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WKU VOLLEYBALL

Cerino's lethal service attack adds new dimension to Lady Toppers

Senior lefty leads the nation in aces per set

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WKU's Sophia Cerino serves during WKU's 3-0 win over Southern Miss on Sunday, September 29, 2019, at E.A. Diddle Arena. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

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Austin Anthony

Sophia Cerino was the last one to learn the rule about Sophia Cerino: Don't talk to Sophia Cerino when she's back to serve.

It's probably best not to distract the routine of the best serve in the country.

“Leave her alone,” Western Kentucky volleyball coach Travis Hudson said. “That's our rule.”

The last thing one of WKU's two seniors had to complete her arsenal last spring was sharpening the serve. Although she's been the team's best asset from the service line the last two years, her ceiling was higher.

Now there's no one in NCAA Division I volleyball with a better ace percentage than Cerino.

“When I go back to the service line, the main thing I'm thinking about is just rip it,” Cerino said. “Get them out of system and do what I can to disrupt them.”

Cerino will have two more showcases for that lethal serve when No. 19 WKU (26-1 overall, 12-0 Conference USA) wraps up the regular season with two home matches starting Thursday against Louisiana Tech (13-13, 3-9) at 6 p.m. and Saturday against UAB (12-13, 4-8) at noon. Cerino and defensive specialists Emma Kowalkowski are the two seniors that have a chance to lead WKU to at least a share of the C-USA regular-season title with a weekend split. They can claim the title outright by winning both games and earn the No. 1 seed for the C-USA Tournament next weekend in Houston.

The well-developed service attack of Cerino has added a whole new

dimension Hudson's teams haven't had in recent memory.

She's hitting at a 0.69 aces per set rate that has led the country for a majority of the season. Second on the national list is Mariena Hayden of UNLV with a 0.65 average per set. Cerino has only had nine matches this season where she didn't record an ace. She had eight against Arizona State on Sept. 6 for a season high. She had three aces in each match against North Texas and Rice last weekend.

“I just spend a lot of time in the gym working and getting a feel for it,” Cerino said. “The more reps I do the more comfortable I feel, the more I feel like I can rip the ball and place the ball. Just really taking the time, putting it in and getting those reps has really been what has helped me excel and get to a different level with my serve than I have before.”

Through 27 games, Cerino sits at 63 aces this season, a number no Lady Topper has come close to reaching since Lindsey Gould hit 60 and 61 aces in 2009 and 2007, respectively.

No Lady Topper has had more than 48 aces (Sydney Engle, 2016) in that span of over a decade.

Cerino has led WKU in that category each of the last two seasons, recording 36 as a sophomore with a 0.35 aces per set rate and 45 last season at 0.38 percent.

Hudson said the emphasis on fine-tuning this part of her game starts in the spring and it was the last thing to complete Cerino's game.

“Soph and I sat down and talked about that being an area she could still grow because it hadn’t been a huge emphasis earlier in her career,” Hudson said. “She really took pride in that and it’s incredible the impact it’s had on our season. We talk a lot about serving and how much it can impact games. Without question, Sophia has gone out there and changed the whole dynamic when she has that ball in her hand at the service line.”

The 5-foot-9 right side hitter brings a spin from her jump serve that's unique mainly because she's left-handed, which has the same impact hitters in baseball have against a lefty pitcher or a receiver adjusting to a left-handed quarterback.

Hudson said he has seen other coaches try to mimic the left-handed spin during warmups, doing whatever they can to prepare the receiver for that angle.

“It just puts a reverse spin on that ball, if you will,” Hudson said. “Everyone is used to it coming off that right hand and tracking right to left. It's just something you don't see very often. Her ball has that curve to it and it's difficult to handle and it's difficult to replicate.”

Cerino said she didn't change any mechanics to boost her serve as another offensive weapon for the Lady Toppers. The senior has just developed the feel and found where she can attack the most effectively.

“I don't think too much about mechanics,” Cerino said. “The main

thing I would probably say is just getting the ball and throwing it up high and in front of me. That's when I have the best chance of being the most competitive as I can be. Ripping the ball and placing it. That's a main focus is getting the ball out in front of me."

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