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## Bresnahan Is Prepvolleyball.com National Coach of the Year



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**Kathy Bresnahan is our National Coach of the Year**

Iowa City West head coach Kathy Bresnahan, who led the Trojans to a second consecutive Iowa 4A championship last fall, is PrepVolleyball.com's National Coach of the Year for 2011. She was an easy choice.

When Bresnahan, known as "Bres" all around Iowa City, submitted Iowa City West's information sheet for the 2011 fall season to PrepVolleyball.com on Aug. 10, she had to feel good about her team's chances to defend its 2010 Iowa 4A title, the first in her 23-year coaching career. Yes, the Trojans had graduated three Division I players, OH **Alli O'Deen** (Iowa), MB **Lexi Potter** (Wingate) and libero **Katie Kelley** (Maryland), but the team had seven key seniors back.

"We should be title contenders by the end of the season," she wrote.

One day later, none of that mattered anymore. Rising senior setter **Caroline Found**, an Honorable Mention All-State pick in 2010 and the heart and soul of the team, was killed in a moped accident after leaving a Young Life meeting.

The team was devastated. Bres was shattered. Compounding the tragedy, Caroline's mother, Ellyn, died of pancreatic cancer 12 days later, two days before the Trojans were slated to open the season.

Iowa City West lost its first match, to Pleasant Valley, and its second, to North Scott. The losses were irrelevant. Bresnahan wasn't focused on the scoreboard. She was trying to save her players.

Tom Keating, the current Principal at Cedar Rapids Xavier and National Coach of the Year recipient in 2003 while at Dubuque Wahlert, watched his longtime colleague deal with the tragedy.

"Kathy will tell you that so many people helped her and the team work through this incredibly challenging time but the reality is that Kathy was the rock," Keating said. "She accepted each and every kid where they were and allowed all of them to grieve in a personal way. She never forced the issue but she also gently guided them back to what they knew and were comfortable with – competing."

With Caroline's best friend, senior **Kelley Fliehler**, stepping into her shoes at setter, a position she'd never played before, West High started winning. The Trojans won 17 matches in a row, including two wins over Wahlert, which was ranked No. 1 in Iowa's 3A class at the time.

Still, all was not well.

"To be honest, [Caroline's] death made the season grim," Bresnahan said. "At the two-month anniversary, we were still struggling and I should have caught that. Grief manifests itself. Kids were snippy and short and were choked up with tears. There are different triggers. We had just lost the pulse and soul of the team. Caroline calmed everybody down. Her enthusiasm was infectious. Her zest for life was infectious. She was a tremendous influence here."

Somehow, Bres held the team together and West qualified for State with a 36-6 record.

The players and Bresnahan were not done, however, not even when they faced a two sets to none deficit to nationally-ranked Iowa City High in the state final and not even when they faced three match points against them in the fifth set. Together they found a way. The title was the second in a row for Iowa City West and for Bres and the 625th win (against just

180 losses) in her career.

"The adversity that she went through this year with her team was amazing," said Ankeny coach Dave Whims. "She pulled those players together and they became a team."

"We all watched with awe as the team excelled beyond expectations, much due to Kathy's willingness to grow with her team and help them to create an amazing bond with one another," added Pleasant Valley coach Stacey Ruff.

"I think Kathy was terrific this year due to how she handled a group of girls who lost a close/ best friend who happened to be a great setter," said City High coach Craig Pitcher. "How she balanced tears, sweat, emotion, and sorrow -- and that wasn't even with the idea of playing 40 volleyball matches -- is a credit to her. She orchestrated a year that, as one writer put it, had a Hollywood ending."

Bresnahan will tell you that her accomplishments were irrelevant. What mattered was that her team and the individual players were becoming whole once again, comforted by playing a sport they loved, for themselves, sure, but much more importantly, for their friend Caroline.

"I am awed by my players," Bres noted. "What they were able to accomplish is beyond my comprehension. Talent-wise, there is no way they should have won state without Caroline Found directing our offense. That her best friend, Kelley Fliehler (who never set in her life), could step in and learn our complicated offense on the fly is amazing. That our hitters, particularly **Shelly Stumpff**, **Hannah Infelt** and **Olivia Fairfield**, could remain so patient early in the season as Kelley matured into the setting role demonstrates their selflessness.

"Mentally, I'll never know how they found their strength. They refused to dishonor Caroline – or her mother Elyn - by crying on the court during practice, so they would simply step outside when they were too overwhelmed with emotion. Many a practice ended without a single player in the gym but rather all sitting in a circle outside. They had very little reserve to draw on during long matches or tournaments but somehow they would find *just enough* to succeed. I continually asked them to not play for Caroline because that was too much of an emotional burden but I knew that this was one area that they were all defying me. I knew they were playing for #9 and that anything less than a championship they would have felt they left her down.

"I feel blessed to have experienced this journey with this tremendous group of young ladies. I will love them forever as if they were my daughters. It was a life-altering experience for us all. The wins were irrelevant – this was a season of survival. There was a tremendous burden on this group from their classmates, community and friends to help aid everyone

else's healing process...the team became an extension of the Found family to so many. This wasn't a season about coaching and competing but rather a season in which we clung to each other and helped each other move forward one day at a time. This was a season in which #9 was with us every step of the way....."

Dr. Ernie Found, Caroline's father, said that coach Bresnahan is a deserving choice for National Coach of the Year.

"I would kind of describe her as a rock -- somebody you can turn to and put your faith in," he said. "She is there for the players. She is there to make the players better people and to make the team a better team. She is not in it for herself.

"Caroline...all she wanted to do was to make Bres happy and make Bres proud and I think that is how the other girls felt."

"Bres is so deserving of this national recognition and I couldn't be happier for her," said O'Deen, who redshirted at Iowa last fall. "Not only did she lead the Iowa City West High volleyball team to back-to-back conference and state championships, she brought together a team whose hearts were torn apart by an unimaginable tragedy. While I have always respected and appreciated everything Bres did to make us the best players we could be, using both humor and toughness, my admiration for her as a person grew immeasurably in the face of this season's adversity. There can be no doubt that she cares about each and every one of her players as if they were her own and I am proud to now call her my friend."

"Kathy is, above all else, a wonderful mentor for young people," said Keating. "She uses volleyball as a vehicle to guide young women through the struggles, challenges, trials and tribulations of life. This was no more evident than it was during this most difficult season. I remember asking the question, "How will that team ever deal with this tragedy?" Quite frankly, if my daughter ever had to go through something like the West girls did, I couldn't think of anyone I'd want on the journey with her than Kathy Bresnahan.

"Even before this year it was easy to tell the kind of relationship builder Kathy is. Her players love her and love to be around her.

"I can't think of a better candidate for National Coach of the Year! She is my inspiration!"

PrepVolleyball.com has, in the past, often honored co-Coaches of the Year, as so many wonderful mentors make a lasting imprint every volleyball season. In 2011, however, Coach Bres stands alone. Congratulations to Kathy Bresnahan, PrepVolleyball.com's National Coach of the Year!