

Chippewa Valley volleyball learns from coach Nichole Wouters, in life and in death

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Nichole Wouters, left, poses for a picture with the Clinton Twp. Chippewa Valley volleyball team in 2017 during the team's cancer awareness night. (Photo: Photo courtesy of Chad Hottle)

As the Harrison Twp. L'Anse Creuse volleyball players were introduced Thursday evening, each player ran to the other end of the court to hand each Clinton Twp. Chippewa Valley player a purple rose.

It was their way of letting the Chippewa Valley players know that they don't have to grieve alone.

At the conclusion of Monday's volleyball practice, the Chippewa Valley players joined first-year varsity coach Chris Hull and athletic director Chad Hottle in the physical education classroom.

The players had been in that room many times; the last time, at the conclusion of last school year, when Nichole Wouters told them her doctors advised her that she should give up coaching.

This trip to the classroom was even worse.

As the players sat there, Hull informed them that Wouters had lost her battle with lung cancer and she had passed away earlier that afternoon.

The news caught the players off guard. Yes, they knew their 30-year-old coach who had never smoked was fighting the cancer that had metastasized to her brain, but they weren't expecting this.

That did not even cross our mind when they gathered us together,” said senior middle hitter Rebecca Lusha. “Until they said it, none of us were thinking it.

“We did not see it coming.”

They didn’t see it coming because Wouters wouldn’t let them see it.

But it isn’t that Wouters hid the cancer from them. Just the opposite is true.

From the moment she was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer on Jan. 10, 2017, Wouters embraced her condition and held on with both hands as purple became her new favorite color.

One of the first things she did was dye the tips of her blonde hair purple as if she had declared war on cancer.

She attacked everything she did – teaching math and coaching volleyball – with unique verve and along the way was able to show her players that there is a lot more important things than wins and losses.

Chippewa Valley assistant principal Kari Drogosh first met Wouters when she was a freshman at Macomb Dakota, where Drogosh had been a coach and administrator.

“Nichole was one of the kids you could tell right out of the gate was going to be a really good athlete,” she said. “She was a hard-working kid; she was extremely coachable. She came early, stayed after. It didn’t matter. She put the time and effort in all the time.”



Nichole Wouters, in black, poses with the Clinton Twp. Chippewa Valley volleyball team in 2017 during coaches appreciation night. (Photo: Photo courtesy of Chad Hottle)

Wouters attended Wayne State and asked to do her student teaching at Chippewa Valley.

Diane Zatkoff is the principal of the freshman building and she remembered seeing Wouters play volleyball against Chippewa Valley and liked everything about her.

“I loved her intensity and loved her determination that I could see on the court, being an ex-coach myself,” Zatkoff said. “Definitely, I wanted her in our building to student teach and she did a phenomenal job.”

The summer after she graduated from Wayne State, the freshman building had an opening for a math teacher and Zatkoff couldn't hire Wouters fast enough.

It didn't take long for Wouters to establish herself as a team player at Chippewa Valley. There are some teachers who seem to race their students to the parking lot when the final bell sounds. Wouters was the opposite.

She became involved in student council, chaperoned dances, worked crowd control at football games. She wanted to be a part of everything going on at Chippewa Valley.

Volleyball had been such a big part of her life she began coaching in the middle school and even though she didn't have a lot of experience, she became the high school varsity coach prior to the 2016 season.

Hottle was blown away by Wouters' energy and passion for the game of volleyball.

But Hottle wanted someone who was more than just a coach.

“At the varsity level, you want to have that coach who is going to have that lasting impact in a positive way,” he said. “You want someone who will bring some winning and championships, but in the end I want someone who is going to take care of the kids.”

During that initial interview, Hottle got the impression the person he was going to hire was sitting across from him and the more he got to know Wouters the more he knew his initial impression was correct.

“After spending an hour or so with her in that first interview and talking to Diane and Kari, it was a slam dunk, a no-brainer,” he said. “She was going to take care of our kids. They were going to have that mentor and role model that you hope every coach provides, especially at the varsity level.”

Wouters was in her glory as a math teacher and volleyball coach. She arranged her schedule to teach the first hour at the high school so she could see her players and get their day started right before going to teach at the freshman building.

Senior middle hitter Becca Miller first played for Wouters in middle school; that is when she figured out Wouters was going to become an amazing coach.

“Middle school volleyball is rough,” she said. “You're teaching a bunch of kids that barely know how to pass the ball how to play the game. She never got frustrated with people not understanding how the rotation went. She was very understanding.”

She may have been so understanding because she was doing exactly what she wanted to do with her life.

“She had this passion for the game that I just can't describe,” Miller said. “She LOVED what she did and she loved teaching.”

It seemed that Wouters goal was to have her players share her love of the sport and she was a resounding success.

“She wanted us to play to have fun, play for something bigger than yourself,” said senior outside hitter Alexa Garavaglia. “It’s a fun sport in general, but she made it even more fun with different drills, games we would play in practice. The whole atmosphere was great. It was more of a family.”



Nichole Wouters flips the coin before a Clinton Twp. Chippewa Valley football home game in 2017. (Photo: Photo courtesy of Chad Hottle)

Lusha is a four-year varsity player and she was excited but apprehensive when Wouters put her on the varsity as a freshman.

She was thrilled at the way she was welcomed by every single upperclassmen, who each went out of their way to make her feel welcome and Lusha knows that is a reflection on Wouters.

“I always got invited to warm-up with someone,” she said. “Or they’d call me after school and tell me to rush over here really quick and they would have bought me a Slurpee. Or they’d drive me home after practice because I was the only one who didn’t have a car. I didn’t even have a permit.”

Because of her competitiveness, Wouters was concerned when her teams weren’t more successful. Zatkoff and Drogosh both told her it was only a matter of time before she had the program at the level she wanted.

“During her prep period her and I would sit down and talk about what you can do to keep the kids motivated,” Zatkoff said. “They’d be close, but they didn’t quite know how to win. Obviously, she wanted to be a winner, she wanted to have a successful program. I told her it would take four or five years. You don’t just step in and change the culture.”

She never got the four or five years she needed.

She had taken a week off following the 2016 season when she thought she may have pneumonia. A few weeks later, she learned it was cancer.

And it had spread to her brain.

Immediately after learning she had cancer, she went to Zatkoff and told her:

“They told me I might have four years, but I’m going to fool them all. I’m going to do whatever I can to make them wrong.”

To that end, Wouters flew to different hospitals across the country to join trials, hoping to find a miracle cure.

But paramount in her thoughts were her volleyball players.

She didn’t want to shut them out so she decided to go public with the news.

The football team made Wouters its honorary captain for its 2017 cancer awareness game. Last November, she was on the sidelines when the [Chippewa Valley football team captured the Division 1 state championship](#) and she received a championship ring.

Because of her openness, people felt comfortable stopping in to ask how she was doing.

“She was happy to tell you and she told you when it was bad, that was OK, too,” Drogosh said. “She came to work as much as she could. It showed our students this is something to fight through and she’s here because she loves being here and loves doing her job. And she liked to be around people.”

Most of all, she loved being around her volleyball players, who learned a lot about how to handle adversity.



Nichole Wouters (Photo: Photo courtesy of Chad Hottle)

“She was always positive and very optimistic even through her whole battle with cancer,” said senior setter Keisi Markaj. “She was so strong. When you’re battling cancer it’s not an easy thing to overcome or deal with. She would never complain. She was very outgoing and optimistic.

“There are really no words to describe her.”

Wouters began an [Instagram account she named “LipStick it to Cancer.”](#) She posted funny pictures of herself with different shades of lipstick and her players enjoyed following it.

“She fully embraced it and kept as positive spirit as she could,” Hottle said. “And she fought like hell.”

Last season was a rough one for Wouters, who was dealing with the cancer and battling through a poor season.

But she never wallowed in self-pity. She had no time to feel sorry for herself. She was too busy teaching and coaching.

“From Day 1, she said she wanted to take this as an opportunity to show people what it’s like to live and battle the disease,” said Hottle. “There weren’t really any days she was down. She would be honest about it and you would hear her say a lot: ‘Cancer sucks.’ If you asked her about it she would tell you some of the discomfort and pain with having the treatment, but she was always still herself.”

Her team won only one league match last season, but something remarkable occurred through all of the losses. No one complained.

In a day and age when parents want coaches fired for the most insane reasons like failing to win a championship, Wouters had incredible support from her players and their parents.

“They could see the positive impact she was having on the girls,” said Hottle. “The wins weren’t there like we had hoped, but the enjoyment of the game was still there. The girls still enjoyed going to practice. They enjoyed being part of the volleyball program. They still looked at her as a role model.

“It’s just amazing look back on it. It opened my eyes to how special it was that there was a bond between a coach and the kids and even the parents that doesn’t exist a whole lot in today’s society.”

Hull has been coaching freshman volleyball for over 20 years and he saw first-hand how the players dealt with losing last season.

“The team all enjoyed playing volleyball,” he said. “They liked each other; they loved Nichole. They always had fun, they just didn’t have the talent to override playing in the MAC White.”



Nichole Wouters, in purple, poses with her Clinton Twp. Chippewa Valley volleyball team, next to the cancer awareness goal post wrap, during a football game in 2017. (Photo: Photo courtesy of Chad Hottle)

Winning only one league match isn’t anything to brag about, but these girls were proud to be a part of this volleyball program.

“Our record didn’t show it, but we had fun, it was a good season,” Lusha said. “Every season for three years, we still had fun. All of us loved it. Everyone wanted to come back. We loved having her as our coach. We loved the environment.”

In the physical education classroom Monday, the players were stunned when they heard Wouters had passed. Maybe it was their naivete or that she never let on how truly sick she was that they were genuinely surprised.

“She fought,” Lusha said. “She never looked sad or showed she had cancer or anything like that. She tried her hardest, acted totally the same. She seemed strong for us. We all thought she would beat it.”

In the end, she didn't. And the classroom was filled with girls who had lost one of the most important people in their lives.

Last week was incredibly difficult for the players. Every time they walked into the gym memories of Wouters came rushing through.

That will go on for some time.

Tears streamed down all of their faces when they were told of her death, but as the week went on the players began to remember all of the valuable lessons they learned from their coach and all of the good times they shared together.

“I've come to the acceptance of what happened,” Miller said. “Knowing that she's touched so many people also helps. It's not like she isn't leaving something behind.

“And she will be remembered.”

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