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Alyssa Kilen (left) claps for teammate, fellow setter, and best friend Kjerstie Lieberg (right), who smiles after reaching the 1,000-assist milestone in the Gator Volleyball team's 3-0 victory over the Roseau Rams on September 4. Both of these senior players have now reached the 1,000-assist milestone in their careers, having played together as setters since the seventh grade, and they have developed a friendship, a bond, that goes beyond volleyball.

1,000-assist milestone

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Kilen was indeed excited to see not only her teammate, but also best friend, reach this milestone. She knew exactly what it felt like to reach the milestone after having reached it last season, feeling an increased level of excitement as she got closer to it. She still remembers the moment when she reached it, versus the Freeze on October 3, 2017, clearly to this day.

"I was on the last one and I set it to Emmie (Jacobson)," Kilen said. "I was just hoping that it went in, and then (came) the excitement of the gym afterwards and everyone just cheering you on and (you realizing) all your hard work just paid off in that moment."

Kilen appreciated her own milestone achievement and her best friend's for another reason.

"It's something that we'll both remember that we did and we did it together," Kilen said.

Together. That's the way Kilen and Lieberg have been doing things both on and off the court. They may have each reached their milestones at separate times, but they achieved the milestone, thanks, in part, to the bond they created, one that has formed these two Gator girls into one cohesive unit.

Kilen has been playing volleyball since seventh grade and Lieberg since third grade, always as setters. They enjoy playing the game for its team bonding aspect.

"Everyone's a part of the game," Lieberg said. "There's not just one specific person that does the whole job."

Kilen enjoys the results of that team effort. "With volleyball, after every point, you get to celebrate and come together as a team, whereas basketball, you don't get to do that. The game just keeps going," Kilen said.

Kilen and Lieberg became the third and fourth Gator players to reach 1,000 assists, the first ones since Shanyce Bishop did it in 2013. Vanessa (Dvergsten) Thompson, leads the program with 2,264 during her career that ended in 2009.

Gator Head Coach Stacy Dahl thought that two setters in the same class both reaching the 1,000-assist milestone is "unusual" due to the game's dynamics.

"In volleyball, there's so many moving parts. You have to have the pass, you have to have the set, (and) you have to have the kill," Coach Dahl said. "So you have all these players working together to make that achievement together."

Speaking of moving parts, both girls also know that this milestone is not an individually-based accomplishment.

"It's not just our work. If I didn't have a passer to pass it to me, and a hitter to hit it for me, I wouldn't be getting these assists and I wouldn't even be close to the goal (of 1,000 assists)," Lieberg said. "So it's not really just an accomplishment for me. It's for everyone."

During her years with the Gators, each season has provided Kilen with its own different set of hitters.

"But, I needed every one of them to make my milestone happen and our coaches definitely have put in a lot of time in us to instill the hard work ethic that it takes to get there," Kilen said.

Although both setters in the same class reaching this milestone may be viewed as unusual from the outside, that doesn't mean it has come as a surprise to Coach Dahl.

"I think for them, they've worked really hard. It's a lot of ball touches," Dahl said. "They have to be smart, they have to know the game... they have to see the other side. What's happening? Where's the block? And so I think they've been doing this for a really long time."

The girls can't imagine the amount of touches they've had on a volleyball or the amount of time they've spent working to perfect their craft, but they know what it does take to provide the best set-- hard work, dedication and technique.

"I know when we first got moved up in eighth grade, every morning before practice, we'd set with (Coach) Dahl and do different workouts to get the touch on the ball," Kilen said.

As Lieberg explained, a proper set goes beyond just hands techniques.

"It's not just about the hands. It's about positioning your whole body to the ball," Lieberg said.

They also understand the importance of communication in this role.

"As the setter, you're really the leader on the court because every play pretty much goes through you and you get to decide everything," Kilen said, "so you have to be really vocal in telling your teammates what you want to do."

Lieberg added, "You have to take charge and know what's best for the team at the situation of the game."

This loud, vocal communication is something they both have had to develop over time, both sought her since Coach Dahl has encouraged her since the eighth grade to be louder and more vocal, and Kilen has noticed a change in herself in that way.

Coach Dahl still considers both of these players too quiet. Despite that, she explained how their on-court success and strong relation-

ship is one that hasn't necessarily required vocal, loud communication.

"They're like one player and they read each other so well. They know what each is thinking. They know what they're doing with each other on the court, so they fuse as one when they're playing," Coach Dahl said. "And it's just really unique to see their relationship as they play because it's just, it's doing without thinking. They definitely know where the other person will be, what they're doing."

Their friendship has created that trust that they carry onto the volleyball court and beyond.

"We have more trust in each other since we spend so much time with each other and we'll know who's going to make the play most of the time," Kilen said.

They have been friends since elementary school thanks to each of their older brothers, but they really connected and became best friends during their middle school years. Kilen described their relationship as "inseparable."

"It's kind of crazy sometimes how our thoughts are the exact same," Lieberg said. "It's like we're the same person."

On the court, they just know how each other works.

"We can just kind of feed off each other and pick each other up when we need to," Kilen said.

Coach Dahl sees this relationship firsthand on the court, and considers herself fortunate for that opportunity.

"They are poetry in motion when they're together on the court and they really do feed off each other. They're each other's strengths I guess," Coach Dahl said. "I've always told them combined they're the perfect setter."

Kilen has the speed and "unimaginable" body control, and Lieberg has the soft touch and smooth release from her hands.

"Fused as one, it's fantastic. I'll take two any day over one because they definitely are the complete package," Dahl said.

Their best friend connection has also helped them understand how each other plays when they might take on a role beside setter. Although both players do assume the role of setters, both also do get the chance to hit the ball, especially Lieberg, seeing her hitting role increase. Kilen enjoys setting, particularly putting the ball in the right spot for her teammate to get the kill. Lieberg has grown to enjoy hitting more this season, especially since Kilen is the one setting to her.

"She knows how I like my sets and how to get it to me and make it work," Lieberg said.

As for off the court, they continue to work as one, being together all the time. Although they may have built tight relationship on the volleyball court, they didn't become friends necessarily due to the game, sharing common interests and mindsets outside volleyball. As not just their coach, but also as their Greenbush-Middle River High School English teacher, Coach Dahl has noticed this firsthand.

"They both are very driven students; they're very involved students when you look at what each of them does in the community. They are active. They are leaders, and I think that's really cool for some of our younger players to see that commitment and that it extends beyond the court," Coach Dahl said. ".... They're ones that we can call to do things and they're going to step up and do it every time-- that's the leaders they are."

As on the volleyball court, they are also quiet off the court, but also as on the volleyball court, they make up for it with their non-verbal communication.

"They lead by example and they lead by their actions and I think that speaks volumes of just the character that each of them has," Coach Dahl said.

After watching Kilen celebrate her milestone moment last season, Lieberg looked forward to her opportunity to celebrate this moment even more.

"It was just a huge amount of joy and relief that you've made a huge milestone and it's going to be a memory that you'll have forever. It's not just going to go away," Lieberg said.

Speaking of memories, they plan to enjoy every one of them on this final journey together as volleyball teammates.

"It's one last ride, so you want to make it as memorable as possible and put everything out on the court and try our hardest to get as far as we can," Lieberg said.

Kilen added, "It's definitely bittersweet this year thinking that we're never going to be back in the gym, but I think going in with the mindset that don't leave anything unsaid, do your best, work hard, and don't regret anything."

They have enjoyed and will enjoy every moment they get to spend with one another on the court, both the milestone and non-milestone moments. Their time on the volleyball court has provided one way for people to witness their bond, but that bond, won't stop after they step off that volleyball court as Gators for the final time in the same way as they've played on it-- together.

Gator swimmers splash into their 2018 season

Ryan Bergeron

Three Gator swimmers-- Greta Novacek, Ava Novacek, and CeCe Yeager-- jumped back in the water for the 2018 season as part of "The North" girls swimming and diving team.

A co-op of Badger/Greenbush-Middle River, Roseau, and Warroad athletes, "The North" started practice on August 13 and have had two meets so far this season, including at home in Warroad versus Park Rapids on August 30, and on the road versus Fosston/Bagley on September 4. Overall team results and the BGMR swimmers' results from these first two meets are below.

Home vs. Park Rapids

As a team, "The North" varsity team fell to Park Rapids by a final meet score of 116-69, but "The North" junior varsity team came out on top by a score of 101-52.

As for Greta Novacek, she competed in three varsity events and one junior varsity event.

In her junior varsity event, the 200-yard medley relay, she and her relay teammates came out on top with a time of 2:48.70. Swimmers Hannah Schneider, Liberty Johnson, and Bailey Reeves also competed on this first-place relay team.

Greta also competed in three varsity events, including the one-meter dive, the 100-yard butterfly, and the 200-yard freestyle relay. In the one-meter dive, she finished with a score of 131.65, good enough for second behind Park Rapids' Katie Eischens, finishing with a score of 145.8.

Competing in the 100-yard butterfly, she finished fourth out of sixth in this event with a time of 1:31.47. In the 200-yard freestyle relay, Greta and her relay teammates finished fourth with a time of 2:16.71.

Yeager competed in one varsity event and three junior varsity events.

In her varsity event, the 200-yard medley relay, Yeager and her relay teammates finished fourth with a time of 2:52.36.

As for her junior varsity events, she competed in the 100 butterfly, the 100-yard freestyle, and the 200-yard freestyle relay. In the 100-yard butterfly, Yeager finished third with a time of 1:58.05. Competing in the 100-yard freestyle event, Yeager finished fourth out of seventh with a time of 1:24.10. Participating in the 200-yard freestyle relay, Yeager and her relay teammates finished on top with a time of 2:29.10. Gitta Novacek, Kenzie Cole, and Liberty Johnson also competed on this first-place team.

Ava Novacek competed in one varsity event and two junior varsity events.

In her varsity event, the 400-yard freestyle relay, she and her relay teammates finished fourth with a time of 5:08.95.

As for junior varsity events, Ava and her relay team finished second in the 200-yard medley relay with a time of 2:54.76. In the

other JV event, the 100-yard backstroke, she finished fourth with a time of 1:48.60.

Away vs. Fosston/ Bagley

At "The North" team's first road meet, Greta would compete in one junior varsity event, including the 50-yard freestyle, and three varsity events, including the 200-yard medley relay, 100-yard butterfly, and the 200-yard freestyle relay.

In her junior varsity event, the 50-yard freestyle, Greta finished second with a time of 34.55. The first place swimmer, Kyla Pederson of Fosston/Bagley finished with a time of 33.58.

As for varsity events, Greta and her relay teammates finished third in the 200-yard medley relay with a time of 2:42.34. Competing in another relay, the 200-yard freestyle relay, she and her relay teammates finished fourth with a time of 2:22.44. Individually, she finished fourth in the 100-yard butterfly with a time of 1:36.12.

Yeager competed in one varsity event, including the 200-yard medley relay, and three junior varsity events, including the 100-yard butterfly, the 100-yard freestyle, and 400-yard freestyle relay.

In the 200-yard medley relay, she and her team competed in the event but were disqualified.

As for her junior varsity events, she finished second in the 100-yard butterfly with a time of 1:53.19. Fosston/Bagley's Kayla Zitzow finished first in the event with a time of 1:39.63. Participating in the 100-yard freestyle, Yeager earned another second place finish with a time of 1:33.95. Fosston/Bagley's Mya Hendrickson won the race with a time of 1:25.94. Competing in the 400-yard freestyle relay, Yeager and her relay teammates finished second with a time of 6:20.14.

Ava competed in four junior varsity events at the Fosston/Bagley meet, including the 200-yard medley relay, the 50-yard freestyle, the 200-yard freestyle relay and the 400-yard freestyle relay.

In all three of her relay events, she and her teammates in those events finished second. In the 200-yard medley relay, they finished with a time of 3:20.33, in the 200-yard freestyle relay a time of 2:32.40-- just .12 seconds slower than the first-place Fosston/Bagley team-- and in the 400-yard freestyle relay a time of 6:20.14, competing on the same relay team as Yeager.

Individually, Ava finished third in the 50-yard freestyle with a time of 37.44-- a time 2.89 seconds slower than the second-place time her sister Greta posted.

Next Action: "The North" girls' swimming and diving team heads on the road for a meet in Crookston on Thursday, September 13, then heads back on the road again for a meet in Bemidji on Tuesday, September 18.

Gators rally in second set, sweep Freeze

Split Ada-Borup tournament action

Ryan Bergeron

Leading one set to none, the Gator volleyball team was in danger of allowing the Freeze to tie the match at one, trailing 18-23 in set two, a tie where it had trailed the whole way up to that point.

Then the Gators went on a run, scoring seven unanswered points, to steal set two and come away with a 3-0 (25-23, 25-23, 25-19) victory at home on September 6. Asked about that run, Gator Head Coach Stacy Dahl explained how her team started finding one another and playing together, and rode the momentum.

"We were just a little off. We were very flat (before the run)," Coach Dahl said. "They didn't have a whole lot of energy in their game, and so it finally just clicked a little bit, where we started getting points in a row, which we need to do, and they just felt more in tune and more in rhythm and that was what saved us."

During that run, Rinde picked up a block and three kills that provided the Gators with three of its final four points in the set. For the game, Rinde finished with a team-high 13 kills, to go along with her one block and two service aces. Coach Dahl said Rinde has really stepped up so far this season.

"She's a really solid volleyball player. She's super athletic; she's crazy fast... Her confidence is growing now that she's playing all the way around and so I think we'll continue to see good things from her," Coach Dahl said, "but yeah she's always hungry. She's always ready. She wants to swing aggressively and hopefully we can get her working on some more shots too."

Before the second set dramatics, the Gators and Freeze would engage in a back and forth affair in set one. In the set, no team would take a lead larger than one, until a 2-0 Gator run, including a Freeze service error and Alyssa Kilen kill, gave the Gators a 15-13 edge.

The Gators would maintain the lead until a 3-0 Freeze run, including back-to-back service aces by Tessa Anderson, but the Gators in a 17-18 deficit. Coach Dahl would call a timeout. The Gator crowd began to chant, "Here we go Gators" during the timeout to encourage its team to battle back.

The Gators did just that, scoring four unanswered points, sparked by a Lieberg kill, to take a 21-18 lead. The Gators maintained the lead throughout until closing out the set 25-23.

In that dramatic set two, the Gators would fall into an early hole, trailing 5-0. Following a Lieberg hitting error, the Gators trailed 9-3, its largest deficit in the match to that point. The Gators would claw back in with a 4-1 spurt, capped by a Rinde ace serve, to make the score 7-10.

A 7-0 Freeze run would lead to a 7-17 deficit, causing the Gators to take its second timeout of the set. Out of this timeout, the Gators countered with a 7-1 run, aided by two Makenna Burslie tie kills and a Kilen tip kill, and capped by a Lieberg kill, to draw within 14-18. Later, a Rinde kill cut the Gator deficit to two at 17-19, but the Freeze responded with a 4-1 run, to put the Gators on the brink and set the stage for the dramatic end.

Following the second set victory, the Gators came out fast in the third set, jumping out to a 13-3 lead, getting a kill from Rinde, two kills from Lieberg, one ace serve each

from Kilen and Ella Koebernick, and a block from Aaliyah Creekmore.

Later, another Lieberg kill would give the Gators an 18-9 edge, forcing the Freeze to take its second timeout of the set. Out of this timeout, the Freeze went on to a 9-1 spurt, capped by a Grace Sorenson kill, to cut the Gator lead to one at 19-18.

A Rinde kill would spark, and another Rinde kill and a Lieberg ace serve would cap a 6-1 Gator run, securing the home team's victory and moving its record to 3-0.

"We played two really solid matches to start our season and... I don't quite know what it (this Freeze match) was. It felt really discombobulated and really messy," Coach Dahl said. "Sometimes you win ugly. That's sports though. Sometimes things don't go your way and if you can battle it out and still win, it's a win and you learn. You learn from your errors."

Lieberg finished with 11 kills, 14 assists and two ace serves, Makenna Burslie with seven kills and two ace serves, Kilen with a team-high 15 assists, five kills and one ace serve, and Koebernick with a team-high three ace serves, to all pace the Gators.

Ada-Borup Tournament

Coming into the Ada-Borup tournament on September 8 with a 3-0 record, the Gators would run into some tough competition, leaving the tournament with a 2-2 mark. In pool play, the Gators fell to the Kittson County Central Bearcats 2-0 (23-25, 16-25), defeated the Red Lake County Mustangs 2-0 (25-18, 25-7), and defeated the Fosston Greyhounds 2-1 (25-18, 22-25, 15-2)

Playing in the tourney's silver division, the Gators dropped its first round game to an opponent it defeated in pool play, the Greyhounds, by a 2-1 (23-25, 25-21, 7-15) score. Below are the Gator stat leaders from each match.

In the loss to the Bearcats, Rinde led the Gators with six kills and two ace serves, and Lieberg chipped in four kills and five assists.

Against the Mustangs, Kilen finished with eight assists and a team-high seven kills in the victory. Lieberg had six kills and a team-high 10 assists. Also pacing the Gators, Rinde finished with four kills and a team-high three ace serves, and Erika Howell had two kills, a team-high three aces, and one block.

In the victory over the Greyhounds, Rinde led the Gators again in kills with eight, to go along with her team-high three ace serves. Also pacing the Gators, Burslie had six kills and one ace serve, Lieberg four kills, six assists and a team-high three ace serves, and Kilen a team-high 13 assists.

In the tournament-ending loss to the Greyhounds, Lieberg led the Gators in kills with nine and also finished with nine kills, three assists, and one block. Burslie finished with six kills and a block, Koebernick a team-high three ace serves, and Kilen a team-high 14 assists, to also pace the Gators.

The Gators' record stands at 5-2.

Next Action: The Gators return home to host the Sacred Heart Eagles on Thursday, September 13 and end the week at the Pony Invite in Warren on Saturday, September 15. The Gators then hit the road to Warroad to take on the Warriors on Tuesday, September 18.