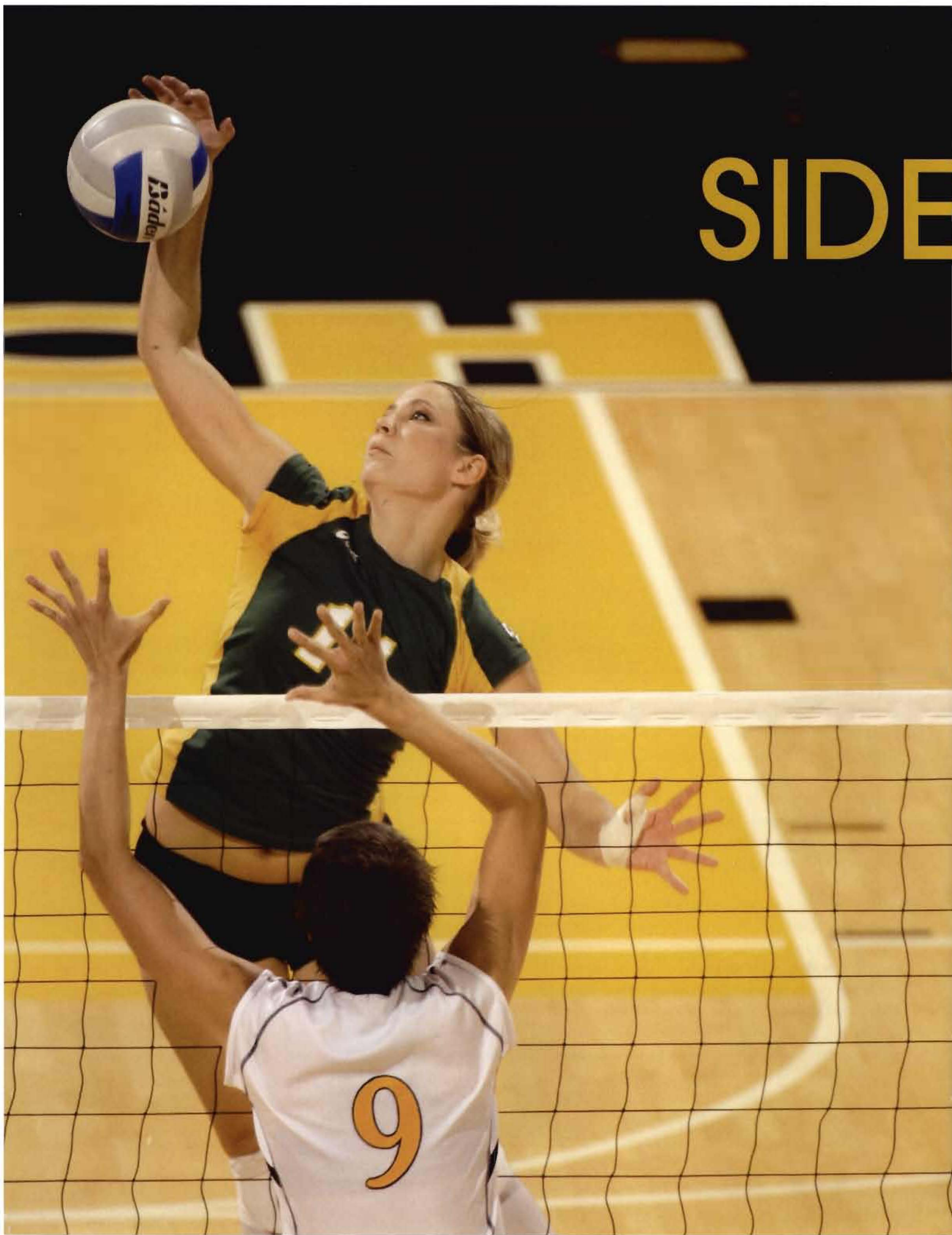
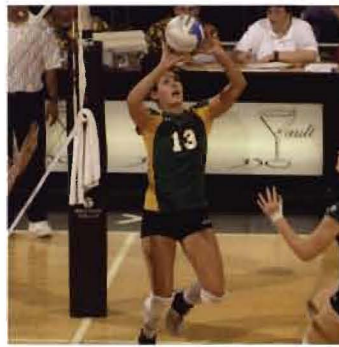


SIDE



Cal Poly's Jaclyn Houston denies an opponent. (Photos courtesy of Cal Poly Athletics)



OUT

VOLLEYBALL TEAM IMPROVES BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS

BY CHRIS GIOVANNETTI

THE LARGEST VOLLEYBALL CROWD in 17 seasons filed into Mott Gym in October to watch 20th-ranked Cal Poly deal a dominating and demoralizing 3-0 defeat to rival UC Santa Barbara. For local volleyball aficionados, the record crowd of just under 2,500 conjured up memories from the 1980s, when the Mustangs were a national powerhouse and regularly packed Mott Gym for matches.

The Mustangs brought the volleyball spirit back to the Central Coast while fighting their way to the 2006 Big West Conference title and NCAA Tournament. During an NCAA second-round match, spectators had to be turned away from Mott Gym as a sellout crowd of more than 3,000 watched the Mustangs face UC Berkeley. Though the Mustangs fell to Cal 3-1, they set a precedent for future squads, not only in the program records they smashed, but also in the tradition that was re-established.

Head coach Jon Stevenson has transformed Cal Poly into one of the hottest sports tickets in town. Quite an accomplishment, considering that Stevenson took over two years ago when the program had gone 5-24 for the season.

Stevenson's 2005 Mustangs finished 19-6 in his first season. Despite the dramatic turnaround, however, Cal Poly was not extended a postseason invitation. Ensuring another

snub wouldn't ensue, Stevenson loaded the 2006 schedule with nationally prominent clubs. Cal Poly responded by overcoming No. 8 Texas, No. 12 Hawaii and No. 20 Louisville, while chipping away at the national poll to reach No. 14 in the nation. The Mustangs were seasoned veterans when the Big West schedule commenced, cruising past their conference foes and dropping just one match in recording the program's first title since 1984.

The records fell as the crowds and media coverage increased. Cal Poly's 23 victories and .793 winning percentage were the second-highest marks in program history. Led by Kylie Atherstone, Big West Player of the Year, five Mustangs were named to the all-conference team, a school record.

When the NCAA distributed tournament entries, the Mustangs and their burgeoning fan base were ready. Before the largest crowd in Cal Poly volleyball history, spectators packed Mott Gym to see the Mustangs win their NCAA Tournament first-round game against Michigan 3-1.

For Stevenson and the Mustangs, there's no reason the momentum can't continue next season and for years to come.

The incoming freshmen class includes two of the nation's top 40 players, while two of the 16 players on Cal Poly's 2006 roster will graduate this spring. □