

# Senior digs her role for No. 10 Purdue

By SAM KING  
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As the youngest of five children, including a twin sister, Emily Ehlers learned early in life about being competitive.

So when it came time to choose a volleyball future at either Miami (Ohio) or Purdue, she became a Boilermaker because of the challenges the Big Ten presented.

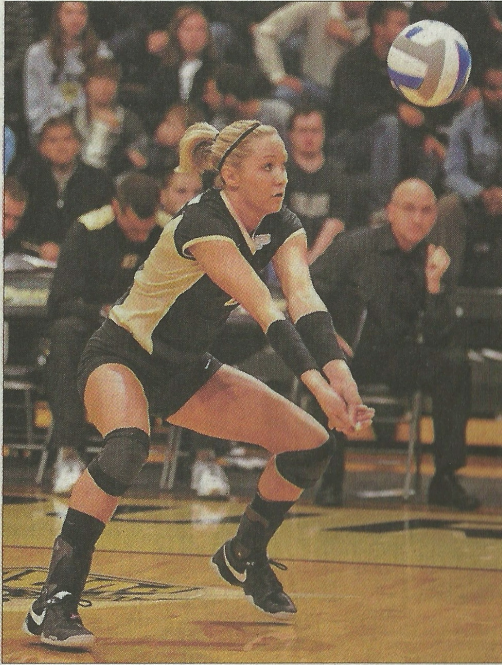
"When it came down to choose my college, I had to choose between playing at a high level like Purdue and changing my position or playing at a lower level and continuing my career as an outside hitter," Ehlers said. "I sacrificed changing my position and it was the greatest thing I've ever done."

The former outside hitter who led Penn High School to sectional and regional titles in 2004 and '06 had to shift to defensive specialist as an undersized player in the nation's strongest volleyball league.

Just another challenge. And another one conquered.

"She had good skills, but she had not done lot of back row work," said Emily's father, Tom, who played football at Kentucky before an NFL career with the Eagles and Bills. "The biggest skill she could get away with was hitting, but she can't play in the Big Ten at that height."

She's had plenty of work as a back row player at Purdue. Midway through her freshman season, coach Dave Shondell made the decision not to redshirt



Purdue's Emily Ehlers digs a ball against Indiana last month. (BY BRENT DRINKUT/JOURNAL & COURIER)

her. She played 16 matches as a freshman and helped the team reach the Sweet 16.

"Our plans were to redshirt her that first year, but we couldn't do it. We had to play her," Shondell said.

She still recalls that conversation with Shondell on the bench at Michigan. Things have worked out.

In Thursday's victory over Iowa, Ehlers recorded her 1,000th career dig, becoming the 14th Boilermaker to do so.

"She's become a great player as opposed to just an average defender, which she probably was in high

school because she was a big hitter in high school," said senior Tiffany Fisher, Ehlers' roommate for the last four years.

Now seniors with the 10th-ranked Boilermakers, Ehlers, Fisher and Blair Bashen will play their final regular-season match in Holloway Gymnasium. And it's a big one.

Purdue hosts conference leader and No. 2 Nebraska. Purdue sits in second place in the Big Ten standings, two back of the Cornhuskers.

It's helping Purdue reach those heights that Ehlers will take as her legacy. She bought into the coach-

## TONIGHT'S MATCH

No. 2 Nebraska  
(21-2, 14-1)

at No. 10 Purdue  
(23-3, 12-3)

Time: 7 p.m.

Radio: WSHY (1410)

Internet: BTN.com

Tickets: Sold out

ing staff's mantra that the Boilermakers would soon be a national powerhouse.

Ehlers already was given great athleticism and had ties to Purdue. Her brother, Eric, was a club hockey player and her grandfather, Ed Ehlers, may be one of Purdue's all-time great athletes.

He was coached in high school by John Wooden, who became a lifelong friend. He played basketball, baseball and football for the Boilermakers before becoming the first draft pick in Boston Celtics' history when he was taken third overall in the first official NBA draft in 1947. He also was drafted by the New York Yankees and Chicago Bears.

With the athletic background in place, it was her job to make the most of it.

She did, with an unbelievable work ethic that rubbed off on teammates.

"Emily is one of the hardest workers in the gym. She is always focused on getting better," setter Rachel Davis said. "She wants to be the best she can be all the time. She never skips a rep. She does everything to perfection all the time and I think that's what's made her great."

Shondell credits getting

## FIVE QUESTIONS WITH EMILY EHLERS

Did it help having a father who went through being recruited when you went through the recruiting process?

My dad, he had to keep reminding me a lot of times that you can't get excited just because you get a letter. His experience really helped me. He was so supportive in taking me to other colleges. He made sure that I made the right decision and that I didn't block out any other choices before I made the decision.

What makes this senior group (Ehlers, Tiffany Fisher and Blair Bashen) special?

Having the connection with Blair and Tiffany that I have is awesome. The best thing about the three seniors is the different leadership styles we have. I think it's important for a team to have different leadership styles from your seniors.

Do you remember your recruiting visit to Purdue?

I remember my first visit here. It started at 6 o'clock in the morning the day after my graduation party. My dad drove me down here. I think what stood out was the coaches. They believed what they were talking about and they believed in the program. I could tell it was something I wanted to be a part of.

Other than last year's Elite Eight run, what's your best Purdue memory?

Beating Penn State was a great experience. No one else believed we could do it. The feeling where you can prove someone wrong is amazing.

Did you feel like a celebrity when you got to do a commercial for the Big Ten Network?

I did feel like a celebrity when I did the Big Ten commercial. That was a great experience. It's something I can always look at and 15-20 years down the road, I can show my kids.

—Sam King/sking@jconline.com

players like Ehlers for changing the culture of the Boilermakers.

Though she never expected anything in return for giving up her body to keep plays alive or accepting the challenge of trying to pass spikes coming from some of the best players in the history of college volleyball, Ehlers appreciates the respect she's been given from peers for her hard work.

Through all the autograph signings, her personal TV commercial on the Big Ten Network, playing

in front of 4,000 fans and making deep NCAA tournament runs, the appreciation she's received may top all those experiences.

"The best thing is probably the respect that you earn as you represent Purdue," Ehlers said. "Just a simple walking to class and having students respect you or having someone walk by and tap you on the back and say good game. That's one of the best feelings I get when I am walking to class and someone says 'Great game' or 'You'll get them next time.'"