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## **SPORTS SPECIAL: Rider volleyball star Jones spends offseason just getting better**

By Matt Schubert

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PORT ANGELES — Kiah Jones had few peers on the volleyball court by the end of her junior season last fall.

Finishing second to North Kitsap junior Sarah Baugh in Olympic League MVP voting, the Port Angeles outside hitter had become an established star in her league.

Fast forward 10 months later, and the Olympic League is about to encounter an all-together different Kiah Jones.

And, according to Port Angeles head coach Christine Halberg, this edition is much better.

“You’ll see,” Halberg said with a grin. “She’s improved ten-fold.”

Indeed, after spending much of the offseason working on her volleyball skills, Kiah appears ready to lead the Riders (6-2 in league, 14-9 overall in 2010) back to Class 2A state contention.

Her offensive game is more explosive, and her defensive abilities are more polished, thanks to countless hours playing with an elite club team in Edmonds.

A rigorous weight training program even added eight inches to her vertical leap (now at two feet.)

Simply put, she’s a bigger, faster, stronger version of the young woman who was a first-team all-league player each of the past two seasons.

“She came back a much more powerful hitter,” Halberg said. “Much more power and explosiveness in her approach.”

Considering Kiah has led the Riders in kills each of the past three years, that’s saying a lot.

But it may also be a reality, due in no small part to the time she spent on the other side of the water working with the Northwest Juniors 18 Elite Black team.

She and her mother drove three times a week to Edmonds — Kiah did homework along the way — to participate in practices and matches from December through June.

There she worked extensively with a former college coach, Tony Miranda, and competed against other elite club teams comprised of athletes vying for college scholarships.

“It was definitely an insanely higher level of play,” said Kiah, who also played with teammate Emily Drake in a summer beach volleyball league in Seattle.

“All the girls that play club want to play college volleyball, so they all have the same determination to get a lot better.

“I definitely learned how to hit better, especially with my timing and being able to stay behind the ball.

“I learned a lot more shots, too, and being able to learn where I want the ball to go.”

Thanks to the coaching she received from Miranda in Edmonds, Kiah discovered fundamental skills she previously lacked — while adding a few new tricks like a jump serve.

Her court awareness picked up as well; the product of having to find ways to attack front rows stacked with six-foot players.

“I would say she had a lot about the position to learn, but she had a good starting point,” Miranda said.

“From that starting point, she has come a long way in terms of reinventing her game and being able to do other things with the ball.”

Much of that can be attributed to Kiah’s insatiable desire to continually elevate her abilities, Miranda said.

“She’s already a very good player, but she still comes to practice with this desire to get better and learn more and be smarter and better,” he said.

“That in and of itself gives her a capacity to continue to grow and improve.

“She’s not quite at her ceiling. She’s still going to get quite a bit better from where she is.”

Kiah had an impressive athletic pedigree to begin with.

Her father, Scott, started at tackle for UW and spent parts of three seasons in the NFL.

Meanwhile, her mother rowed for the UW crew team.

Kiah’s first love, however, was basketball.

She didn’t even start playing volleyball until she was in seventh grade.

Soon enough, it became her No. 1 sport.

And now she’s vying for the attention of colleges around the region.

So far, the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and Central Washington have shown some interest.

A straight-A student and ASB vice president — Kiah is currently the top-ranked student in her class — she certainly has all of the academic requirements checked off.

“I guess I just finally kind of figured out what it was like to love a sport,” said Kiah, also an all-league forward on the Rider girls basketball team.

“Every moment I’m on a court, no matter if we’re winning or losing, it’s always fun.

“I feel like I have a better connection with my teammates on volleyball than in basketball.”

Kiah said she plans to major in biology wherever she goes and eventually get into dentistry.

Before all of that happens, of course, she's got a lot of big goals for her and the Riders to take care of this fall, beginning with another visit to state.

"I want to place, and I know that we can do it," said Kiah, one of six seniors returning from a Rider team that reached state for the first time in 21 years.

"We got experience last year. None of us had ever been in the state tournament before.

"We got there and we were just shell shocked and we were not ready at all for that level of play.

"Hopefully, we'll go a lot farther than we did last year."

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