

Soaring Falcon swoops in for highest honor

Rice led Foothill to two NCS titles after pivotal sophomore season

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Inside Bay Area

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PLEASANTON — Standing 6-foot-6, Matt Rice of Foothill High looks like your typical, big-hitting volleyball player.

And Rice is certainly talented, leading the Falcons to East Bay Athletic League and North Coast Section championships. But it wasn't always that way for the personable senior.

When Rice came in as a freshman at Foothill, he was big, but his game was far from complete. He was able to make only the occasional play in the middle.

The next year, Rice turned the corner when he took up the game year-round.

"His sophomore year, Matt made the commitment to being the best volleyball player he could," Foothill coach Dusty Collins said. "He put a lot of time and energy into it, and it's showed. Everyone sees the big hits, but what's most impressive is all the little things he can do. That's what has made him an all-around player."

In addition to leading the Falcons to the two titles, Rice has been selected as the East Bay Player of the Year. It's simply a case of hard work paying off.

"You could see early on he had potential," said Collins. "But just where he's gone as an athlete from a freshman to a Division I player is not an easy thing to do. You have to be special to get there."

Special is what Rice was this year, dominating the front line for the Falcons. Also crucial was his leadership as the lone returning starter.

Rice didn't take the role lightly.

"We came into the season really wanting another EBAL and NCS championship," said Rice, who will move on to play for Cal State Northridge next year. "I felt great about how the team came together as the season went on."

The Falcons started to blend early, finishing second in the Davis tournament. However, they stumbled in the Chico tournament, losing to California.

The loss was a wake-up call.

"That drive home wasn't a happy one," Rice said. "We thought about what we did wrong and focused on the rest of the year. We needed the focus."

They didn't lose again, running the table to defend their EBAL and NCS titles, getting better as the season grew longer. In the NCS finals, the Falcons destroyed Deer Valley in three straight games, with Rice leading the way with 15 kills, four blocks and eight service points.

"I was surprised we won that easily," Rice said. "But (NCS) was the best we had played all year."

Before Rice heads off to college, he's got a busy summer ahead. In addition to playing in national tournaments with his Central Coast volleyball club, Rice will also compete for the United States Youth National A-2 team in an international tournament in Miami in late July.

"I consider myself lucky to have a chance to play for that team," said Rice of the U.S. Youth team. "It's going to be a great experience."

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