

She's got HIGH hopes

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Santa Ynez 13-year-old Aly Squires is one of just 30 young female athletes from across the United States selected to the USA Volleyball High Performance Championship Team.

Aly, a lanky 6-foot (and still growing) outside hitter, will join an elite group of girls to represent the United States in the USA Volleyball High Performance Championship for indoor volleyball in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., from July 19 to 22. Eighty athletes tried out for the team's 30 spots.

The High Performance Program at USA Volleyball is "the pipeline for young volleyball athletes" who strive to play professionally, according to the USA Volleyball Web site. The program begins when players are 13 or 14 years old and continues for six seasons, though players must try out each year.

The program gives players the opportunity to train with fellow elite athletes of their age group, compete at international levels and receive instruction from the top coaches in the country.

But for Aly, who graduated in June from Los Olivos Elementary with a 4.0 grade-point average and the citizenship award for her volunteer work at her school, making the national volleyball team is one achievement on a path to much greater aspirations.

"This is a stepping stone because I want to go to the Olympics," Aly said. "It has been one of my longtime dreams ever since I saw Kerri Walsh and Misty May play volleyball. When I see it, I want to do it. I know I can do it."

Obtaining a place on the national team roster was extremely competitive, Aly said.

"I didn't think I would make it because there were so many girls."

The program held tryouts in 20 sites across the country from March to June. Players could attend as many as were offered, and they would be evaluated based on their best tryout. Coaches measured players' height and vertical jumps for blocks and hitting, in addition to their skills and presence on the court.

Aly attended three tryouts over two months in Anaheim.

She said the sport came naturally to her because it has been in her family for so long -- Sue Squires, Aly's mother, participated in the 1980 Junior Olympics in Omaha, Neb., and played for one year at UC Davis.



However, according to the many who have watched Aly play, her genes were a small factor in getting her selected for the national team. Aly's passion for the game, desire to win and leadership on the court set her apart from other players, said Ed Gover, coach of the Santa Barbara 13-1 club volleyball team that Aly has played on for two years.

"At her level, (HP coaches) look for quality as much as skills. Are they a leader on the court? Do they blend in with others?" Sue Squires said.

Aly's vocal leadership on the court, according to friend and teammate Paige Craine, is sometimes the difference between winning and losing.

"She is consistent and a great leader. She'll always help you when you're down," Craine said.

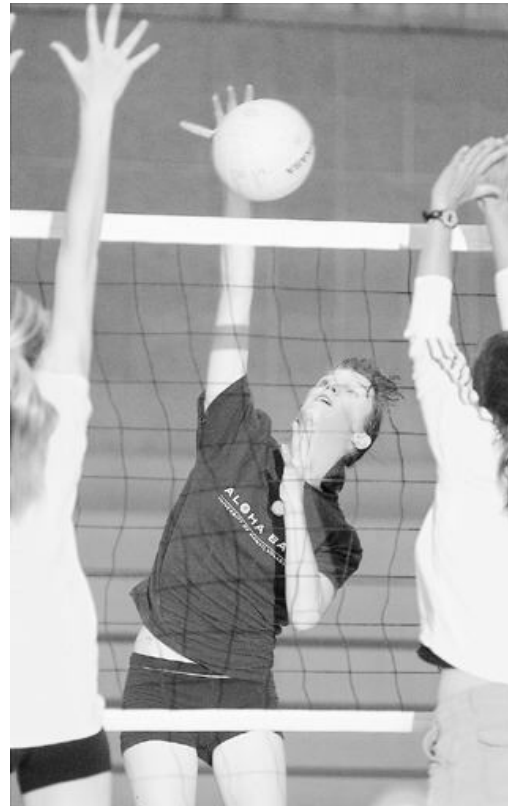
"For how great of a volleyball player Aly is, she is a better person," said Liz Towne-Gilbert, director of the Santa Barbara Volleyball Club.

Towne-Gilbert, one of Aly's biggest role models, said Aly's potential has not even been tapped. She only started playing volleyball in fourth grade.

With the sky as the limit and a place on the national team, Aly's Olympic dreams may not be far-fetched, Towne-Gilbert said.

"We always knew Aly was a special volleyball player," she said. "Where her competitiveness would take her, we didn't know."

Sue Squires added, "She's gone over and beyond anything we ever expected."



In the championship game of Aly's eighth-grade year, she played with a 102-degree temperature, refusing to sit out of the game. Her team lost the match, however, because so many players were absent because of illnesses.

"She'll fight through everything to play," Squires said.

As Aly's coach from fourth through eighth grade at Los Olivos Elementary, Sue Squires said Aly's work ethic separates her.

Aly's family, her mother and father, Jeff Squires, and her younger brother, Kristian, 11, who also plays the game, are supportive despite the financial expenses and the three-hour drive to Anaheim two to four weekends a month for Aly and Kristian's volleyball tournaments.

"If we have to work extra to get more money, then we do," Sue Squires said. "It will get harder as she gets older. She is good about being concerned and sensitive to that."

Aly earned \$1,200 that will go toward her trip to Florida for nationals by selling team bracelets for \$5 each.

She will meet and train with the national team from July 13 to 19. The 30 girls selected will be split into three teams that will compete in the national championship.

In addition to playing in nationals, Aly will compete with her club team in the 2006 Junior Olympics, which run through July 2, in Atlanta.

Aly said she will continue to play on her club team in Santa Barbara, which begins in December, and she will try out for the Santa Ynez High School team in the fall. She also plans to travel to Anaheim to compete in tournaments with the High Performance Regional Team.