

Can you dig it? Lauren Stopko can

Written by Jim Ecker

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Lauren Stopko has shattered the school record for digs for the Mount Mercy University volleyball team with a whopping 2,463 for her remarkable four-year career.

She's also among the career leaders for the Mustangs in bright smiles, energy and leadership.

"Lauren is an outstanding kid," Mount Mercy Coach Deb Marlin said Tuesday night. "She's a hard worker in the gym and she has extremely high expectations for herself.

"I think the girls look up to her."

Stopko, from Clear Creek Amana High School, stepped right into the lineup as a freshman at Mount Mercy in 2015 and has never slowed down. She collected 777 digs as a freshman and has 688 this year with a few weeks left in the regular season.

Stopko had 23 digs Tuesday night as Mount Mercy swept Briar Cliff, 25-20, 27-25, 25-20, in a non-conference match at the Hennessey Recreation Center. She notched her 23rd and final dig on set point as the Mustangs raised their record to 18-12.

Stopko, the libero at Mount Mercy, will probably finish her college career with more than 2,500 digs.

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"It's hard to believe," she remarked. "I'm just playing my own game, but I'm really proud of myself at the same time."

"It's a great accomplishment, especially with all the players that have made their marks here. The best thing about it, is that I'm doing it under Coach Marlin, so it's a good feeling."

Stopko uses her quickness, reflexes and overall athletic ability to get digs all over the court, often with diving saves that keep the ball alive for her teammates.

"In volleyball, some balls are just un-diggable," said Marlin. "And in Lauren's mind, there's no such as an un-diggable ball. She expects to dig everything. She keeps pushing herself and doesn't take anything for granted."

Stopko became serious about volleyball as a sophomore in high school, when she made the varsity for the first time. She was named Honorable Mention All-State as a junior and senior, finishing her prep career at Clear Creek Amana with 1,133 digs.

She learned to love the game in high school.

"It's really competitive," she said. "Once I started playing on the varsity level, the level of play is much higher. When you're short, you have to get those little digs. It's fun. I've just really enjoyed the game."

Stopko is 5-foot-5, a graceful athlete who is usually in the right spot at the right time for another dig after an opponent hits the ball.

"It's kind of cliché," said Marlin, "but sometimes she knows what they're going to do before they do it. She reads so well."

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That's her job: Read, react, get another dig and put her teammates in good shape for the next shot.

"I've always been a passer," said Stopko. "I'd definitely say that I've grown a great deal with Coach Marlin. She's definitely developed me into where I am today. I couldn't have been where I am today without her."

Stopko, who will get her nursing degree this spring, enjoys being a leader on the team, slapping hands, encouraging everyone to keep playing well and keeping things positive.

"When I make a mistake, I always appreciate my teammates who are there for me," she said, "so I try to provide the same support."

Alyssa Weldon had 15 kills for Mount Mercy and Maddie Bell finished with 12. Kayla Daggett had 35 assists. Becca Thomson had 14 digs, Weldon 13 and Sam Whalen 11. Olivia Coe blocked four shots and Bell blocked three.