

Silver, Purple, and Gold

LSU volleyballer Meghan Mannari enters her senior season on the heels of winner silver with the USA

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If anyone watches a volleyball match they will see that one player on each side of the net is wearing a different color jersey from the rest of her teammates.

LSU senior Meghan Mannari is the player on the back row that wears that different color jersey. But as she'll tell you, it is so much more than that.

"The libero position is responsible for passing, defense and ball control," Mannari said. "Usually, you are substituted for a middle blocker whenever it's your turn to go to the front row. Every play in volleyball starts with a pass so our role is very important to the overall success of the team."

In March, Mannari was one of 48 players invited to participate in the US Women's National A2 Program by USA Volleyball. The tournament recently ended, with Mannari's USA Gold team earning the silver medal.

"Each day, you knew you were playing with and against the best volleyball athletes from around the country so you knew it was going to be a challenge," Mannari said. "I was focusing on my job because I knew that was something I could control, but learning to read the other players' personalities and their technique was something that came with time. We had really great coaches, and they had us practicing twice every day to learn to read one another early on."

Statistics for digs were not made available by USA Volleyball, but Mannari saw plenty of action. Despite her solid play, her attention was more on the experience and how she can translate it to a successful season for LSU.

"My personal highlight was just being able to play against players from all of our SEC rival schools, dig a few of their hits, and play against each other in such a competitive environment that so closely related to our fall season. I am ready to get back on the court, play against all these girls with my LSU team and get some wins."

During the pre-tournament training session, the 48 women were divided into four teams of 12 players. Each team played three matches in pool play before the semifinal and final rounds.

After posting a 2-1 record in pool play, USA Gold won a thrilling semifinal match over USA Red before losing in the final to USA White, a team they had beaten three days earlier. The gold medal match lasted three tightly contested sets decided by a total of eight points.

"The most exciting match for me was the semifinals against the white team. When we played in the semifinals and won the match in a winner-take-all fifth set by an 18-16 score, I think we all knew we had achieved our goal which was to be able to go for the gold."

Mannari's involvement with USA Volleyball's A2 program marked the fifth consecutive year that the LSU program was represented. All-Americans Brittnee Cooper and Elena Martinez won the gold medal in 2008, while Cooper added the silver in 2009. Former assistant coach Steve Loeswick scored a bronze medal in 2010, and head coach Fran Flory secured gold in 2011.

The 5'9" Mannari was one of eight liberos chosen for the A2 program after she earned All-SEC Second-Team and AVCA All-South Region Honorable Mention recognition as a junior. She triggered the Tigers' back row defense and collected 518 digs at a 4.67 per set average, which ranked second in the SEC. The 518 digs were also the third highest single season total in LSU history.

Even as a three-year letterman at libero, Meghan was happy to learn from the seven other defensive specialists. Still, her focus is on the upcoming season and her trust is in her LSU coaches.

"The seven other liberos invited had many different technical positions that differed from what we learn at LSU. Although I may not bring them back to use at school, it was interesting to learn the different approaches to our position as a whole."

LSU has strung together seven consecutive SEC Western Division titles highlighted by the overall league championship in 2009. It is the second longest streak in SEC division history, behind only Florida's 14-year run at the top of the SEC's Eastern Division from 1995-2008.

Mannari hopes the A2 experience this summer will carry over to the season, and that she can help LSU make it eight Western Division titles in a row. She understands the importance of the off-season, especially in developing individual talent for the betterment of the team. Playing for USA Gold did nothing to deter her from that perspective.

"As players, we are always expected by our coaches to work hard during the offseason and push ourselves to be the best we can be. This is not only an individual job but a team job as well. The USA A2 Program not only allowed for both of those aspects, but it also allowed me to see many drills that would make great additions to our open gym practices. I can't thank my coaches at LSU enough for supporting me throughout the entire process.

"I think as a team, we have worked extremely hard through our off-season both in the gym and weight room. We will be conditioned and ready to compete. I am anxious to get started and make this season a very successful and memorable year for our team."

It will be an exciting season for LSU volleyball if the experience of Mannari's silver can help lead the purple and gold to another championship.