

STILL IN THE GAME

Neil Nachbar*

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It's not unusual for students at Rivier College to take what they've learned in the classroom and use that knowledge to teach others. However, the classrooms aren't the only place on campus where students have been inspired to share their knowledge.



Jason Conetta '06 (second from the right) coaches the Simmons College women's volleyball team.

Many of Rivier's student-athletes have taken what they've learned from their coaches and have passed that knowledge onto players of their own.

Craig Kolek, who is in his 12th season as the head coach of the men's volleyball team and just completed his 9th season as the head coach of the women's volleyball team, has had several former and current players enter the coaching profession.

Greg Stanton, who graduated from Rivier in 2006 after a stellar career on the men's volleyball team, is now the assistant men's volleyball coach at Emmanuel College. He plans on conveying the lessons he learned from Kolek to his own players.

"Coach Kolek was able to take a bunch of individuals and turn them into a unit, or as he liked to call it, a family," explains Stanton. "He made you understand that when one person fails or succeeds, you all fail or succeed. I will do my best to get my players to buy into the belief that we are a family."

Ashley Snell, who will graduate from Rivier in 2008 with a B.A. in International Studies, began coaching for a local volleyball club team when she was a junior at Rivier.

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“Coach Kolek’s pure enthusiasm for the sport and his dedication to us as a team and as individuals inspired me to become a coach,” stated Snell. “I wanted to pass that same enthusiasm on to younger players.”

Perhaps Rivier’s greatest success story in the realm of coaching is also one of the original members of the men’s volleyball program at Rivier, Don Ferguson.

“My initial class was only the second containing males that lived on campus,” recalled Ferguson. “It was a small bunch of students that contained a number of athletes that went on to start all the (athletic) programs that now exist at Rivier.”

Ferguson helped create the volleyball program with the founding coach and athletic director, Joanne Merrill. He played for Merrill for two years before returning to Rivier years later to play for Kolek.

“My relationship with Craig was different than others who played for him because we already had a friendship from having both coached in the high school ranks,” said Ferguson. Some people might have had difficulty taking direction from someone who was once a peer, but not Ferguson.

“He demonstrated respect and loyalty to me and others that made it easy to follow him and his leadership,” said Ferguson.

After graduating from Rivier in 2000, Ferguson coached girls’ volleyball at Nashua’s Bishop Guertin High School, where he was named 2001 Class L Coach of the Year.

While assisting Kolek for several years with the men’s volleyball team, Ferguson became the women’s volleyball coach at Division II Saint Anselm College in Manchester, N.H. His 2003 squad set 14 team and individual records, including most conference wins and highest conference finish. In 2005, Ferguson was named head women’s volleyball coach at Division I University of Hartford.

“I credit a lot of my current success to the experience I had with Craig both as a player and a coach,” stated Ferguson.

Like Ferguson, Lindsay O’Leary chose to coach with the person who coached her at Rivier. After a successful career on the soccer team, O’Leary is now the assistant coach.

“Coach Jeff Simoneau always put a lot of faith in me, so I was able to really become a confident player,” said O’Leary. “I was inspired to give other players confidence and help them play at their best level. Giving back to my old team has been a great way to fulfill my love of the game.”

While coaching for your alma mater can be rewarding, coaching against it is an entirely different experience.

Jason Conetta is the head women’s volleyball coach at Simmons College, which is a conference opponent of Rivier. “It was a privilege to bring my team to my old stomping grounds and play against my former coach,” said Conetta, referring to Kolek. “I will admit that it was a little intimidating coming into the Muldoon Center, but at the same time it was such an incredible feeling to be able to coach a college team in the same gym where I was once a student-athlete.”

Stanton's Emmanuel squad is also a Rivier conference foe. He hopes someday to defeat the former coach he respects so much.

"Even though I am a graduate of Rivier College, I would love to win against them," admitted Stanton. "To be able to beat the coach who helped you get to the level you are at is always a great accomplishment." ■

* After graduating with a bachelor's in journalism from Roger Williams University in 1992, **NEIL NACHBAR** covered high school sports for weekly and daily newspapers in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, before becoming an associate editor at a weekly newspaper in Rhode Island. That experience led to a public relations and marketing position at a YMCA in Rhode Island, where Nachbar was responsible for the content and design of all marketing material, as well as writing press releases. Prior to writing articles for Rivier, Nachbar served as a writer/editor for Johnson & Wales University's design and editorial services department. Nachbar lives in Nashua with his wife, Jennifer. When he's not writing, Nachbar enjoys coaching volleyball, which he's done for 13 years.