

U-Turn, Titans 18 Open Bound After Super Show Me Sunday

*Written by John Tawa
Sunday, 02 May 2010*

Don Gresham's been coaching volleyball for 22 years but, being from Richmond, Virginia, where volleyball has only recently started to get competitive nationally, he's never had a team that could compete consistently in the Open division. So you can forgive him for not celebrating when his club, U-Turn Sports Performance Academy, defeated Coastal Virginia, 25-22, 14-25, 15-10 on Sunday morning at the Show Me National Qualifier to clinch no worse than sixth place. He did not know that Open bids could trickle to sixth place or that his team had just earned a bid to Junior Nationals in the 18 Open division. He was probably just happy to win a match after his team went 0-3 in pool play on Saturday. Here's how the conversation went between us right after the match:

JT: So how does it feel to have qualified in Open?

Don Gresham: We haven't qualified yet.

JT: Yes you have.

DG: Have we? [Smile]. Thanks for telling me. They don't know. I didn't know. I didn't think it went down any further than four.

Gresham was right that his team did not know. After MB **Brittany Spencer** finished off the win with a kill, her third in the last four points, the players slapped hands and prepared for the next match of the Silver bracket. There were no parents at this one, so "that dad" – you know the one – had not done the research to know what was at stake. I became that dad. The players shrieked and made sure I wasn't joking with them. With the Open bid, U-Turn had now pulled off the triple: three bids to Nationals. They earned an 18 National bid through the Old Dominion Region, an 18 American bid with a runner up finish at MEQ in 18 Club and now this.

In a way, it may have been a blessing in disguise that the team did not know what was at stake. There was nothing to be nervous about; they were, after all, "just playing." And it was a familiar foe. Coastal Virginia, located Southeast of Richmond in Virginia Beach, is a team U-Turn had played three times before, winning twice.

In contrast to U-Turn, Coastal knew what was on the line and, in a way, it meant more to them. They did not have a National bid nor for that matter even an American bid after failing to play enough region events. It was do or die for them.



8,



Game 1 was close early until MB **Mallory Woolridge** (Univ. of Virginia), one of six D-1 recruits on the U-Turn roster, had a block and hit two balls straight down to give USPAV an 11-8 lead. **Samantha Hughes** scored to slow U-Turn briefly, but coach Gresham's team scored three more, including a two-hander from **Sarah Harper** and a libero kill from **Maggie Murphy**, to grow the advantage to 14-9.

Tessa Bivens had a block and ace for Coastal, which scored three in a row to get her team within 14-12, but USPAV used another Woolridge slide attack as part of a 5-1 run that made the lead a robust 19-13.

Coastal, a team with great balance and a D-1 libero in **Paige Wheeler**, chipped away at U-Turn's lead. Kills from **Krista Hughes**, **Samantha Hughes** and **Bivens'** block on a dump attempt got Coastal within 23-22 late in the set. Coastal had a swing to tie but its attack went wide. Its final swing of the net was blocked by Woolridge and Harper and U-Turn had the one-game lead.

Coastal started to play its game early in the second set. With **Chelsea Blanford** and **Amy Miller** scoring at the net and **Bivens** doing a little of everything, Coastal thumped its Virginia rival, outscoring U-Turn 17-8 to complete a 25-14 momentum-changing win. It got so bad that Gresham replaced Spencer, his big-leaping D-1 middle heading to Temple, with a reserve front row player generously listed at 5-9.

On Coastal's bench, coach Dave Albaugh was brimming with confidence as he should have been. He fully expected that his team would continue to play well into Game 3 and pull out that bid.

He certainly did not expect what happened next.

U-Turn scored the first point, then **Valerie Carroll** scored off the block for 2-0. Woolridge took a set from tall **Kristi Richardson** and put the ball away for 3-0. Then Carroll again made it 4-0. Then came two aces from **Morgan Freeman**. 5-0 and 6-0. Murphy, for her part, was sensational in the back row for U-Turn.

Blanford stopped the run with a Coastal kill and her team also scored three of the next four, including a kill and block from **Krista Hughes**, to get back in the set down only 7-4. But USPAV got a Harper kill and three Coastal gifts to make it 11-4, setting the stage for Spencer to take the team the final steps through the Open gate.