

Reeling Them In

Brandeis aims to level the recruiting playing field.

By Adam Levin

One of the most important aspects of putting together a successful college team is recruiting, even at the Division III level. To see how just a small shift in recruiting policies can effect a major change on the court, one need look no further than the Brandeis volleyball team.

Since head coach Michelle Kim took over in 2004, the Judges have won ECAC New England titles in 2006 and 2007, setting the school record for wins with their 28-10 mark last fall. Kim has done this by putting together a roster of thirteen players representing eight different states, including California, Colorado, Georgia, and Hawaii.

Director of Athletics Sheryl Sousa '90 was Kim's predecessor as head volleyball coach. When Sousa became the head of the department in 2004, after seeing the Judges' fortunes in the university

Athletic Association dip, one of the first tasks she undertook was examining the recruiting budgets around the league. "We lagged behind drastically," Sousa said. "The next highest school had a budget nearly six times ours."

Sousa has been able to close that gap, making more travel funds available to allow coaches a much greater flexibility in their recruiting. As a former volleyball coach, Sousa knows the importance of being able to go after a national player pool. "Unfortunately, New England isn't as deep an area for high school recruiting as other parts of the country, especially with so many quality colleges competing for talent," Sousa said. "But I was never able to get anywhere much beyond Baltimore for the big club tournaments that it seemed like everyone else was at."

Now that coaches are able to travel to showcases in places like Florida and California, the opportunities are opening to spread the Brandeis name. Kim recalls her first big recruiting trip to a showcase in Las Vegas. "There were close to 200 teams that I would never have been able to see otherwise," she said. "Before [as an assistant under Sousa], we had to judge from videotape. Now, I can identify club teams that are successful. Even if I or Marni (assistant coach Marni Kutok) don't have a chance to see a potential player, we have a rough knowledge of her skill level because we are familiar with her club."

It was Kim's familiarity that brought players like junior Lorraine Wingenbach, the program's first All-American, from Buffalo, New York, All-UAA sophomore Piera Carfagno, a middle blocker from Los Angeles, and the 2007 conference Rookie of the Year, setter Abby Blasco from Boulder, Colorado, to her attention. After that, it was up to her to sell the players on Brandeis. "Getting prospective students on campus is really a key point in the process," Kim said. "Anyone who is looking at Brandeis is doing their homework. They know about the education we can provide them, but we have to convince them that Brandeis is the right fit."

Kim said that her players do most of the work when recruits come to campus. McAllister was especially impressed on her visit. "My trip was epic," she recalled. "The girls really showed me a great time."

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