

Tough act to follow



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Ellen Bugalski always did just about everything her older sisters did ...

1-19-86. Tragedy inspires All-America year

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APTOS — Ellen Bugalski and her older sisters, Leslie and Mary, were always close to each other. They wanted it no other way.

For years, Ellen was in the stands while Leslie and Mary were starring at Aptos High in volleyball and basketball; Ellen wanted to do the same — and did. Leslie and Mary went on to play volleyball in college; Ellen wanted to do the same — and, of course, did.

There was a camaraderie, a support for one another, that knew no bounds. Leslie and Mary handed down their knowledge to their little sister, showing her the ropes. Their experiences became Ellen's experience.

Ellen went on to play volleyball at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo — and play well. Then, in the middle of her junior season, Ellen's sisters were killed the weekend of Oct. 19, 1984, in an automobile accident on the way from San Diego to Ensenada, 65 miles below the Mexican border in Baja California. Leslie was 24, Mary 23.

Ellen Bugalski took about a week off from the season, one in which she was playing at close to All-America standards (she eventually was named All-America honorable mention). She soon

returned to the team, but it was not the same. Understandably, it was harder to concentrate on volleyball.

"I had a really good season going," said Bugalski, who home in Aptos recently on vacation. "Then, the accident kind of threw me off and I let down a little bit at the end of the year. I did miss some time, and it took me a while to be able to concentrate."

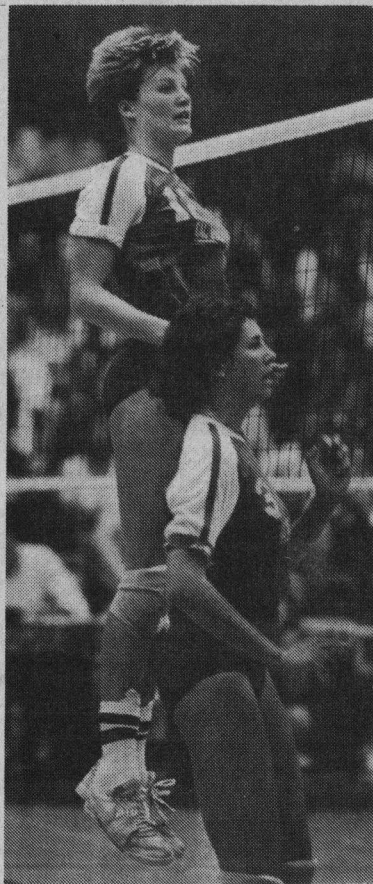
In the offseason, however, out of respect for her late sisters, Ellen made a commitment: to shoot for All-American in her senior season. Nearly a month ago, she made it onto the NCAA Division I All-America team, which is chosen by the Collegiate Volleyball Coaches Association.

"That (the tragedy) gave me extra incentive to push myself a little bit harder my last year around because they (Leslie and Mary) would have liked that," said Ellen.

"I'm sure they're very proud of me, wherever they are."

"I've been following in their footsteps ever since I was young," she said. "I've done what they've done, played a lot of the sports they've played. I looked up to them."

Bugalski never thought of giving up volleyball following her sisters'



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... and their deaths
made her do more.

deaths. She was not affected in that way, she said. She wanted to play better, rather than give it up. "They would have never wanted it that way," said Ellen. "They were

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Bugalski: inspiring senior year

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definitely athletic and they loved it so much that it gave them more incentive to get out there and play.

"I don't know what I would have done if I didn't have that (volleyball) to do after the accident," said Bugalski, whose family — father Bob, mother Barbara and younger brother Bobby — have all become even closer in the last year. "That took up a lot of my time. My relationships with the rest of the women on the team helped me through that."

"She made a pact with herself," said her father. "She was going to dedicate the season and do something to make her sisters proud of her."

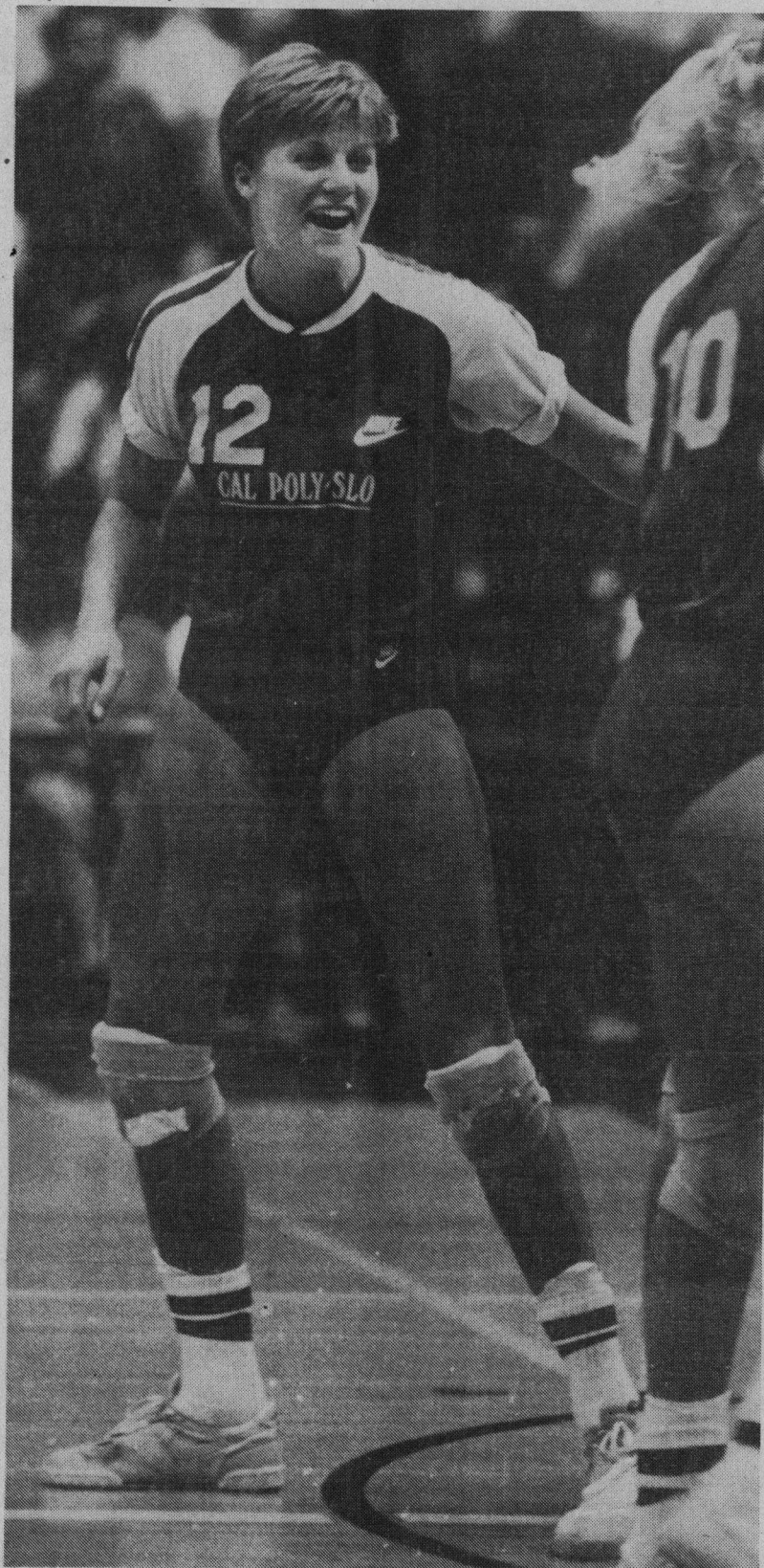
"It's got to be a tribute to her that she buckled down and was able to overcome all the stress and grieving and come back and get the job done," he said. "It was very hard on her because they were all so close."

But, said Bob, Ellen was the one who paid the price by herself and won the prestigious award. "She did it. She's a great girl and that's one heck of an honor," he said.

Indeed, Ellen Bugalski has come a long way since she graduated from Aptos in 1982. In volleyball, she was the Santa Cruz Coast Athletic League's Most Valuable Player. In basketball, she was league MVP, All-County MVP — and was also on the all-Northern California team.

Before the 1985 volleyball season concluded, Bugalski knew the opportunity was there for her to be All-America. After all, she had already been a three-year starter for Coach Mike Wilton's nationally ranked Mustangs. "It was in sight my junior year," she said. "This is a Division I school (in volleyball), so we're playing USC and UCLA; we're at the top level. It was just kind of there. Then, my last year, I went for it."

As an All-American, Bugalski was flown back to Kalamazoo, Mich., to watch the NCCA national championships between Stanford and University of the Pacific, which won the tourney. "I wanted to be playing so much," said Bugalski. "Especially because the team we lost to — UOP (in the finals of the Northwest Regional) — won the whole tournament. We had beaten them two out of three times before the regionals."



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Volleyball gave Ellen Bugalski a positive outlet.

For Wilton, who has coached at Cal Poly for eight years, Bugalski has been only one of "three or four" players to start for four years. As a high school athlete, the 5-foot-11 Bugalski was the dominant player in the league, in two sports. When she went to Cal Poly, Bugalski was forced to work harder, to dig down

deeper.

"She needed to become tougher," said Wilton. "That was a shock to her. Maybe it wasn't easy to adjust, but I think she did in her own way. After her sophomore year, she just started to hit her stride."

Wilton was not at all shocked by Bugalski's All-America award. "I

felt the last couple of years that it was a distinct possibility," he said. "It was just a result of all the hard work she had done."

Bugalski played three positions in four years at Cal Poly. Before last season, she was switched from right-side hitter to middle blocker. "Then all she did was go out and make first-team All-American," said Wilton.

Bugalski does not see herself as one of the most physically talented female volleyball players in the country. Intelligence and awareness have provided the winning edge for her, she believes.

"I think I'm a pretty smart player," said Bugalski, who plans to graduate in a year from Cal Poly and then decide whether to pursue national or international volleyball competition. (Bugalski does not intend to play basketball at Cal Poly next season, she said.)

"I think I know what's going on," she said. "I have a limited amount of physical ability, but I think that I use it pretty well. I don't think I'm an outstanding player in any area; I think I'm more of a well-rounded player."

There are those, however, who believe Bugalski is intelligent and physically gifted. One is John Dunning, coach of national-champion UOP. Dunning also coached Bugalski for a time with the Bay Club in San Jose, when she was a senior at Aptos.

"There aren't many people who are downright overwhelming," said Dunning. "When you think about Ellen herself, she's six feet tall, she can jump and she's quick. How many people have those skills and are that big?"

"I know when I coached her that she had almost no negatives," he said. "She was a good, big, strong athlete. She was intelligent. The trait I saw in her at Cal Poly was that she was tough. She was very determined."

Another person not taken by surprise is Dan Gruber, who was Bugalski's basketball coach at Aptos. "I think she has a concept of athletics that shows up on the court in both volleyball and basketball," said Gruber. "She just knows the whole flow. She knows where people will be in the next instant or two. She has a sense that you just can't teach."

"She has done a lot of hard work since her high schools days to prepare herself for volleyball," he said. "A lot of people from here have seen her play over the years and came back saying that she was just nails."

Just the way her sisters would have wanted it.