

At Pinnacle, Stepping Away From Basketball

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NEWARK, Del. — Students kept filing into the tiny hideaway gym at the [University of Delaware](#), but most seemed interested in swimming and the fitness center, not volleyball. Only 150 or so fans attended Wednesday's match, 200 tops, family and friends tucked into a small set of bleachers.



The freshman Elena Delle Donne is a 6-5 middle hitter on Delaware's volleyball team.



Tim Shaffer for The New York Times

"I don't know necessarily that Elena knows exactly what happened," Ernie Delle Donne, Elena's father, right, said. He played golf and basketball at Columbia.

Elena Delle Donne, a 6-foot-5 middle hitter, took her position near the net and played the way a novice does, dominating at some moments, uncertain at others. She spiked the ball ferociously to end the suspense in a three-set victory over Villanova, but it remained jarring even for her father to see her in the tights and kneepads of volleyball instead of the flowing shorts of basketball.

“If [Tom Brady](#) was your son, you would really enjoy that he was a darn good Ping-Pong player, but you’d feel like, Why’s he playing Ping-Pong?” Ernie Delle Donne, a real estate developer, said, referring to the New England quarterback.

Only months ago, Elena Delle Donne was the nation’s top female high school basketball recruit, a signee with the [University of Connecticut](#), an expected central figure in what many predict will be the Huskies’ sixth national title season in 2008-9. After two days of classes last June, though, Delle Donne acknowledged what few athletes of her visibility have ever acknowledged publicly — she was burned out on basketball at 18. Her parents also wondered if she was homesick.

For now, she wants no part of the sport, no part of the UConn crowds that will swell to 10,000 and beyond, no part of a chance to collect national titles the way some people collect stamps. She left college, took time to reassess her decision, renounced her scholarship in August, then enrolled at Delaware and walked on to play volleyball, a sport that she played for the first time only last year as a senior at Ursuline Academy in nearby Wilmington.

“She seems a lot happier; she laughs a lot,” said Meghan Bonk, a high school and college teammate of Delle Donne’s.

Still, life does not always follow the same consistent arc as the 80 consecutive free throws that Delle Donne once hit to set a national high school record. She and her father candidly say that it is too soon to know whether Elena has made the right decision, or even the final decision, about her athletic career.

If a longing for basketball re-emerges, there is even a chance, Elena and her father said, that she will want to return to UConn next year. She is still a teenager, just turned 19, trying to sort through a teenager's frame of reference, trying to figure out where she fits into a sporting world in which she was a basketball player of such towering skill that she received her first college scholarship offer when she was in seventh grade.

"I love what I'm doing; I don't see any reason to change as of now," she said. "If I ended up missing a sport, I wouldn't mind just playing here and maybe doing two sports. Or if I really, really missed it and I wanted to go back to Connecticut, that's always a possibility, too. But right now, I'm happy, so I'm going to stick with what I'm doing and enjoy it."

Meanwhile, Bonnie Kenny, the volleyball coach at Delaware, views Delle Donne's situation as a cautionary tale about the increasing professionalization of youth sports. Children are pressured to specialize in one activity too early, essentially play year-round and grow so accustomed to extravagant travel that there is often little left to enjoy beyond high school, Kenny said.

"No kid should have to go through what she went through," said Kenny, a past president of the American Volleyball Coaches Association. "Adults need to pay attention. It's a problem in youth sports. These kids are burned out. From 12 to 18, I bet Elena can count on her hands the amount of weekends she didn't have anything to do related to sport. She's missed the opportunity to be a kid."

The closest analogy to Delle Donne may be gymnasts, figure skaters and tennis players who quit their sports as teenagers after becoming too consumed at a young age, said Steven Ungerleider, a sports psychologist from Eugene, Ore., who has counseled athletes from high school to the Olympic level.