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Amputees cherish chance to play sitting volleyball

By Jenni Carlson

EDMOND — Heather Erickson grabbed her shin with both hands and pulled.

Thwoop.

Like a plunger pried from the bathroom tile, her prosthetic leg popped off her real one, revealing a rounded stump above where her knee should be. She propped the leg next to her on the bleachers, adjusted the sock on what remained of her right leg and lowered herself onto the floor.

Time for some volleyball.

It's a style that isn't widely known. Played mostly by the disabled, sitting volleyball is just like the standing game except for the smaller court and the sitting players.

Few teams play the game better than Erickson and her U.S. sitting volleyball teammates, who train at Central Oklahoma and begin play today at the Paralympics in Beijing. The spirit on display last month in Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt and every other Olympic champion? It's been running through the veins of these women for months while they prepared for this opportunity.

It's an opportunity, as one player said, to be judged on ability rather than disability.

Thing is, these women are already winners because of what they've overcome.

"We have planes, trains and automobile accidents," team veteran Lora Webster said. "Each person is such an amazing story."

Webster and Allison Aldrich survived cancer by amputating a leg, much like basketball legend Wayman Tisdale did last month.

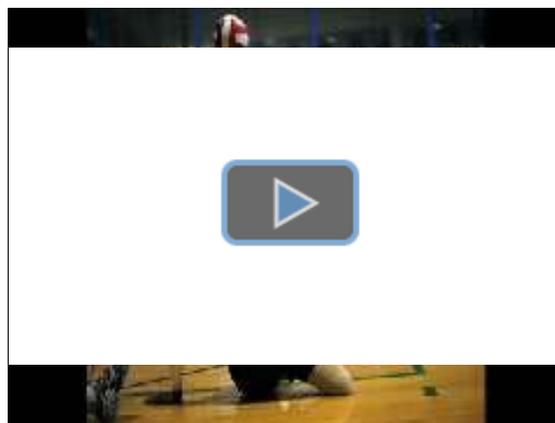
Hope Lewellen was run over by a 767 and lost her leg when the former airplane mechanic was helping move the massive jet.

Gina McWilliams and Kari Miller lost legs in car crashes. For Nichole Millage, it was a boat accident. For Brenda Maymon, a lawnmower mishap.

Whether by horrific accident or random genetics, none wanted to go without a limb. None chose to lose it.

Erickson did.

Born with a right tibia that wouldn't grow as fast as her left one, Erickson endured exhaustive efforts failed to correct the problem. Doctors gave her an option when she was only 9 years old: keep trying to fix it or cut it



US Paralympic volleyball team Members of the women's US Paralympic Volleyball team talk about their sport.

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off.

"I was actually able to make the decision," she said.

She wanted to run and jump and live more than she wanted her leg.

To understand the spirit of the U.S. women's sitting volleyball team, to realize how a loss can really be a gain is to know the story of Heather Erickson.

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Heather Erickson uses a healthy dose of "like" when she talks, keeps a messy room, texts friends constantly and loves playing sports.

She is a typical 15-year-old.

Then again, she isn't. She attends a high school with 2,000 students where there is pressure to fit in. She lives in a society where girls are constantly bombarded with images of beauty and standards of perfection. And yet, she is not the least bit self-conscious about her leg.

Sometimes, she'll catch kids looking at her prosthetic. They'll stare. They'll whisper. They'll stare some more.

"And I'll just whip it off to scare 'em," Erickson said.

How can you have a hangup about something that changed your life?

Truth is, many of her teammates have.

Most amputees do.

"We work so hard to try to get them to fit back into 'normal' society," said Gina McWilliams, who teaches adaptive sports and is going to her second Paralympics with the sitting volleyball team. "They're taught to put pants on and walk around and go back to a normal life."

That's what happened to Katie Holloway. Born without a right fibula, she had her leg amputated before her second birthday. She became an all-state basketball player in Washington and earned a Division-I scholarship to Cal State-Northridge.

Yet, there were times she kept her prosthetic secret, even from her teammates.

"I used to hide my leg," Holloway said. "I don't hide anymore."

Erickson never did.

When she was still an infant, doctors discovered a problem with her right leg. It was a condition called pseudoarthrosis, what her dad calls a \$12 word for the bottom third of her shin bone not growing.

Erickson had one surgery after another. Doctors tried everything imaginable to stimulate bone growth. Bone grafts. Synthetic implants.

She even wore a device called an Ilizarov. The contraption looks like it's from the future or a torture chamber. It bolted around her lower leg with wires and rods that were supposed to generate bone growth.

It didn't work.

Nothing did.

Even after 15 surgeries, her leg was shorter, her foot smaller. Doctors gave Erickson a choice. Continue having surgeries to try to correct the problem, wear corrective lifts that would've limited physical activity, or have the lower part of her leg amputated.

She knew what she wanted — a chance to play.

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For years, Erickson could only watch her sister play volleyball.

She loved the sport. The speed. The action. The teamwork. She would go to her sister's practices, maybe serve a little bit, but since young Heather was still undergoing treatment, she could do little else.

She hated it.

Erickson was an athlete trapped in an unwilling body.

"I got in trouble a lot with doctors," she said, "because I would do stuff I wasn't supposed to do."

Bouncing on the trampoline, for example.

"We would put soap on the trampoline and then put sprinklers under it," she said, her words accelerating, her voice rising. "I was a kid!"

And after doctors amputated her leg and she received her first prosthetic, Erickson felt like she had the chance to be a kid for the first time. She ran track. She played volleyball. She did all the things she never could before.

"I didn't think, 'Oh, my leg! Where is it?'" she said. "I just got into sports."

She was playing at a tournament with her club volleyball team last year when Bill Hamiter, coach for the U.S. men's sitting volleyball team, noticed her. Because there is no feeder system for the sitting teams, most of the players are discovered by chance.

Erickson wasn't sure what to make of sitting volleyball when Mike Hulett called her about joining the U.S. women's team.

She was hesitant.

"More like anti," Hulett joked.

"Because it hurt," Erickson wailed.

The pain was in her backside. Sitting on the floor those first few practices left her sore like it leaves every first-time player.

"I didn't really move, so I was just sitting on my butt," she said. "You realize you actually have to move."

Because the court is smaller and the net is lower, everything is faster than the standing game. Opponents sitting only a few feet away will spike the ball 50 miles an hour or more.

The reaction time is minimal.

So is mobility.

"The difference between standing and sitting is you can be a little less coordinated in standing," said first-time Paralympian Kari Miller, who lost both legs nine years ago when a drunk driver hit her car. "We have to move with our arms, then use your arms to play the ball."

Players roll and lunge and do whatever they can to get to balls.

Last spring at an international tournament in Egypt, a couple of the gals slammed heads during a match and ended up with concussions.

Team veteran Webster said, "This is not a sport for the fragile."

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Heather Erickson has quite a what-I-did-with-my-summer story.

When she starts her sophomore year of high school back home in North Carolina, she can tell all her friends about the months she spent training in Oklahoma, about the teammates she had and the friends she made. She can talk about going to China and playing in the Paralympics.

Maybe there will even be a medal to show off.

Thing is, having a chance to play is the real reward for Erickson. That's what she wanted when she was 9, and it's still what she craves.

That's what everyone on the U.S. women's sitting volleyball team wants. No matter how they became amputees — by chance or by choice — they refused to let their loss limit their life.

"It sucks sitting on the sidelines," Erickson said.