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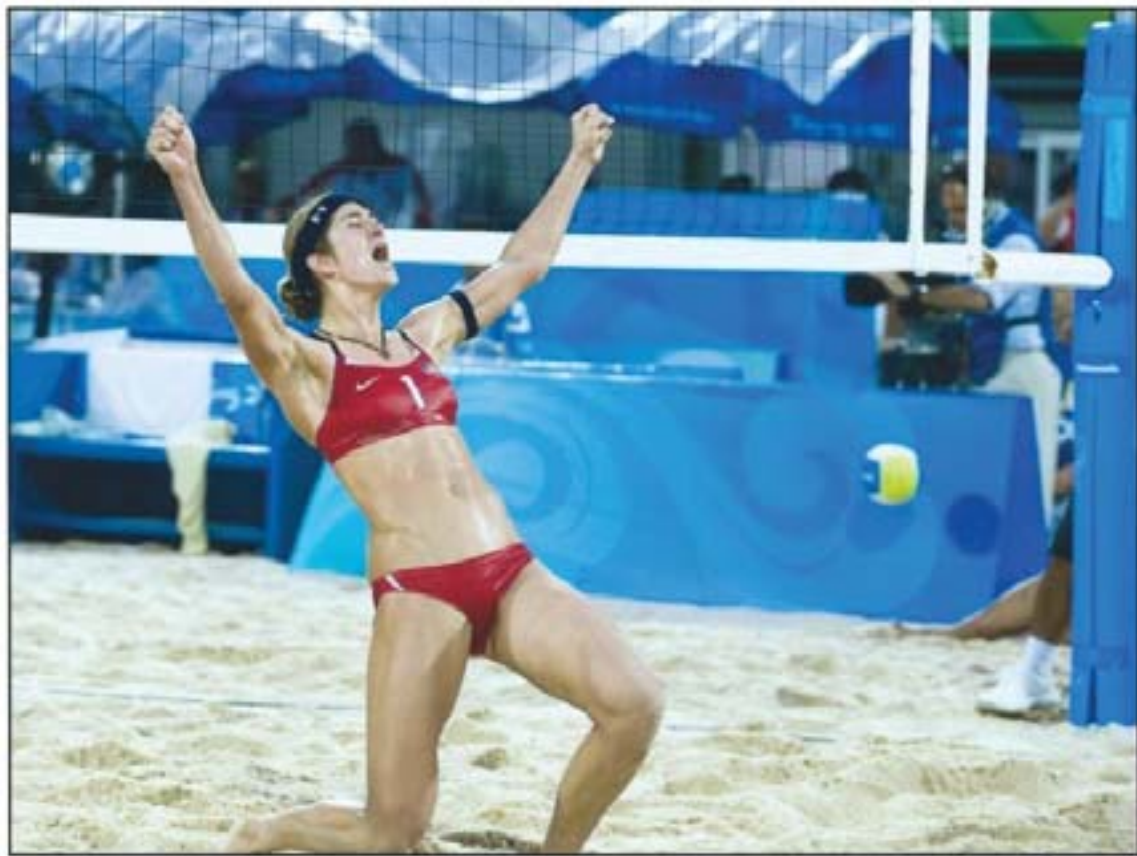
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LAMORINDA SPORTS

Life's a beach for Nicole Branagh



Nicole Branagh at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China

Photo provided

By Jon Kingdon

Lamorinda has been blessed with many great student-athletes. There have been multi-sport athletes that have lettered in three sports. The number drops precipitously when you restrict the list to the people who have been recruited by various colleges to play any or all three sports. Nicole Branagh, who grew up in Orinda and graduated in 1997 from Miramonte High School, is one such individual.

Starting out, like most in Lamorinda, as a swimmer, Branagh also played softball and soccer. Entering high school, she played basketball, volleyball and did the high jump, triple jump, and long jump for the track team. Branagh was the league MVP in volleyball and basketball and still holds school records in the high jump and triple jump all of which ultimately led her to be inducted into the first Hall of

Fame class at Miramonte in 2017.

"I loved the whole experience of playing sports at Miramonte with the rivalries with Acalanes and Campolindo," Branagh said. "I had a lot of great memories like the road trips with the team with all of the team camaraderie and the Lamorinda community. I will not admit to painting the rock, but it was always fun to drive by the rock and see what school had done the latest painting."

Branagh chose to attend the University of Minnesota, accepting an athletic scholarship to play volleyball for the Golden Gophers. It was between basketball and volleyball as to which sport she would play. "Actually, I think that basketball was my best sport," Branagh said. "I had played it the longest, but I may have been burned out on it a little bit and I really loved volleyball and saw that there would be a lot of opportunities to continue

playing volleyball after college."

With so many colleges offering scholarships, what was it that led Branagh to choose to go to the University of Minnesota where the winters are cold and snowy, and the summers are hot and humid? It was the personal touch by head coach Mike Hebert that won Branagh over. "I had actually canceled my scheduled visit to Minnesota because I did not want to go that far from home. However, I kept getting hand-written letters from Coach Hebert and there was something about him that drove me to check him and the school out."

Hebert, considered one of the architects of modern high-competitive professional volleyball, won Branagh over when she made her recruiting trip. "After the trip, I told my family, 'That's the one. I just have a feeling about it,'" Branagh said. "I was won over by the people, the academics,

and the great support they had for the athletic programs. As for the weather, it was only going to be for four years, but I loved it there. I did grow up skiing, so snow wasn't new to me. It was just a great place to go to college."

Branagh did not totally turn her back on basketball, giving some thought to playing with the Minnesota varsity after finishing her final volleyball season. "I would usually hang around after practice and shoot with the basketball team," Branagh said. "However, playing two seasons of college sports back-to-back, and being a full-time student would have been too much."

Branagh led Minnesota in kills all four seasons and was named First Team All-Big Ten as a sophomore, junior and senior, named the Big Ten Player of the Year as a senior and was chosen All-American twice. Her 2,370 career kills remain the most in school history and remains among the top 15 in NCAA history and was inducted into the University of Minnesota Hall of Fame in 2014.

To the surprise of no one, Branagh was asked to join the U.S.A. National Team from 2001-03, winning a bronze medal at the Pan American games in 2003. She also played for the one season of the United States Professional Volleyball League with the Minnesota Chill winning the only championship for that league, and was named the Finals MVP. When the league folded, Branagh went on to play professionally in Japan from 2002-03 and in Italy from 2003-05.

While working for the family business, Branagh Inc. in 2004, Branagh got a call from a friend that led her on a new career path. "A friend invited me to come down to Southern California to play beach volleyball even though I had never played it before," Branagh said. "It is a different game from indoor volleyball (with only two players on the team) but the

basic skills are the same. Fortunately, it worked out to be a great career for me with many opportunities. I traveled all over the world and went to the 2008 Olympics which was a dream come true."

Beach Volleyball is a bit like the pro golf tour - it's all prize money and you must pay for all your expenses. So, for two years, Branagh played both indoors and beach volleyball where she had sponsorships with Under Armor and Hilton. "Once I began to win awards and do well, I got more sponsors," Branagh said, "which helped."

After being named rookie-of-the-year with American Volleyball Professionals (AVP), what led her to fully commit to beach volleyball was when she was asked by three-time Olympian Holly McPeak to be her playing partner. "This was huge," said Branagh. "It was then that I wanted to see how good I could do on the beach. I committed to training in the off-season, training with and learning from the best players."

Along with the AVP, Branagh also competed in the International Volleyball Foundation (FIVB). Competing in both leagues was taxing on the players. "We might play a final match on Sunday in California and that night we would be on a plane to Europe to start another tournament the next Wednesday," Branagh said. "Either we would come right back to the United States or stay overseas for a couple of weeks to compete in tournaments. We would play 26 to 27 tournaments in a season and with all that travel, it took a lot out of you."

Finding the right teammate is not easy and changes are often made. Branagh at various times partnered with six Olympians through her career. It was Elaine Youngs who was Branagh's partner in the 2008 Olympics where they finished in fifth place.

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