

# sports

## Setting up for success in the 2019 season

**BROOKE YOUNG**  
Reporter

“When we do good as a team and my teammates are smiling on the court, it just makes me really happy to be here,” said AU sophomore, Zoey Peck.

A fierce determination can be seen in her eyes from the moment one meets her, combined with a gentle kindness that she always puts on display. Peck is a sophomore on the AU volleyball team and one of the best setters in the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletics Conference.

Although she is only a sophomore, Peck’s track record has been phenomenal in the beginning of the season. With 156 assists, 42 digs and seven kills, she was ranked fifth in the nation and was named the GLIAC South Player of the Week in honor of her impressive performances on the court.

Peck began playing volleyball in sixth grade and credits her older sister as her main inspiration for wanting to play volleyball. Her older sister “taught her the ropes” of the volleyball game by playing with her in the backyard almost a decade ago.

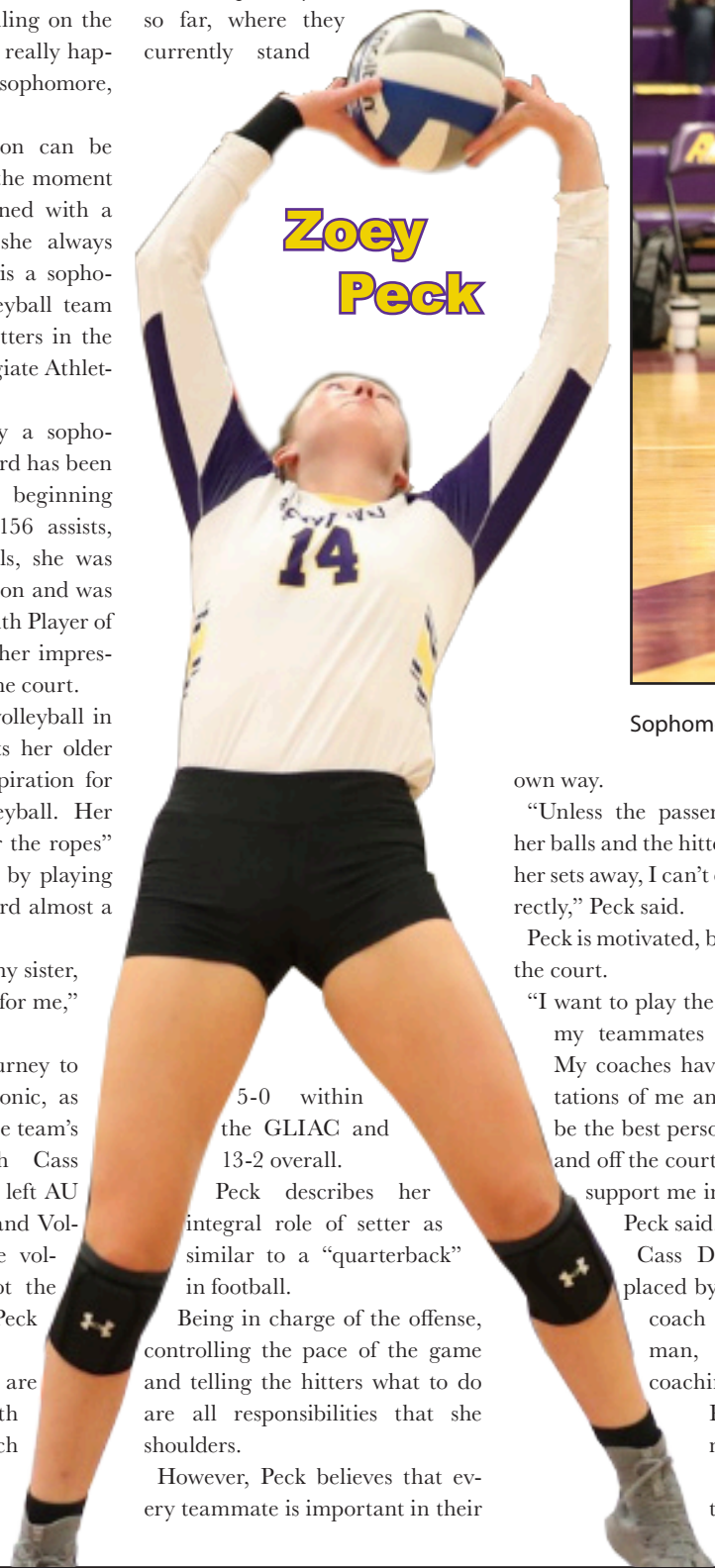
“I wanted to be like my sister, she was an inspiration for me,” Peck said.

Peck recounts her journey to becoming an Eagle ironic, as she was recruited by the team’s previous head coach Cass Dixon right before she left AU to coach at the Cleveland Volleyball Company. The volleyball program is not the only thing that drew Peck to AU.

“The AU professors are very understanding with the athletes on how much class they have to miss. They are lenient, un-

derstand what our job is as college athletes,” she said.

The Eagle volleyball team has had an especially successful season so far, where they currently stand



5-0 within the GLIAC and 13-2 overall.

Peck describes her integral role of setter as similar to a “quarterback” in football.

Being in charge of the offense, controlling the pace of the game and telling the hitters what to do are all responsibilities that she shoulders.

However, Peck believes that every teammate is important in their

own way.

“Unless the passers are getting her balls and the hitters are putting her sets away, I can’t do my job correctly,” Peck said.

Peck is motivated, both on and off the court.

“I want to play the best I can for my teammates and coaches. My coaches have high expectations of me and want me to be the best person I can be on and off the court. They always support me in everything,” Peck said.

Cass Dixon was replaced by current head coach Kevin Foeman, who began coaching during Peck’s freshman year.

“She’s one of the most im-

portant parts of the team” Foeman said. “Setters are often overlooked for hitters, due to the glamour of it, but without setters creating a ball that is hittable, nothing can be done with it.”

Foeman echoes the same determination and motivation that Peck does, stating that Peck has worked hard to become one of the driving forces on the team.

“She worked every day over the summer. She came and did reps three times a week to be the best setter” Foeman said.

While her current statistics and accomplishments are already impressive according to Foeman, he feels that Peck actively works to make her goals a reality each day.

Peck’s phenomenal abilities as well as her calm, collected and coachable personality allows her to continue improving and being the

outstanding athlete she is, according to Foeman.

With the combination of Peck’s team-player attitude and passion for improvement as well as dedication to her sport, Foeman anticipates that AU volleyball will continue to be successful week by week. Peck is expected to rise and become one of the topsetters in the country by the time she graduates according to Foeman.

“She’s the perfect setter for our system,” Foeman said. “She fits it perfectly and we are very lucky to have her.”

Peck’s constant drive to improve her skills sums up her ultimate goal: to become the No. 1 setter in the nation.

The Eagles next match will be on Friday, Oct. 4 at 7 p.m. in Kates Gymnasium where they will face Lake Superior State.



Sophomore Zoey Peck prepares to return a spike during a match against Fairmont State.

AU ATHLETICS

## Nikhol Pluta: Resiliency . . . and a big smile

**NIKO SCARLATOS**  
Reporter

For most students set to attend college, staying at a local university or going to a school that is in the state they grew up in is an easier option than traveling afar. For Ashland University sophomore Nikhol Pluta, this wasn’t an option. Not only did she leave her home state, she found herself on the complete other side of the United States following her dream of playing collegiate tennis.

Pluta grew up in Apple Valley, California and attended Granite High School for two years before transferring to a home-schooling program called Excelsior High School. At the high school level, she had a perfect 36-0 record for her career in league play. Pluta did not always have the dream of pursuing the chance to play the sport, as she was an avid soccer player for part of her life, but decided to play tennis at the collegiate level and

show off her talents.

Pluta can best be summed up in one word according to Director of Tennis Operations Lexi Bolesky: resiliency.

“Nikhol is very resilient and sees the bright side of life,” Bolesky said. “She always has a big smile on her face and always remains positive through adversity.”

After playing soccer for 10 years, dealing with multiple injuries and moving cross country, Pluta has been noticed for having the ability to bounce back and continue to perform at a very high level.

The California native was unfamiliar with Ashland University until Bolseky discovered her. Bolesky, in her second season at the helm of the Ashland University Women’s Tennis team, was able to find Pluta despite not being anywhere near the state of Ohio.

“She [Coach Bolesky] is just amazing at recruiting,” said Pluta. “We have at least four or five play-

ers from a different country and a lot of out of state players so she did an awesome job. I made a hype video and I don’t know how but somehow she found it. Ashland, Ohio was not on my radar at all.”

Despite being such a small school, AU continues to bring in people from all over the world to help develop the careers of student athletes. Nikhol is just one example of this.

For years, tennis has been seen as more of an individual sport at the professional level, but here at AU and at the collegiate level, team chemistry is a very crucial key to success.

“We get along so well both on and off the court,” said Pluta. “We will all go study together as a team, not because coach is forcing us to but because we all want to be together. We get breakfast, we get lunch, we get dinner. We spend so much time together so it is natural for each of us to be there for each other.”

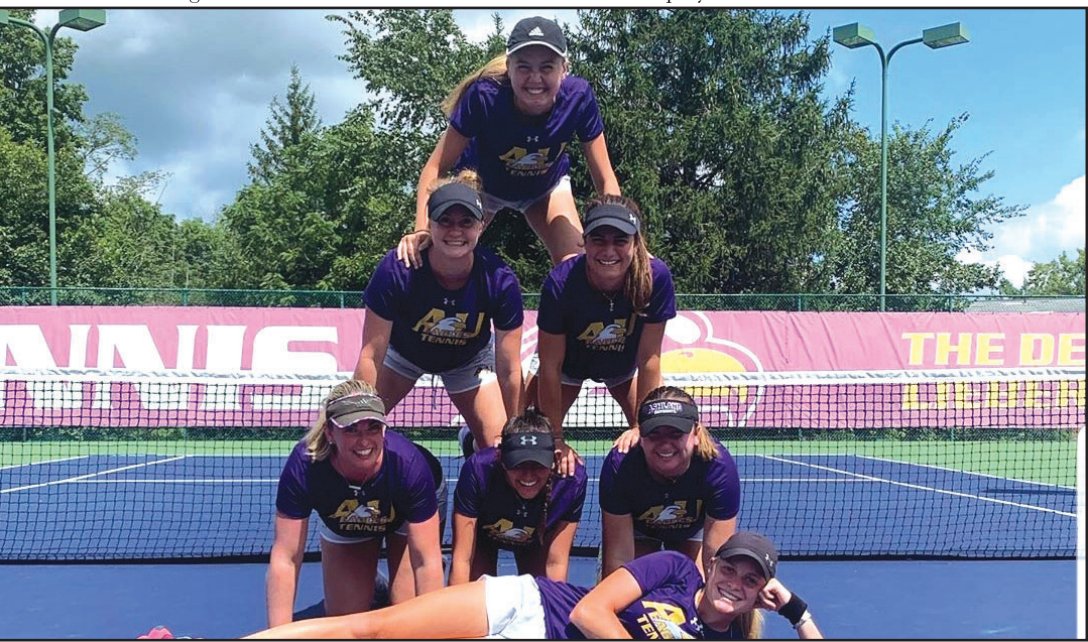


PHOTO SUBMITTED BY: NIKHOL PLUTA

Nikhol Pluta poses with the rest of the women’s tennis team.



Pluta in a match against Lake Superior State.

AU ATHLETICS

Most, if not all, sports teams have great chemistry and get along well but Pluta sees this as a next level type of relationship with all of her teammates.

“I know a lot of teams are close but these girls seriously are my best friends. They are part of the reason I love being here at Ashland so much and it makes it so easy to have fun with them and cheer them on. Even if you aren’t playing. The girls that may not play as much are still so invested,” said Pluta.

The importance of having each and every player on the team buying into the process and getting involved in the team chemistry has gone a long way in keeping the team successful, Pluta said.

The Eagles are currently 3-1 in the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference and 8-2 overall, a record that is already better than the 2018 season.

A lot of adjusting has been made by Pluta since moving all the way from California to Ohio and it definitely took a toll on her in her freshman year.

“Last year was really tough with

all the transitioning,” said Pluta. “The coldest it ever gets where I am from in California is like 40 degrees. When I first got here my body was just trying to get used to it and it led to me getting sick a lot.”

As an athlete, injuries can start to take a toll on the body of the player, but for Nikhol, she has shown the fight in herself by having the ability to get through each injury and come back stronger each time.

“At one point I was in a boot for a month and then I pulled my groin while dealing with a sickness. But as everything looked like it was going downhill, I just kept coming back time and time again,” Pluta said.

Pluta may only be a sophomore, but she has already made a huge impact within her team and around the AU campus, according to Bolesky.

“She is a hard worker and a great example of what an AU tennis player should be,” said Bolesky.

The Eagles play their next match at Wayne State on Saturday, Oct. fifth at 11 a.m.