

Van Oort excited about Mustang men's volleyball

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 01 August 2015 20:50 - Last Updated Saturday, 01 August 2015 21:04



Mary Kay Van Oort does not consider herself a pioneer for female coaches in America, but she'll be stepping into an unusual role as the first head coach of the brand-new men's volleyball program at Mount Mercy University.

Van Oort will begin her new duties Aug. 10, building a program from scratch for the 2016-17 school year. She has no players, no team and no schedule at this point, but she's eager to get started.

Van Oort has an extensive background in women's volleyball as a player and coach, including the past two years as the head coach of the girls volleyball program at Cedar Rapids Jefferson. She's leaving the J-Hawks now for new full-time duties at Mount Mercy, where she'll also serve as an assistant coach with the women's volleyball team.

Mount Mercy decided to add men's volleyball to its list of varsity programs and needed someone with experience to tackle the job.

"I'm really excited about it," Van Oort said Saturday. "It wasn't something I was out searching for, because I really planned to coach at Jefferson again. I was very excited about that and happy about that."

"You know how jobs go: Sometimes they just pop up."

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Other men's volleyball teams in the country have female head coaches, according to Van Oort, so she's not a pioneer in the truest sense of the word.

"I can't compete with the female who was just hired with the Arizona Cardinals football team," she remarked. "I saw that and I felt, 'Well, good.'"

Jen Welter has been hired by Arizona as an assistant coaching intern, working with inside linebackers, but Welter is joining an established program with a full roster. Van Oort has none of that.

"It's like starting a business, if you can imagine how much work it is to get a business off the ground," she said. "It's going to be an adventure, that's for sure."

The men's volleyball season runs from February through April, so Van Oort has 18 months to put a team together for the start of her first campaign in February of 2017. "We'll be ready," she vowed.

The first task will be finding tall, athletic players to join her in Cedar Rapids.

Iowa high schools do not offer boys volleyball as a varsity sport, although there are some club teams in Iowa. And junior colleges do not offer men's volleyball at the varsity level, so Van Oort will have to search for players.

She said Wisconsin, Illinois and Missouri have extensive boys volleyball programs at the high school level, so her search will begin there. She'd also like to promote boys volleyball in Iowa.

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"Maybe I can help get some club programs going and build some local talent," she said. "I would love to be able to do that."

Van Oort will be able to offer scholarships for men's volleyball at Mount Mercy. And she'll have five other teams to play in the Heart of America Conference as she puts the schedule together.

Van Oort was a star volleyball player at Notre Dame, where she was a two-time MVP. She graduated from Notre Dame in 1989 with a degree in marketing and got her master's degree in kinesiology at Southern Illinois in 2012.

Van Oort has served as an assistant women's volleyball coach at Southern Illinois (1990-1992), Mount Mercy (1992-93) and Kirkwood (1996-97). She was named the Metro Volleyball Coach of the Year at Jefferson in 2013.

"We couldn't have picked someone more qualified than Mary Kay to lead the start of our men's volleyball program," said Mount Mercy athletic director Scot Reisinger. "Her enthusiasm, knowledge of the game and professionalism will jump-start a successful beginning to our newest varsity program."

Van Oort said her only regret in moving to Mount Mercy is leaving the Jefferson volleyball team. Many of the Jefferson players are scattered right now due to family vacations, so Van Oort had to inform the girls of her new job in an e-mail.

"I wish I could do both, but it's not possible. And they understand. They've been great," she said. "It's a very sad time, too, because of that."

Van Oort's husband, Doug, previously coached the Mount Mercy women's volleyball team and is a member of the Mount Mercy Hall of Fame. He has

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been one of the assistant volleyball coaches at Jefferson and might get involved with his wife's new team at Mount Mercy.