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## Kaua'i grads commit to 4-year colleges

by Lanaly Cabalo - THE GARDEN ISLAND

They were three high school buddies who shared a love of volleyball. Kaleo Baxter, Kevin Downing and Rikki Garma were members of the 2004 Kaua'i Interscholastic Federation championship team that went undefeated all season and the 2005 championship team their senior year. All three went on to play in junior college and now, they're upgrading to the next level.

Baxter, of Kapa'a, played at Irvine Valley College, a two-year feeder school to the California State and University of California school systems.

While there, the 5-foot, 9-inch libero helped the Lasers win two consecutive California Community College Athletic Associations Men's Volleyball Championship titles — the first in a five-game set over Long Beach City and the second in a three-game sweep over Orange Coast College.

Baxter averaged 2.77 digs per game and holds the current school record for digs in a match (27). Baxter was named to the First Team All-Conference and the All-State Tournament team.

His performance at the JC level and his skills have gotten him noticed by larger schools.

"I wasn't getting looked at out of high school," Baxter said. "(Irvine Valley) was an opportunity to improve my skills. As a player, I couldn't have asked for a better outcome. The coaching staff has done so much for my volleyball playing skills; technique-wise, getting up to the college speed as opposed to high school which is slower, and they helped with academics to help me transfer to a four-year college"

Baxter said that, now, he has a better understanding of what it means to be a collegiate athlete.

"I was lazy (in high school). I definitely put sports first," he said. "The coaches made me realize it's not all about volleyball. I needed to focus on something other than volleyball."

He learned to balance a focus on academics and athletics.

He garnered interest from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Lewis University in Illinois and Cal-State Northridge. Earlier this month, Baxter gave his verbal commitment to Northridge where he will try to play into a scholarship.

"I was extremely happy two other schools were interested but at the same time shocked because you never think it's going to happen until it's actually happening."

Baxter plans on majoring in sociology with an emphasis on counseling.

For Downing, playing volleyball while attending college was kind of an afterthought.

Downing, of Po'ipu, was originally attending the University of Colorado and was on the waiting list for the nursing school.

"I always wanted to play Division I, but was always told I was too big," he said, referring to his body size as opposed to his height.

But he missed playing volleyball and figured that while he was waiting, he'd head out to El Camino College in California to play alongside his Kaua'i High School teammate, Garma.

"I found out I was playing really well," he said.

The 6-foot, 5-inch outside hitter hit a record 400 kills, had 21 aces and 81 blocks in his short stint there.

One of the things he liked the best about being at El Camino was that he was near some of the prime areas for beach volleyball.

"I got to see the AVP players from Hermosa Beach and Karch Kiraly. It was like being around royalty and knowing that I compete with them; it was amazing," he said.

For his upgrade, he will be attending the University of the Pacific in Stockton, Calif., where he will most likely study sports medicine. His ultimate goal is to become a doctor.

Garma, unlike his friends, will be leaving California and heading to the Midwest to play for Lewis.

"They were looking for a libero and they were interested in me," Garma said.

This past season, Garma broke the school record for digs in a single season with 242 — a record he previously set a year ago with 241.

Lewis was his top-pick heading into the season but held off making any commitments until hearing where Baxter would be going, since there was a chance that he would go there too.

But he committed to them with the plan of accepting an academic and athletic scholarship, without even visiting the campus.

"I thought I could hang with them," he said.

Garma originally joined the team at El Camino with the intention on being the setter. In his first year, he made the shirt switch to libero, but is comfortable playing either position.

"Collegiately, I want to play libero because I get a rush and I get more time on the court and I don't have to worry about serving or setting," he said.

Both Downing and Garma were named to their conference's first teams. This was Gama's second time on the team.

All three of them achieved their goals of attending college and playing at the collegiate level and all three seem very happy about the route they took to get to the next level.

"If you want to play in Division II or Division I, I strongly suggest going to a junior college," Downing said.

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