

BC3's Bianco has skin in game on volleyball court

Despite soph's national ranking, assists don't assist in defining "best" BC3 setter, coach says

Oct. 10, 2017



Brittney Bianco, a Freeport High graduate and setter on the Butler County Community College volleyball team, is shown Sept. 27 in a match against Penn State-Beaver at BC3's Field House. At bottom left is Penn State-Beaver's Brooke Tomasko (19).

(Butler, PA) Solid black lines on the hardwood floor of the Butler County Community College Field House mark the periphery of the 900-square-foot boundary intended to confine six BC3 volleyball players, 2-inch lines across which Brittney Bianco's skin shrieks in protest as she dives for the ball and climbs in stature and national rankings.

Among players on 102 squads in the National Junior College Athletic Association's Division III, the 5-foot-6 sophomore is ranked No. 15 with 7.68 assists per set, assists being likely the only statistical category that reflects a setter's abilities and one that falls short of adequately summarizing the position's importance, coach Rob Snyder says.

Like her ubiquitous presence on the court, the influence of Bianco – “the best setter we have ever had,” Snyder says – cannot be limited to a narrow category whose nightly influx of numbers depends on a hitter’s ability to kill the ball.

Assists, says Snyder, a 19-year BC3 coach with a 352-119 career record, “are not a good enough stat” to define a setter like Bianco.

That definition should include intangibles for which there is no statistical representation, such as Bianco launching from her spot toward a stray dig and lunging headlong across those 2-inch black lines, as she did against Penn State-Beaver, before double-fisting a blind over-the-head pass that would later result in a kill.

For Bianco – literally bending over backward on a play that would give BC3 a 16-15 lead – no assist.

“Your setter is amazing”

“If the pass isn’t there, you have to be willing to sacrifice yourself,” Bianco says. “I have no problem doing it. That is part of what I have to do for the team.”

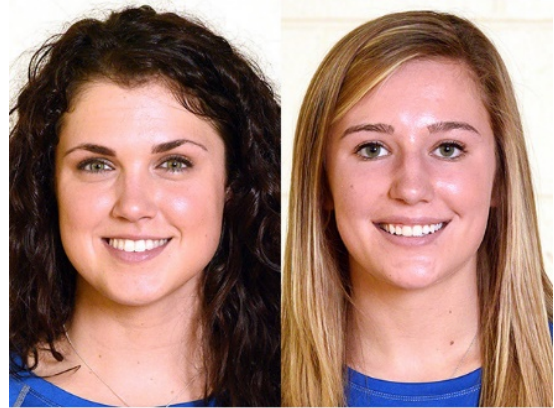
The setter’s job, Penn State-Beaver coach B.J. Bertges says, is many times “thankless because it is your job to go and corral a not-so-perfect pass and then to still get it out to a hitter, where they can still make a play. So many times that person gets overlooked because they are the middle man.”

It’s only a narrowly defined statistic that overlooks Bianco, Snyder says.

“I don’t think we have had a single game yet that someone didn’t come up to me after the game, a fan, a coach, and say, ‘Your setter is amazing.’ From that you know she is that good.”

“Crazy good,” teammate Autumn Rodgers says.

“Incredible,” teammate Mackenzie Craig says. “She always puts her body on the line to get it to where we need it, which is necessary to win and progress.”



Top row, from left, Brittney Bianco and Autumn Rodgers. Center row, from left, Mackenzie Craig and Emily Magusiak. Bottom row, BC3 volleyball coach Rob Snyder.

The BC3 volleyball team is winning and progressing, having notched victories in nine of its past 10 outings to move to 13-4 overall, but needs to play well more consistently if it wants to capture its third Western Pennsylvania Collegiate Conference championship in a row and 10th under Snyder, Bianco says.

“If we can do that, then we can be really, really good,” she says.

Bianco would know. She was a freshman on Freeport’s first-ever WPIAL Class AA championship team, a senior on its second. In 2016, as a member of a BC3 squad that would end 21-3, Bianco finished 10th in the NJCAA’s Division III with 8.75 assists per set, and was named to the WPCC’s all-conference team and as MVP of the NJCAA Region XX tournament.

Bianco “has that special ‘it,’”
opposing coach says

“She knows where to get the ball, what to do with it,” Pitt-Titusville coach Vic Carr said after BC3 swept the Panthers Oct. 4 behind a 21-assist effort by Bianco on a night in which she also recorded five kills with deft deflections.

“She has outstanding hands,” Carr said. “Very instinctive. She can anticipate the ball. Some athletes have that special ‘it,’ and she has ‘it’ as a setter.”

Pitt-Titusville setter Rebecca Fagley has seen “it” – through the net and in the eyes of her counterpart, Bianco.

“She is really competitive,” Fagley says.

“Very competitive,” BC3 hitter Emily Magusiak says.

“The most competitive player on the team,” Craig says.

“I have to make a decision fast”



Brittney Bianco, right, celebrates a point with Butler County Community College volleyball teammates Kelly Kabay (2) and Emily Magusiak in a Sept. 27 match against Penn State-Beaver.

It's her competitiveness that makes Bianco – third in career assists in the Snyder era behind former setters Nicole Sebastian and Jess Prelec – the best setter he has had, Snyder says.

“She is strong and she is quick,” Snyder says. “She can get to every ball. She can jump and get the ball above the net. Getting to every ball is the first thing you teach a setter. You’ve got to get to every ball.”

Then decipher among her teammates’ shouts for the ball.

“I can hear them,” Bianco says. “I have so many things I have to pay attention to.”

There are the opponent’s positions on the front line. The trajectory of the ball she is tracking. The calls for the pass. Those 2-inch black lines. Her teammates’ whereabouts, sensed by sight or sound.

“I have to make a decision fast,” Bianco says.

Sometimes, Craig says, without seeing her teammates. “Without looking.”

Like having eyes in the back of her head?

“Yes,” Craig says. “When she is setting to me, I am behind her. She has no idea where I am. She just hears my voice and is able to get it right where I want it.”

Adds Magusiak: “She places it there every time.”

And Rodgers: “98 percent of the time.”

Bianco climbs in all-time BC3 assists

Sebastian recorded 1,360 assists in 2002 and 2003, and Prelec, 1,088 in 2011 and 2012. Bianco has 1,051 – in 11 fewer matches than Prelec and 16 fewer than Sebastian – and with five to play before the WPCC championship Oct. 21.

While hosting the tournament, BC3’s road to its 14th overall WPCC championship may go through Westmoreland County Community College, the Community College of Beaver County, the Community College of Allegheny County-Boyce, Penn Highlands Community College and Pitt-Titusville.

“We are good in spurts, and we have to stay more focused,” Bianco says. “We have to get the job done.”

Bianco will literally have a hand in BC3’s success -- with or without an assist, Snyder says.

“She is definitely the leader,” Snyder says. “She sets the pace for what we are trying to do.”