!). They had a second scary athletic middle (#20). Their setter was aggressive and had good hands. They liked to run a lot of fast stuff to the outside and we had some trouble dealing with their attack. The first game was tight. We pulled it out 26-24. The second game, our serve starts to take over. BOOM starts to have trouble passing and their setter starts to get frustrated. After watching for a little while, I realize she's a deceptively "bad" setter. Don't get me wrong, she puts up very good sets and they run good, quick stuff, but she's a little overly aggressive, so she pushes bad situations and ends up putting the hitters in tough spots. This is particularly problematic when your team can't serve receive. We win game 2 comfortably, 25-16.

The next team we played was Moxie. This was another short Hawaiian team. They went 4-1 in pool and I can't figure out how they did it. They're short. There's only one hitter who is even mildly dangerous. Since we had just played a short Hawaiian team in pool play, I knew the team was going to be ready and in fact, we roll over them in Game 1, 25-13.

And then, things start to go pear-shaped.

We win so convincingly, that I decide to take the opportunity to get some players some rest. We have been riding a couple players pretty hard. Since the team

didn't have any real time together, I don't have a great feel for a) what players look like when they're tired and b) how players will handle being subbed in and out. There aren't any fixed substitution patterns yet. I have been going mostly by observation and intuition and I have been letting people go a little bit longer to figure out what we have. On top of this, I've been trying to find a combination that's going to give us some more offensive firepower. So this is a great chance to give players some rest AND try and get some other players hot for the rest of the way.

If only the team had obliged...

Instead of being fired up by the subs, the entire team's energy plummets through the floor. We fall behind a couple points early, I call timeouts to try and rally the troops, but the energy is just gone. The team scraps, but can't come up with a run. I consider putting the other players back in, but I am a big believer in giving people a chance to prove themselves, so I stick with the lineup, hoping it will come through. Meanwhile, the other team is doing the whole short Asian team thing: oh, let me just dig up a crazy ball; oh, let me just hit a little tool shot; oh, let me just keep sending you free balls until you mess up because you're getting nervous. Maddening. We lose 21-25.

Frustrating, but no problem, I think. We'll just win Game 3 because we're clearly the superior team. I sub back in the group from the first game - and they promptly proceed to ALSO play with an alarming lack of energy. We lose Game 3, 15-10.

I am really, really upset inside. I think that I have just destroyed the team's chance to play in Gold. Yes, the team should have played better and not put themselves in position to lose. Yes, a team that loses the way we did probably doesn't deserve to play in Gold. If there is one thing this tournament does, it's force you to be on point almost all the time. Yes, we have a chance to play in through the challenge matches. But while I understand this intellectually, I feel directly responsible for the loss due to the substitutions. I know how important rhythm and consistency can be. I took a chance and had it backfire big time. The team is clearly crushed as well. I don't think I have ever seen a team so upset. No one is crying or anything so overt, but everyone is just depressed. I don't really even know what to say. I say some things, but I don't even remember what they were. I feel like I let everybody down.

And then we realize that it's not over...

(To be continued)

It turns out that because it's a three team pool, you can lose a match and still make it. You need all of the teams to split and then it goes to a percentage of games won as the tiebreaker. So if BOOM can beat Moxie, we have a chance.

And then we realize that any win by BOOM puts us in Gold. If BOOM beats Moxie 2-0, then everyone is 1-1 in matches, but we would be 3-2 in terms of games, with BOOM 2-2, Moxie 2-3. If BOOM beats Moxie 2-1, then everyone is 1-1 in matches, we are 3-2 in terms of games, BOOM would be 2-3 and Moxie would be 3-3. Either way, we would make it.

But none of us, having just played both teams, thinks it's a good matchup for BOOM stylewise! So we're still pretty depressed.

And then BOOM wins Game 1, 25-21. And we kinda start to believe a little bit. But only a little bit. We won the first one against Moxie as well. We know the script. Moxie's just going to continue to do their thing and grind BOOM down. And true to form, Moxie comes back and whomps BOOM in the second game, 25-16.

And now, we're pretty much resigned. We figure Moxie has them figured out, BOOM will freak out and Moxie will win going away. Worse, BOOM has nothing to play for. They had to win in two games to have a chance. The loss means they are guaranteed third place in our pool, no matter what happens in Game 3. We figure it's over.

But it doesn't happen. BOOM comes out and plays steady. As I recall, it was pretty tight all the way through. We're trying not to be too obvious, but at some point, Sharon says, "Alright, I'm just going to start openly cheering for BOOM." She gets up and joins their supporters who are watching the match. If I recall correctly, BOOM goes into the switchover only up 8-7. But somehow, miraculously considering the teams' past performances, Moxie falters at the end and BOOM pulls away to win 15-9. I run over to BOOM and thank them.

We're cautiously optimistic, but we sweat out an anxious half an hour waiting for the official results to come in. Finally, we find out that we made it. We're in Gold and don't have to play a challenge match. Man, are we relieved. Then we find out that we have to play at 8:30 AM. That's okay. We'll take it. We go out to dinner altogether at a Mexican restaurant. As we're coming in, I realize that the members of BOOM are all sitting at the bar. I consider buying them a round, but then decide it might be a little too soon. We have a nice dinner, then head back to the hotel.

Day 3 dawned bright and hot, just like every day in Phoenix apparently. I wake up very thankful that I am still basically on East Coast time. 6:00 AM in Phoenix feels like 9:00 AM in Boston and therefore it's quite easy to get up. Sidebar: because we booked a hotel late, we were staying at a hotel near the airport, a pretty fair distance from the convention center. We had to take a light rail every day back and forth. It wasn't too bad, but it did mean you had to factor in some travel time.

Morning of Day 3, we plan the departure to the minute. Unfortunately, the printed light rail schedule is not accurate and we miss the train we were planning to catch. Not a disaster, but not the organized start you would like to a big tournament day. Fortunately, I'm not too worried. The team's played a lot. I'm more worried about staying fresh and less worried about having enough time to get warm.

Our first match in Gold is against the Golden Diggers. Funny story. This team is sponsored by the LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs. This is a Lutheran Church Charities organization that basically trains adorable dogs to be adorable and provide affection and comfort to people in hospitals, nursing homes, disaster areas, etc. The day before, the Diggers had worked one of our matches and some of the comfort dogs were there. You never saw a dog get swarmed by a bunch of women faster in your life. I literally looked at the dog, turned around to talk to the team, then realized that 7 of the 10 players were busy trying to hug the same dog at the same time.

This was my first time in Gold, so I had some concerns. I wasn't quite sure what to expect. The Diggers were also a concern. A little Internet research indicated that most of them had played college together, so they had the potential to be pretty good. We went with our first base lineup: Sarah O. and Eva as outsides, Sharon setting, Emma and Marti as middles with Lindsey as the libero and Jess Fessler as the opposite. The first game went poorly. We're a little flat, but the big problem is that we are getting victimized on the right side with the shorter block. The Golden Diggers outsides are just abusing the line digger. And then things get worse. You know how we often teach serving at a spot? Well, I have never seen a team hit EVERYTHING at a spot. I mean, for a while, it looked like everybody was just aiming at one digger. Outside hitter? Down the line. Middle hitter? Cuts it back to aim at right back. Right side hitter? Goes sharp cross court to right back. We lose the game 18-25 and I have had enough. We switch to our big lineup and now I'm committed to it. Sarah's blocking changes the complexion of the Golden Diggers offense. Kate scores a number of key points. Eva finally catches fire and starts hitting. We scrape by in Game 2, 25-23, but it's clear we have the momentum now. We go on to dominate Game 3, 15-6.

I'm feeling good. As always, I'm most concerned about the first game of the day. Our teams tend to start slow, so I tend to try and go with the most conservative lineup early and give it a chance to get hot. We managed to win that game and avoid the trap. I suspect that the Diggers are in the upper part of Gold, so I'm starting to feel cautiously optimistic.

Our next game was against Cougars'n'Cubs, a New England team that many of you will remember. They won B- champs this year and were very solid and confident. We absolutely killed them the first game, 25-9. They just couldn't handle the serves. We knew they were a better team than that, so we expected a big push back. And, true to New England form, that team came roaring

back. We didn't really do anything that much worse, but I think they started using their familiarity with our players. They started serving tougher and smarter and just tried to play the role of older, more poised team. They won Game 2 pretty handily, 17-25. I don't remember Game 3, but I don't remember feeling really worried. I didn't think they had quite enough. If we just stayed aggressive and played a little clean, we would be fine. We did that. We only won 15-13, but I have the feeling we were probably up at some point like 13-9, so I felt like it was only going to be a matter of time.

At this point, I'm not feeling great (but then, I'm pretty pessimistic). But I can't complain. We beat a young, athletic, varsity-like team. We beat an older, poised, New England team that knew us pretty well. We're now two wins away from taking the championship! We have all our rotations completely set. We're using 9 players at this point, with a libero and two defensive subs. But standing in our way are the two best teams remaining...

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Geez, I write a lot. My apologies if it's too wordy. I'm just trying to put you there, in the middle of the action...

Our next opponent was a team called Twitch. They hailed from the great state of Utah. They were, to this point, undefeated. Not just that, but they had only lost a single game in nine matches. That's right, they were 18-1 and the only game loss was to Montana Epic. The somewhat amusing thing is that they seemed unfairly unpopular with the other teams, though I couldn't figure out why. But we have all kinds of New England teams coming up to us and giving us scouting reports and telling us to just beat their asses. I wonder if it's a little sour grapes. Turns out that pretty much this same team played BB last year and won Silver. So I wonder if people were resentful that they were now playing B and doing so well?

Twitch was a very solid team. They were all pretty much tall and athletic, except for one of their middles who was unfairly tall and their libero who was tall and athletic and also noticeably pregnant. That tall middle. That was just unfair. I think her legs were as long as the distance from my shoulders to the floor. Seriously, it was intimidating just to look at her. And again this team was good. Long, athletic, they could all hit (hitting lines just looked ridiculous).

But, our team was finally clicking on all cylinders. We weren't bigger than them and we certainly couldn't hit with them in hitting lines, but they had trouble with our serve. They couldn't handle the deep float and it was just enough to keep them out of rhythm. Any team can look good in hitting lines off tosses. But can they pass well enough to use those hitters? They started sending over relatively easy stuff, just to keep the balls alive and we started playing phenomenal defense. The game was back and forth, back and forth, but we managed to pull



out a really thrilling 26-24 win. We switch sides and we just keep going. Everyone's feeling it now. Again, Twitch is good enough that they are not just going to disappear, but we're rolling. It's almost like they reach a point where they start to believe they can't beat us. We win 25-21.

Now, we're excited. Win one more match and we are the champions!

Now we see the real advantage of winning in the double elimination portion of the tournament. We basically get a 5 hour break after winning the 12:00 match against Twitch. In contrast, Montana Epic, having lost to Twitch in the 10:00 AM game, has to play and win in the loser's bracket at 12:00, then again at 2:00. They win both, beating Golden Diggers and Cougars'n'Cubs in the loser's bracket. Interestingly, Montana Epic wins pretty convincingly, taking out Golden Diggers 25-20, 25-20 and Cougars'n'Cubs 25-7, 25-16 (see, I told you they were good). So at 3:00, we get to settle in and watch Twitch and Montana Epic square off AGAIN for the right to play us.

I talked to one of the Montana players and knew they felt they had let one get away against Twitch, so I figured they were going to come out pretty focused. Plus, I had the feeling that Twitch was kinda stunned at having lost to us. And it looks that way at the start. Montana Epic comes out and wins 25-15. I start praying for a long, drawn-out, 3 game match. I don't really care who wins. I believe we are mentally tougher than Twitch who depend a lot on their offense but can't always pass well enough to use it. I think Montana Epic is all kinds of trouble, but they weren't the same team that started the tournament due to injuries and we certainly weren't the same team that started the tournament due to our lineup tinkering. I'm almost eager to get a shot at them. To be the best, you've got to beat the best, right? Montana Epic loses Game 2, 20-25 (I'm psyched. I start praying for a Game 3 that ends 30-28). Alas, Montana Epic makes short work of Twitch in Game 3, winning 15-7. We get the matchup I've been wanting and a shot to see how far we've come.

The court that we're supposed to play on is really delayed, so the match gets moved to a different court so we can start on time. Everyone looks ready, excited but not jittery. They know how well they're playing as a group. You can feel the trust they've built up over the tournament. We go to the coin flip and Sharon plays a little Jedi mind trick. She wants to start play on the right side because she prefers the lighting. So she points out to the Montana Epic captain that if their team is doing hitting lines in warm-up from the right side, they're going to have to shag because there's no hanging netting on the left side. The Epic player then decides to take the other side! Sharon 1, Montana Epic 0...

So we start hitting lines. Sharon asks Max and me to shag. And in an absolute demonstration of class, Montana Epic comes off the bench, all of them, and shags for our team. Now maybe that's just a standard procedure for some collegiate teams or maybe they were just coming over to watch the hitting lines

from a defensive perspective, but boy, was that a classy move in my book. We return the favor (of course) and we start the match.

And everything just continues clicking. Like I said after Day 1, Match 1, I thought Montana Epic was possibly the best team in the tournament. But we go toe-to-toe with them. Everyone pretty much stays hot and in rhythm from earlier in the day. We make plays, they make plays. We know by now the tempo of our matches. We start with three strong rotations, then get stuck in a couple of low-scoring rotations, then have to try and pull away when the first rotations come around again so we can keep siding out to win with the low-scoring rotations. And everything goes to plan. We go up a couple (like 7-5), then down a couple (like 12-14) and it just seesaws back and forth. But it's clear we can do it. We take Game 1, 25-21. We're playing fantastically, and I can tell Montana Epic is tired. They're a little older. They've had to play more matches today. They have been playing three days with only 7 players. They lost their big middle to an injury on Day 1, forcing her to play opposite (where she was good, but nowhere near as dangerous). Here's where our depth really shows. With so many fresh defenders coming in, our defense is really on point, and our key blocker and key hitter are getting plenty of rest so they come back to the front row with a little more juice. Game 2 is like a carbon copy of Game 1. Both teams play excellently, but we have just a little bit more in the tank. At some point, an official comes to me and asks, "So, coach, who are we thinking for MVP?" I almost start cussing him out. I mean WTF? we haven't won anything yet! That's when it really started to sink in: "Geez, other people think we are really going to win this thing." We continue to play really excellent volleyball and win the second game 25-22.

It's just a great feeling. I'm incredibly proud of the way the team pulled together. Everyone did their job and everyone contributed. We run off to have our pictures taken. We get medals. We get a trophy. Sharon, Lindsey and Eva win All-Tournament honors and Eva wins Tournament MVP.

And just like last year, one of our players has to leave for a plane immediately. And five of the players are planning to leave for Sedona and the Grand Canyon that evening, so the team has one brief moment of perfection and then is gone, like a soap bubble. But really, I almost prefer it that way. There's something about that transience that just makes everything seem a little more surreal and unbelievable.

I contemplate retirement. But Marti tells me I should now focus on training a team up for BB ;-)