

COLLEGES

Coaches, friends remember the life of Western Kentucky volleyball legend Alyssa Cavanaugh

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Alyssa Marie Cavanaugh was one of a kind.

Her accolades on the volleyball court were seemingly endless. A four-time state volleyball champion at Assumption High School. A four-time All-American and two-time Conference USA Player of the Year at Western Kentucky University where she won four C-USA tournament titles and was part of the program's first class to appear in the NCAA Tournament every year.

But those few hours some people saw on the court were just a small part of who she really was, according to those that knew her.

The daughter of Eric and Leslie Cavanaugh was stubborn. Full of life. Loved to laugh. A loving, kind soul.

“Honestly, when she first got on ‘The Hill,’ I didn’t like her,” her fellow All-American teammate and roommate Jessica Lucas said. “We would always joke around about how we didn’t have this great relationship, but as teammates you start to learn more and more about each other.

“It got to the point where we were really inseparable.”

When someone talked about Cavanaugh, the word “competitor” tended to come up.

More: Alyssa Cavanaugh, Louisville native and former WKU volleyball star, dies at 24

Her journey started in Louisville. She attended St. Martha grade school, and prepped at Assumption where coach Ron Kordes first saw the small, lanky kid who played defense but worked her way up to being a first-team All-State selection and one of the top offensive players in the nation.

“To say she was stubborn would be a little bit of an understatement,” Kordes said with a laugh. “Alyssa was so competitive that there were times that we’d go back and forth. But you have to love coaching kids like that because so many times it’s hard to motivate people, but that wasn’t the case with Alyssa.”

That drive, and stubbornness, made its way to Bowling Green for Travis Hudson’s Western Kentucky program.

She closed her career with 123 wins and just 17 losses and ranks second in program history with 1,816 career kills and third all-time with 3.78 kills per set across her career.

She also earned the 2017-18 Conference USA Michael L. Slive Female Athlete of the Year award.

“There wasn’t a day that you didn’t want to come in the gym and play with her,” Lucas said. “And not a game — we’d be going up against these Power Five schools, and I’m the person that was always nervous, and I’d have these jitters and she’d be like, ‘What are you worried about?’ She just competed and you knew that if she’s on your side of the court you had a chance to win that night.”

From 2018: For WKU volleyball All-American, there's 'hope' despite cancer battle

Cavanaugh’s competitive nature on the court prepared her for the challenge that was greater than any defender in volleyball. Bigger than playing for a state title or a conference title. Even bigger than playing the University of Kentucky in a five-set thriller in the second round of the NCAA Tournament.

It was her fight against acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

She was prepared to pursue a master's degree at Northumbria University in England while beginning a professional volleyball career, but less than a month before planning to travel, she experienced kidney pain which doctors diagnosed as a kidney infection. However, after antibiotics didn't help, a blood test after a trip to the emergency room discovered her white blood-cell count was high.

On Sept. 5, 2018, she was diagnosed with leukemia at 22 years old.

Cavanaugh faced the situation like she handled volleyball matches — battled it head-on. Through her platform in volleyball, programs across the country rallied in support for the WKU legend and raised money for the Bone and Marrow Cancer Foundation.

“Volleyball was just the vehicle that allowed her to find herself,” Hudson said. “When she got to ‘The Hill’ she was a stubborn, hard-headed kid that had this strong passion for what she believed in, and she transformed it to this strong love this university and strong love for her teammates, and her passion became their success. It was through that journey that she ultimately found herself and became this young woman that inspired so many with the way she lived her life.”

Some days were easier than others for Cavanaugh, but she never allowed it to stop what she set her mind to. In a 2018 interview with The Courier Journal, she talked about the importance of people being registered in the bone marrow registry. Moments before that interview, she was in the bathroom sick due to the chemotherapy.

Still, she never stopped helping people.

“We had another young lady in our program who had been diagnosed with cancer and Alyssa met with her and talked with her and encouraged her and she is in remission and getting stronger,” Kordes said. “She was not only fighting her own battle but was always there to help someone else.”

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Until the end, Cavanaugh was making the most of her life. She received a successful bone marrow transplant from her father on Feb. 19, 2019. She was rooming with Lucas in an

apartment in Bowling Green and was a proud “dog mom” to Hope.

For two and a half years, she never stopped fighting, but on Christmas morning, she passed away. She was 24.

Her lasting impact will be remembered for years to come.

The stubborn kid became a strong, brave and courageous woman.

“I’ve had so many little girls message me and say she’s the reason that I continue to play or I wear (her jersey number) 7 because of her,” Lucas said. “Surprisingly, I’ve had several people who still play overseas that we competed against say the same thing. I had one reach out to me last night and say, ‘I’m wearing 7 tonight for Alyssa.’”

“I think she has really taught me behind the meaning of strong. We talk about strong a lot, but until I saw her fight through cancer, I’m not sure I knew what strong was. I will always take that through life.”

“Alyssa had no regrets,” Hudson added. “As sad as I am that she’s not here right now, I’m not sad for the life she lived.”

“She packed more into those 24 years of life than many of us will with three times that lifespan. She’s a young lady that lived every second of her life.”

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