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## At Pinnacle, Stepping Away From Basketball

By [JERÉ LONGMAN](#)

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.

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.

Often, youngsters are forced to drop all sports but one by overzealous coaches or pushed too hard by parents, Ungerleider said. Even if they are self-driven, he said, they can sense a subtle expectation that they should follow in the footsteps of others in an athletic family.

Such pressures can result in depression or rebellion by children, who begin using alcohol and drugs and give up sports, Ungerleider said. It takes a kind of bravery for athletes to acknowledge publicly that they need a break, he said.

“It’s very unusual for a kid to come forward,” said Ungerleider, who does not know Delle Donne. “It takes a very self-aware person. The fact that she didn’t drop out or disappear, but still wants to be involved with a team, with her education, is admirable.”

Until her stunning decision to drop basketball, Delle Donne was considered the next great women’s player. She seemed equally comfortable inside the lane and beyond the 3-point arc. The next [Candace Parker](#), some called her. By age 7, she was playing on a team with 11-year-old boys. By eighth grade, she was all-state at Ursuline Academy.

The family excelled at sports. Ernie Delle Donne played golf and freshman basketball at Columbia and power-lifts as a hobby. Joan Delle Donne, Elena’s mother, was a high school swimmer. Gene, her brother, was an all-state high school quarterback who attended [Duke](#), then transferred to Middle Tennessee, where he now plays tight end.

At a young age, Elena decided she wanted to be the best female basketball player in the country. Describing herself as a self-starter, she became obsessed, getting up at 6 in the morning to run and later lifting weights and practicing basketball. Eventually, she led Ursuline to four state titles.

But, by age 13, she said, she began to notice a lack of fulfillment. She did not seem to enjoy basketball as much as the other girls. This startled her because she was the star and thought she should be having even more fun than her teammates.

She kept her feelings to herself but felt a growing, gnawing discontent. Why am I doing this? Because I want to? Because everybody else wants me to?

“I was overdriving myself because I was so into becoming the best,” Delle Donne said. “I always thought someone else was working harder than me, which really made me go nuts with it. It wasn’t fun. It was like a job, and it was a job I wasn’t getting paid for.”

Feeling burned out, she took the summer off in 2007, then played her senior year of high school, more out of obligation to her teammates than a sense of enjoyment, Delle Donne said. When she sat out part of the 2007-8 season with mononucleosis, she missed her teammates but not basketball.

She enrolled at UConn in June, but several days later, returned home to suburban Wilmington, crying, telling her parents, “I can’t do this.”

She was confused, distraught. Everyone at UConn had treated her well, but she had seen the level of commitment required to play basketball and had realized she did not possess the necessary dedication.

“Everyone was so upset, and all I could think was, how do you think I feel to possess this God-given talent and not put forth the effort?” Delle Donne later told reporters.

[Geno Auriemma](#), UConn’s coach, said he would hold her scholarship through the summer. He urged her to take her time in evaluating her decision. It did not change. In late August, Delle Donne enrolled at Delaware and joined the volleyball team.

“It was tough and I was scared, but I had to do it,” Delle Donne said of giving up basketball. “I couldn’t keep lying to myself. That was the main thing; I was sick of being unhappy.”

With volleyball, she said, she feels excited before games in a way she no longer did with basketball. There is something new to learn every day, another challenge to be the best.

It is comforting to see the smile back on her face, Ernie Delle Donne said. Still, he wonders whether Elena’s decision to attend Delaware had less to do with basketball burnout than with homesickness, particularly the separation from her older sister, Elizabeth, 24, who was born deaf and blind and has cerebral palsy.

Last October, Elena told The Hartford Courant: “I look up to Lizzie more than anyone else. She’s an inspiration to me.” Leaving her sister would surely make her sad, Elena told The Courant, saying, “It’ll be a big piece of my life missing.”

A year later Ernie Delle Donne said, “I don’t know necessarily that Elena knows exactly what happened.”

He has posed to Elena a couple of hypothetical situations. If she could play volleyball at a powerhouse like Stanford or basketball at Delaware, which would she choose? If UConn played basketball in Newark, Del.,

instead of Storrs, Conn., what sport would she choose?

Basketball, Elena said both times, her father said.

Ernie Delle Donne said, "I think being away from home, being at UConn, she said, 'What have I got myself into?' "

There appear to be no hard feelings from Auriemma, at least publicly.

"Elena has the ability to be an Olympic volleyball player," he said through a spokesman. "I think she will be the top player at the college level, and I wish her the best of luck."

She said she would force herself to watch basketball on television this season. That way, she can figure out if she truly misses the sport. And she will be able to make a decision about her future that is strictly her own.

"I want her to watch the Final Four," Ernie Delle Donne said. "Hopefully, Geno Auriemma is cutting the net down. And I hope Elena says, 'Thank God I'm not there.' Then it was the right decision. We'll see. I honestly couldn't tell you within 30 percent what her reaction is going to be. I feel more confident predicting the stock market."

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