



Volleyball, 2B.



Soccer, 3B, 6B.



Football, 10-11B.

SPORTS

SECTION

B

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UNCP sophomore volleyball player Marissa Baker stands out on the court thanks to her different jersey color and her personality.

Photo by Nick Phillips/graphic by Kaleh Sampson

Volleyball's Baker lives in a mind of her own

By Nick Phillips
Editor

Rule 12.1.3.1 in the NCAA Rules and Interpretations handbook states that "the libero must wear a uniform shirt or jersey that is immediately recognized from all angles as being in clear contrast to and distinct from the other members of the team."

That would be the official reason why UNCP sophomore Marissa Baker stands out from her 13 teammates on the court.

But as much as her jersey helps her to stand out, anyone who has been to a Lady Braves volleyball match – and surely her teammates and coaches – will say that Baker is in her own world on the court, both literally and figuratively, and is also a pretty good libero as well.

Baker, herself, calls the libero "one of the most important players on the court," while head coach Jeff Billington says that

she's "like a second captain on the court."

The one they call Red

In sports and in life, most of us have nicknames. Some are good, others are funny and the bad ones falter while certain ones stick.

Baker has one of those. If we look at the volleyball team, there is a mix of certain unique nicknames and those that are easily identifiable. Take in a match and the names you see on the roster aren't necessarily what you'll hear on the court.

Seniors Tricia Varno, Tiara Anderson and Rebecca Morgan go by Trish, Tee and Becca, in a simple case of shortening their names, as is the case with sophomore Jennifer Grunden's calling of Jenn. Senior Heather Bolwerk simplifies it all by going with her initials H.B.

Others are more interesting, as freshman Chelsea Phillips goes by Lu and junior transfer Sarah Bower

brought the nickname Bear with her to campus.

Baker's nickname has the ability to be both unique, and people instantly know who they are talking about.

"My club coach, back in eighth grade, was bad with names. He just started calling me Red because of my hair, to the point it just stuck and now I just tell people I'm Red. I don't even tell them my real name," Baker says.

The player

Baker, who is listed at 5 foot 6 inches on the Lady Braves' roster, played outside hitter until she came to UNCP, but at her height that size doesn't translate well into becoming a front-line player in college.

By the time she was at Pembroke, Baker knew of Billington's plan for her to become the team's libero.

"He wanted an all-around player; he let me know that right away," Baker says.

"She's got the perfect mentality," Billington says, noting that she was a good defender and passer as well while playing with high school and club teams.

As a freshman, Baker finished second on the UNCP roster by playing in 109 sets out of a possible 122 in 2010, finishing only behind Bolwerk's 117 sets played.

Baker finished with 506 digs last season, more than double that of the No. 2 player on the UNCP stat-book.

"I think it's more gratifying digging a kill than getting a kill. I've always thought that," Baker says of her defense.

In 15 matches through Sept. 24 this season, Baker has already tallied 256 digs as she is well on her way to surpassing last season's totals.

"Some of the skills she has when she digs a ball or passes a ball are so flawless that it gives everyone around her confidence,"

Billington says of Baker.

"When you just relax and play the game, your body will instinctively react. That's where Red has gotten to; she doesn't think near as much (as last season)," Billington adds.

But Baker's job is not only about digging the ball; it's also about delivering a good pass to the UNCP setters as the Lady Braves go on the offensive attack.

She says her main objective is to "get the ball up" and that "it doesn't always look pretty" as she moves on the court.

After a brief pause, she laughs and adds, "I do have some cool flips sometimes, though."

The joker

If her jersey color and playing abilities don't have her standing out to you yet, get to the next volleyball match a little early. Your eyes will somehow gravitate to Baker.

Continued on page 9B