

Every Game Could Be Her Last

By KEVIN WOODWARD

Sentinel Sports Writer

She is a virtual cinch to be named next week as the Santa Cruz Coast Athletic League girls' basketball Most Valuable Player for an unprecedented second straight year. But, Ellen Bugalski, Aptos High's versatile star athlete, is approaching each post-season playoff game as if it were her last — because it well could be.

That's because Bugalski has decided to hang up her white hightops after this season in order to concentrate completely on volleyball, a sport she expects to play on the collegiate level. Bugalski has already been offered at least one "full-ride" athletic scholarship in volleyball by a major university in the sport, but more can be expected to arrive in the mailbox by Mar. 1, the first day high school athletes are allowed to sign national letters of intent.

Still, she says, "Basketball has always been a part of my life." After all, her father, Bob, had coached basketball in Santa Cruz County — at the high school level in Watsonville and then at Cabrillo College — since before she was born. And growing up with the game must have rubbed off, as Bugalski, a 5-11 senior center, is one of the main reasons the Mariners closed the regular season at 21-3 and are currently ranked No. 4 in the Central Coast Section.

Saturday night, the Mariners, already guaranteed a spot in the CCS Tournament, host Santa Cruz for the SCCAL Playoff title and the league's top seeding into next week's tournament.

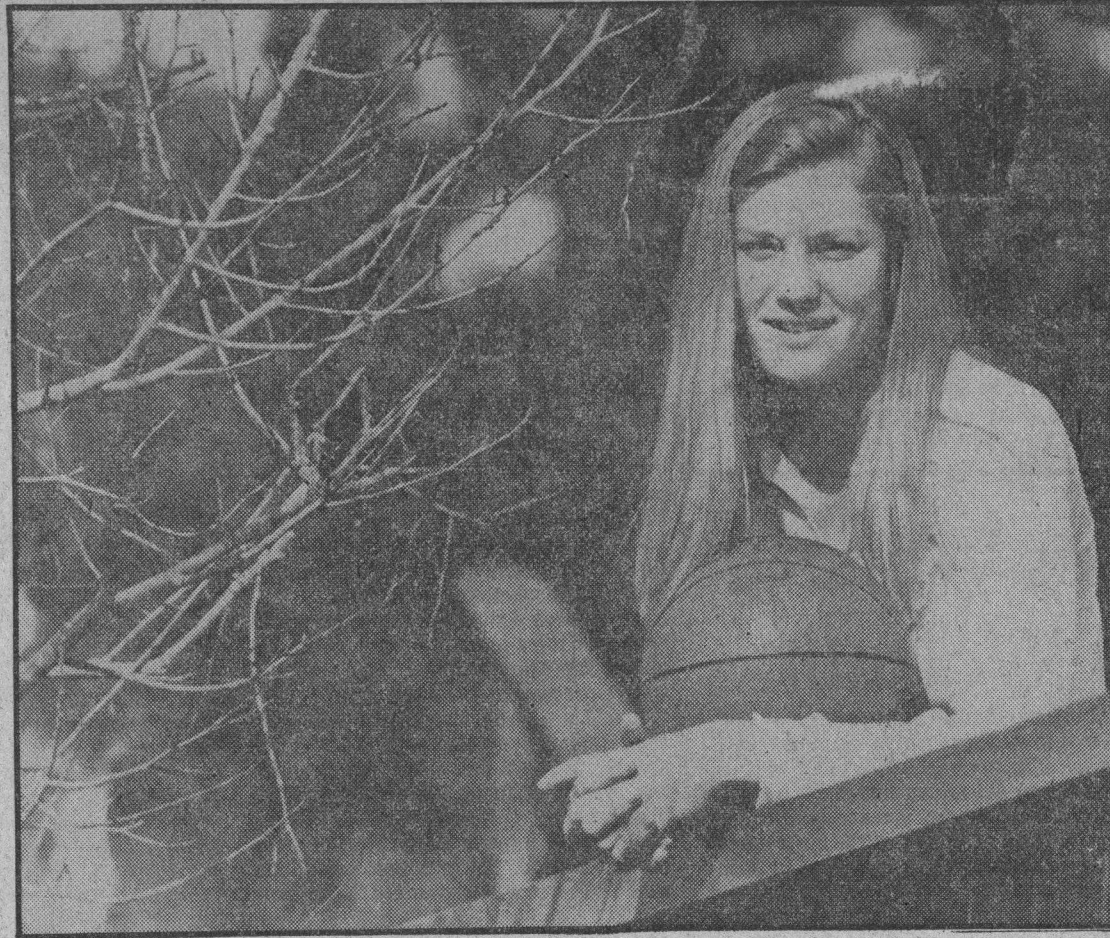
"I don't know if I'm any better at volleyball than basketball," says the three-time All-SCCAL basketball selection, who was also named league MVP in volleyball this season. "But, it's something I've decided to do. I enjoy it more — the whole game, the whole aspect. It's hard to say, 'No more basketball after this.' Maybe after a year or so I may decide I've made the wrong decision."

If she does — but don't bet on it — no one doubts Bugalski could probably earn a scholarship in basketball if she so desired. Her individual statistics this year would certainly attest to that:

- 13.1 points
- 13.7 rebounds
- 3.1 assists

All the while, he averaged only about three quarters of playing time per contest.

"She is probably the best player to ever come out of this area," says Harbor High Coach Emily Fertig, who has watched Bugalski dismantle her Pirates for the



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Ellen Bugalski has her sights set on volleyball — once basketball's over.

past three seasons. "There have been other good players, but it's her sportsmanship that sets her apart."

Bugalski is certainly the type of player who ranks team results ahead of personal statistics, but when she decides to take control on the court, the outcome can be staggering. Last week, with an undefeated SCCAL season and the league title on the line, Bugalski responded with perhaps her best game ever by pouring in 28 points and pulling down 22 rebounds.

"You have to try and limit her and try to cut the other players off," admits Santa Cruz Coach Ray

Hunter. "She is very tough. You can't keep the good players from getting their points, they're always going to get their share."

Hunter and his Cardinals, who have lost twice to Aptos this year in league play, will get their third shot at the Mariners Saturday night.

That Bugalski has enjoyed such a successful high school career on the hardwoods really comes as no surprise considering her basketball background. Besides her father, who coached the game for 25 years, the last 13 at Cabrillo, her two older sisters, Leslie and Mary, were each voted all-league twice at Aptos while

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leading the Mariners to a fourth place (1978) and third place (1979) in the CCS playoffs, respectively.

"My family always encouraged me to play," says Bugalski, but it was always my own decision. I always wanted to follow in my sisters' footsteps and it was always fun watching them."

Bugalski nearly bypassed the current basketball season in order to work on her volleyball skills, but decided two weeks before the start of basketball practice to play for the Mariners.

"I decided I would play," she recalls. "I didn't think I could sit at home. I have to be active. I talked it over with my dad and my sisters and they helped me. I also thought about this being my last year and I'd never get another chance at it, especially after I decided to go on an play volleyball."

What makes the 17-year-old Bugalski such a good basketball player, most league coaches say, is her knowledge of the game — her "court sense." When she gets the ball she instinctively knows what to do with it, knowledge gleaned by watching "thousands of games," she says.

"On the court," says Aptos Coach Dan Gruber, now in his third year at the helm of the Mariners, "she knows what the game of basketball is all about."

"One of the big reasons she's had such a good year this season is the group around her," he adds. "They complement her real well. Our guards are real good at getting the ball into her when they need to and their outside shooting opens up the middle for her."

Bugalski is also quick to credit her teammates — especially starters Char Reber, Karen Cantoni, Cara Hurley and Carin Daily. Watching all those games taught her it's how the team as a whole performs — not just her — that will determine Aptos' success in the upcoming CCS tournament.

"It would be nice to win it all," she admits. "You always think about that. I feel we have a pretty good shot, though, this year. We're together and playing the most consistent that we have all season. We should do well."