

Purdue volleyball player Amanda Miller is a defensive specialist for the Boilers.

(BY BRENT DRINKUT/JOURNAL & COURIER)

## ONLINE

**Live coverage:** The J&C's Sam King will have live updates from tonight's match at [jconline.com](http://jconline.com).



# AGAINST ALL ODDS

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PURDUE UNIVERSITY)



By **SAM KING**  
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The odds have been stacked against Amanda Miller.

She wouldn't make it to college.

Once she arrived at Purdue, the defensive specialist spent two years as a role player who rarely earned playing time.

Then, on the cusp of making an impact on the court, a horrific car accident thrust another challenge to Miller.

She dispatched all the naysayers and obstacles in her path.

And now she stands with her teammates as the Boilermakers take on Florida State tonight in the NCAA tournament regional

semifinals at Minnesota's Sports Pavilion.

Miller is not the tallest, fastest, most athletic or most talented player on Purdue's roster.

However, her story is the most inspirational.

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# ODDS

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## Early learning disabilities

"You could not write a movie script with her life," said Amanda's father, Mark Miller, who was told his daughter would be fortunate to graduate high school. "When she wants something, she is pretty tenacious. I think perseverance is a great word."

In second grade, Miller was diagnosed with auditory processing disorder. APD affects the way someone processes and interprets sounds. It was severe, and she couldn't process what she was hearing, which led to struggles with reading and comprehension due to an inability to grasp phonetics.

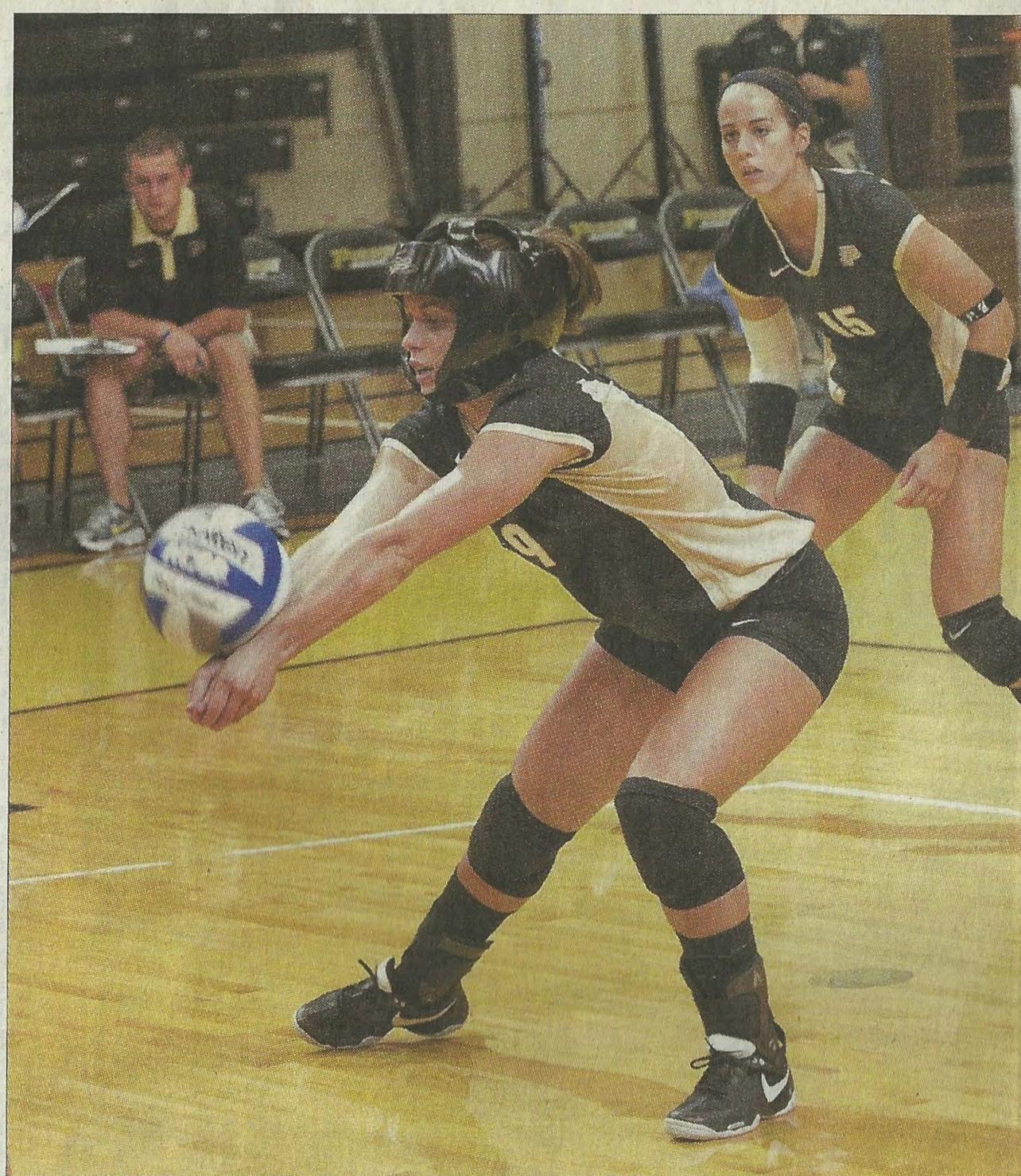
Mark and his wife, Gladys, are both school teachers in Mission Viejo, Calif. They recognized the problem early. As teachers, they'd also witnessed what happened when learning disabilities were not addressed.

"They saw parents ignoring the fact that their kid has a learning disability, saying, 'No, my kid is perfect,'" Amanda Miller said. "They realized that doesn't help. My parents said, 'This is what you have, and we have to deal with it.'"

To deal with the problem, Miller began working with Fast ForWord, which Mark had heard had a high success rate in children with similar struggles.

Fast ForWord uses a computer to alter sounds and work back toward normal speech slowly.

Amanda was placed in special education but wanted to get out. Her visual IQ



"It was embarrassing at first," said Amanda Miller about playing volleyball in a helmet. She said next season she hopes to play without it. (PHOTO PROVIDED BY PURDUE ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS)

she tried tennis.

Her parents purchased a \$25 racquet and took her to a lesson. Even as a newcomer, she was too advanced for the skill level.

She went to Vic Braden Tennis College, but her father thought she tired of the sport too easily because it wasn't a team activity. She also was a track and field standout, breaking the freshman pole vault record at athletic powerhouse Mission Viejo High before a knee injury her sophomore



Miller, in her fourth year of college this year, is a redshirt



In addition to volleyball, Miller played tennis and ran track in high school.

(PHOTO PROVIDED)

## MEET AMANDA MILLER

Amanda Miller has overcome several obstacles to achieve her role as a defensive specialist for Purdue's volleyball team. Miller answered some questions about the lighter side of things as well.

**Question:** What's your favorite movie?

**Answer:** "Forrest Gump."

**Q:** Who is your favorite musical artist?

**A:** Don Henley from the Eagles.

**Q:** If you could invite three people to dinner, who would they be and why?

**A:** Karch Kiraly to ask about volleyball and his success overall. He is my most inspirational hero.

My great uncle Fritz Haber, who won the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1918. I would just like to know about his life. He was good friends with Albert Einstein, which would be interesting to hear about.

Bob Harper. I have been watching The Biggest Loser the past two sea-

everyone was like, 'Why is she wearing a helmet? She looks ridiculous.' My teammates had my back. They really support me.

"They are always like, 'Wear your helmet, Amanda. Protect that head of yours. No more concussions.'"

The helmet is neither stylish nor comfortable.

Despite a full season with it, Miller still notices it. She still holds her head high to give her better vision because she can't see when she looks up. She still gets frustrated when she misses a play she normally would have made but was just a second off in judging the ball because her peripheral vision is slightly affected.

The plan is to play without the helmet next season.

"When I think about it, how often do I really get hit in the head? Not that much," Miller said.

## Opportunity arises

With Bashen, Emily Ehlers and Cramer in the rotation, playing time again appeared to be scarce in 2011 for Miller.

When Cramer had to have surgery for a leg injury, it opened the door. The Boilermakers played Miller, Courtney Gosewisch and Hilliary Fox as the third defensive specialist until Miller separated herself from the pack.

"For what we need, which is a solid serve in that position, that gives Amanda a little bit of an edge right now," John Shondell said.

Against Iowa on Nov. 10, Purdue struggled against one of the conference's worst teams. In the third set, Dave Shondell substituted in Miller and Katie Griffin, who aided a 10-0 Boilermaker run. The Boilermakers rallied to defeat

was low, her father said. By high school, she had opted out of special ed assistance.

"She's always been a perfectionist and very independent," Mark Miller said. "Her reading was severely impacted. She has dyslexia, that was part of it. That program helped her brain to discriminate sounds. It slowly works her toward normal speech."

Amanda credits Vicki Londy, a special education teacher who spent hours on end making sure she didn't fall behind. Miller spent up to five hours a night working on assignments that peers polished off in under a half hour.

"I owe it all to my parents and especially my special ed teacher Mrs. Londy," Miller said of her achievements.

Miller brushed aside talk that she wouldn't graduate high school.

Instead, she took college prep courses in high school because she knew she was going to college.

Because of her disability, Miller was awarded extra time for the SAT.

She hardly used it and scored well enough to be accepted into Purdue, though her reading score barely made the cut of what the university deemed acceptable.

Satisfactory was not something Amanda Miller sought after. She wanted to be extraordinary. She took the test again and scored higher.

While Miller struggled with schoolwork, she did not struggle in athletics.

### A natural athlete

Miller was always blessed with great athleticism.

On top of the plethora of work to keep up in class,

When she tried volleyball, as was the case with many kids in California, there was no turning her away from it.

As a 15-year-old she tried out for the USA High Performance team and made it.

"They said when they picked her, they were looking for potential, they aren't looking for a polished player," Mark Miller said. "She did that and really liked it.

"When she made that team, the recruiting letters started coming. Bins of them."

At Mission Viejo High School, well-known for its athletic success in most sports but not so much in volleyball, Miller provided instant success for the Diablos. Mission Viejo advanced to the California state semifinals in her freshman and sophomore seasons.

She helped teams win medals in national and international competition.

To those who saw her play, there was no doubt she had potential.

"I definitely thought she was going to go on and become a Division I athlete. The skills were there," said former University of Southern California standout Eric Seiffert, who coached Miller with the Laguna Beach Volleyball Club travel team.

### Boiler bound

Miller's father compiled a DVD of her best highlights.

When Purdue assistant coach John Shondell viewed it, he knew the 5-foot-7 defensive specialist was a player the Boilermakers had to target.

"I was impressed with the passion she played with and the excitement she

brought to the floor just besides her skills being good," Shondell said.

Shondell showed the DVD to head coach and brother Dave Shondell, who made a trip west to see Miller in person.

At the time, there was no scholarship available, and the Boilermakers were not recruiting her position.

Meanwhile, other powerhouse programs were recruiting Miller, including then-reigning NCAA champion Washington.

Dave Shondell didn't beat around the bush when recruiting Miller. He told her he'd work to get her a scholarship for a couple of years, but that it would not be a free education all through college.

"All these other offers, it was like five years if you come," Mark Miller said.

On a trip in Chicago to visit Loyola, the Millers made a decision to visit Purdue as well.

Miller felt like she fit right in with the Purdue mold and despite living on the West Coast, a second family developed in West Lafayette.

"I love the coaches and the girls. That's what sold Purdue to me," she said.

### Another setback

Like anyone who had been a high school standout, Miller arrived at her college of choice ready to earn immediate playing time.

In 2008, she played in just four total sets against Tennessee State, Southern Illinois, Miami (Ohio) and Ohio State and compiled no stats.

The following year, she played just seven matches, totaling just eight sets.

Through it all, her passion for volleyball never

wavered.

"She always had a smile on her face," redshirt senior Blair Bashen said. "One of the hardest workers in the gym by far."

Miller believed she was ready to make her mark in spring 2010. She was playing well and was ready to prove she deserved more playing time. Then she went home to California for spring break.

While returning from lunch in Newport Beach on California State Route 73, Miller was a passenger in a vehicle accident that nearly took away everything she'd worked so hard to achieve.

"Basically, we flipped all the way down the road, through the mountains," she recalled. "We were still on the road luckily."

"I thought that was my time to prove to the coaches I could be a starter. With the car accident, I felt destroyed that I didn't get my chance to prove to them that I could do it."

That was just the beginning.

In early September, Miller was making her comeback when she had a relapse from the head trauma she suffered in the accident.

During practice, a ball struck her in the head.

"It got me really dizzy, and I was just shaking it off and kept playing," Miller said. "That was a bad idea. I got hit in the head again. I kept going."

The team had a weightlifting session that day and Carly Cramer noticed something was not right with her friend. Cramer alerted the trainers and Miller was diagnosed with another concussion.

"Things were not going

health and fitness, I've been learning a lot about training people and making healthy lifestyle and food choices. He chances lives every day, and I want to know how he does what he does so well.

**Q:** What is your favorite class at Purdue?

**A:** HK263: Biomechanical Foundations of Motor Skills.

**Q:** What are your post-college plans?

**A:** I either want to go to grad school for some form of kinesiology studying human/sports performance and then become a strength and conditioning coach or become a Division I volleyball coach.

— Sam King/  
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my way," Miller said with a laugh.

Miller took a medical redshirt, missing the remainder of the 2010 season.

She came into the 2011 season, her fourth year of college, as a redshirt junior who had rarely played. In fact, her career statline included only four digs.

### 'Protect that head of yours'

Recurring concussions turned into a point of concern until her father saw something unusual.

While watching last year's NCAA championship match, he noticed a California player wearing protective headgear. Miller accepted her father's suggestion and began wearing a helmet.

"It was embarrassing at first," Miller said of donning the black foam helmet. "In the springtime when I first started wearing it and

After the match, Shondell told a story about how Miller spoke up in practice and questioned why she wasn't seeing more playing time. Miller said that every time she plays, the Boilermakers win and she plays well. Then it's right back to the bench.

"It was kind of in a joking manner, but it was serious at the same time," Miller said of her comment.

It was a valid point and one that certainly resonated with the coaching staff as Miller played in eight of the last nine matches.

Miller had perhaps her best match last Saturday. Playing in just her 16th contest this season, she had a career-high seven digs and also had two assists and an ace to help Purdue beat Louisville in the NCAA tournament's second round.

"It hasn't been until about five, six weeks ago that she was getting back to being full speed and starting to believe in herself, and we realized we had a pretty good player," Shondell said after the Louisville match.

Miller has recorded five aces and 43 digs this season.

And she's not done yet.

For all the times she was overlooked or told she couldn't do something, Miller wants to be on the floor playing for a national title.

There are voices saying it won't happen.

But Miller's life is full of hearing the doubters and proving them wrong.

"I think it shows through volleyball as well as my school work," she said. "Keep working and never give up. Keep that dream in mind and always reach for it."