

Athletes of the Year

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Stories by Mark Powell Staff Writer

Chelsea Fowles, who was selected as the Free Lance Athlete of the Year, helped lead the San Benito volleyball team to its first Central Coast Section title

To Chelsea Fowles, the volleyball court might as well be a giant human chess board - and Fowles might as well be the queen.

The recently-graduated San Benito High setter said she puts as much stock into the cerebral side of her sport as she does the physical, attempting to figure out what moves her opponents may make before the next few plays unfold.

"I watch the other team's setter a lot," Fowles said. "I want to see what she's doing. I want to see how everyone else moves around the court."

Fowles spends a lot of time observing her own squad as well, advising teammates to "hit the line next time" if it's been unguarded the entire match, or telling them to be aware of where they are on the court at all times.

"If the other team knows where you're not going to be," she said, "they are definitely going to hit it there."

Fowles led the Balers to their first ever Central Coast Section title in November and earned a scholarship to play at Utah State starting this fall.

"She's been so important," said San Benito head coach, Dean Askanas. "She's a smart player, real savvy, and sees the court well. She knows what to do out there."

Askanas recalled one game earlier in the season against Salinas that brought Fowles' importance to the forefront.

"She took it to a whole another level against them and that's when it was confirmed how critical she was," he said. "And when we got to the playoffs, she was just like LeBron James out there. She was doing it all out there. She did great then, great for the rest of the season and was great for our playoff run."

Askanas added, "In her heart, she wanted to win the CCS title. She made things happen. You'd believe she was the captain of the team, whether you knew it or not."

Being captain is nothing new to Fowles, either.

Priding herself as the "quarterback" of her team, which setters are often signified as, she revels in being a director, and captain of whatever team she's played on for the past several years.

"I've been around volleyball my whole life," said Fowles, who fell in love with the game as an 8-year-old ball girl for the San Benito High team, then coached by her father Curtis.

Fowles' mother, Debbie, also lends a big hand as well. She videotaped many of Chelsea's tournaments and practices so her daughter could review her performances and continue to tinker and improve. Debbie has already booked five flights to Utah for this fall to watch her daughter play.



If having mom visit every so often won't make her feel enough at home, Chelsea says she's excited to be playing and living with those who share the same religious background as her, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Plus, Fowles' sister Melissa currently attends Brigham Young University about two hours away in Provo and brother Travis attends BYU-Idaho in Rexburg.

Fowles said she finds comfort and stability in her family and her religion.

"You always need strength for things and that's where I find mine."

Fowles isn't sure exactly what she wants to major in at Utah State, "maybe nursing," but it is certain she wants to be a good mother some day when she has the opportunity.

But before she's ready to settle down, Askanas said Fowles has many games left in her.

"She's a natural competitor," he said. "When that whistle blows, you know she's going to compete. She's got supreme confidence and that's the best thing to have, especially on the court."

Josh Schroder, the Hollister Free Lance Male Athlete

of the Year, set a school record in the pole vault and will be attending Cal State, Northridge on a scholarship

It starts with the clapping.

Slowly and softly at first, but it grows with each smack of palm on palm and becomes electric. Anticipation swells as many, many eyes shift to the section of the stadium field where the seemingly random and progressive applause originated.

Not much time passes before those in attendance are aware of what is about to transpire.

Ladies and gentlemen, Josh Schroder is about to pole-vault.

"For some people, being kind of showy is not their style," San Benito High track and field coach Julio Trinidad said. "But you can't blame a guy for loving what he does. Schroder said that he's not just a pole vaulter, he's an entertainer."

And he's also a record-holder.

This past season, Schroder set a school record in the pole vault, clearing 15 feet, 9 1/4 inches at the March 29 Palma duel meet at Hartnell College while he "had the crowd going."

Schroder, 2007 Tri-County Athletic League champion, however, contends he should have shot for 16 feet.

"I kind of wish I was a 16-footer," said Schroder, who was adopted at birth from his native country of Peru. "Two years ago I set the J.V. record and this year I set the varsity record, so I should have set the bar at 16."

Schroder said that he will be setting the bar higher when he makes California State University, Northridge his new home this fall, earning what he said was the largest scholarship the school had ever given to a pole vaulter.

Books, tuition, fees - they're all covered, and Schroder said he was incredibly impressed with the school's year-round training facilities.

"He's one of those guys I've seen pretty much grow up before my eyes," Trinidad said. "He's a coach's dream, a once-in-a-lifetime kind of kid. He has a desire to win and to improve."

As much of a "dream" and "once-in-a-lifetime" athlete Schroder may be, Trinidad remembers when Schroder had to pay his dues.

Last season, he was competing in the shadows of Todd Merrigan, who was the one to watch. As much as Schroder nipped at his heels and made a run to match everything he was doing, Merrigan absorbed most of the spotlight.

Schroder was not blessed with the level of speed Merrigan had, but Trinidad saw a difference in the two.

"Schroder is more dedicated, more talented, and he watches a lot of film," Trinidad said.

Better yet, Schroder is somewhat of a film junkie, watching his performance after every meet, even on days where no one could touch him.

When he set the San Benito record, the video evidence left proof, for Schroder, that he can definitely go higher.

"This year I got kind of cocky," Schroder said. "I knew I was going to win league and for about a week-and-a-half I was ranked No. 1 in the state."

Though beaming with confidence, Schroder said he doesn't plan on breaking any CSU Northridge pole vault records - by the end of the year that is.

He'll be just a freshman on the Matadors' squad next year but Schroder said he's already jumping higher than some of the more seasoned pole vaulters at CSU Northridge.

"I just know if I focus everything is going to work out," said Schroder, who plans on majoring in civil engineering.

If Schroder isn't in the Olympics representing his home nation Peru within a decade or so, a definite dream of dreams for him, Schroder said he wants to have a good post-college job, and the ability to coach and compete in pole vaulting at some capacity.

Even that might be worth a round of applause.

Kevin Medeiros, named the San Benito Senior Athlete of the Year, excelled in three sports - baseball, basketball and football

When San Benito baseball coach Michael Luna looks at Kevin Medeiros, he's reminded of a raw, two-way player from Cal-State Fullerton who had plenty of natural ability years ago.

That player turned out to be Mark Kotsay, and Mark Kotsay turned out to be a Major League Outfielder with the Florida Marlins, San Diego Padres and currently, the Oakland Athletics.

And as it turns out, Luna wouldn't be surprised to see the two playing in the big leagues at the same time someday.

"Kevin may get drafted," Luna said. "He's played outfield and pitched some, and he can definitely do both at the next level."

The next level is West Valley College in Saratoga, where the 2007 Tri-County Athletic League MVP will play outfield and pitcher, and also compete in just one sport for the first time in years.

"It was huge just to play all three sports last year," said Medeiros, who played outside linebacker for Baler football and small forward for Baler basketball. "It was fun. I'm never going to get the chance to play basketball or football

again probably."

Medeiros batted mostly third or fourth in the batting order for San Benito this season, finishing with a .320 batting average, four home runs and 30 RBIs, despite missing six games with a hamstring injury.

Though Medeiros has a prowess for baseball, Luna said he wouldn't have considered pressuring him into focusing solely on baseball.

"For selfish reasons, you would have liked to have him for yourself," Luna said. "But you need to get the enjoyment out of high school. And Kevin loves other sports too so it was enjoyable for him."

Medeiros said that the UC Davis and University of Hawaii baseball programs showed some interest in him, but he said he wasn't interested in red-shirting.

West Valley will give him the chance to sharpen the rough and raw edges of his skills, he said, eventually leading to "anywhere" he can play ball.

"He just needs a little more velocity on his fastball," Luna said. "He's got a good curveball and a good change-up. With some added velocity he'd do pretty well."

Luna added that with Medeiros graduating, San Benito is left with a big hole to fill for next season.

"He'll be hard to replace," Luna said. "His leadership, his league numbers, his pitching as well - someone next year is going to step up, I know it. But we will definitely miss Kevin."

Morgan O'Laughlin, San Benito Senior Female Athlete of the Year, played three sports - volleyball, track and basketball

Things aren't going to get easier for newly-christened San Benito alumna Morgan O'Laughlin. They're just going to get a bit simpler.

The former three-sport athlete is leaving behind two of her cherished activities, track and field and basketball, and traveling 3,162 miles to hone her volleyball skills at Bentley College just outside of Boston.

"It will be fun to focus just on volleyball," said O'Laughlin, who played outside hitter for the Balers in their first-ever Central Coast Section title run this past season. "But even so, it's not going to get easier. It's going to take a lot of hard work, but I think I'm going to get a lot better faster."

O'Laughlin said she also plans to make at least a small impact on the day she arrives to play at Bentley.

"I think I'm going to wear my tie-dye shirt the first day of practice, ha-ha."

O'Laughlin also played forward for the San Benito girls' basketball team and competed in the discus, shot put and triple-jump for the track and field squad.

However, Baler volleyball coach Dean Askanas said that O'Laughlin is just as much a "jack-of-all-trades" in volleyball as she is in her wide-ranging participation in sports.

Askanas played O'Laughlin at setter, middle blocker and eventually at outside hitter, where she competed during San Benito's title march.

"She has an overall athleticism that few have," Askanas said. "

Not bad for a girl who said she never starting playing sports until she was in sixth grade.

Tap dance and Capitola Junior Lifeguard training encompassed most of O'Laughlin's activities before her friends

encouraged her to participate in athletic competition.

O'Laughlin definitely doesn't regret agreeing to her friends wishes.

"I definitely enjoy sports more," said O'Laughlin, who also graduated with a 3.7 GPA.

After making the junior varsity volleyball team as freshman, O'Laughlin said that people started taking notice of her skills.

San Benito track and field coach Julio Trinidad said he would have maybe liked to see O'Laughlin devote a more time to the discus ring, but believes that everyone deserved a chance to see her compete.

"She's so talented it would be unfair to keep her to yourself," Trinidad said. "She's innately-dynamite on the volleyball court. She's a pretty mean forward in basketball. It would have been a crime to keep her in one sport."