

# Net Gains

Story by Angela Busch  
Photos by Adam Masloski

For members of Mizzou's best-ever volleyball team, camaraderie and competitive success go hand in hand.



**D**uring the 2005 season, Missouri's volleyball team didn't really have one go-to player. Instead, the Tigers had 14.

Although some players earned national honors, what really distinguished Missouri was its teamwork. The squad vaulted into college volleyball's upper echelon during the 2005 season, reaching the Elite Eight for the first time in MU history after upsetting sixth-ranked Hawaii on Dec. 9, 2005.

The 2005 season may be over, but the relationships formed on this team will continue. In the cutthroat, often selfish world of Division I athletics, this was a special bunch of women. It was a group so closely connected and driven to succeed as a team that they discarded the goal of personal accolades and discovered something much more valuable: each other.

### Distinct personalities

In an average college town duplex in Columbia's Pear Tree Village, three not-so-average young women live together.

Shen Danru, Tatum Ailes and Nicole Wilson were all starters on Missouri's 2005 volleyball team. They come from varied backgrounds, have distinct personalities and don't always get along. But through their shared passion for volleyball, they developed friendships that they say will last long after their college careers.

Each roommate has her own quirks.

On the court, senior outside hitter Shen Danru is known for her ferocious jump serves and easy smile. After making a mistake, Shen points to herself right away,

**Left, Tatum Ailes (No. 9) celebrates after the winning point in the third game against Missouri State on Dec. 2, 2005. The Tigers won the match 3-0. Since joining the team in 2004, Ailes has charged the team with emotion on the court.**

**Right, Nicole Wilson (No. 13) squeezes a hit between two Arkansas players during the NCAA Regionals. The Tigers had their most successful year to date in 2005.**

smiles and refocuses for the next point. The smile seems to be an admission of guilt with a promise to improve.

Shen was born in Shanghai, China, and moved to the U.S. five years ago at age 19. She redshirted her first season and went on to play in every game of every match during the 2002-05 seasons.

School doesn't come easily to Shen, who still struggles with English. But to maintain her visa eligibility, she must do well in her courses. She spends hours at the library.

Shen is Missouri's all-time leader in points, kills, aces and digs. She is disciplined and focused in life, in school and in volleyball.

Sophomore Tatum Ailes may be Shen's polar opposite. The Big 12 Libero (full-time defensive specialist) of the Year is short and fair in coloring with light reddish hair, while Shen stands 5 feet 11 inches with dark hair and eyes. While Shen's smile is apologetic, Ailes' is mischievous.

Like Shen, Ailes considers school a priority. But she has difficulty focusing on just her studies. She often sits downstairs on the recliner, where her books compete with the TV for her attention.

On the court, Ailes is likely to dive into the sidelines to pop up a ball. She doesn't smile when she makes a mistake; instead she sets her jaw in determination. But once the team wins, she'll jump in the air

with her arms spread wide: the picture of exuberance.

Junior Nicole Wilson falls somewhere in between Shen and Ailes, which is fitting because she also is in the middle age-wise and plays middle blocker for the Tigers. Wilson says she often serves as the moderator during her roommates' "sisterly spats."

On the court, Wilson is reliable, quick and strong. The honorable mention All-America middle blocker was named National Player of the Week on Sept. 26 after hitting .719 and averaging 3.83 kills.

She shows emotion most after a block, when she raises her arms and smiles quickly, letting go, for an instant, of her composed personality.

### Where they all come together

Outside of volleyball, Ailes, Shen and Wilson have little in common. But despite their differences, the three have created a haven for their team. Their duplex is where they all come together.

It's Sunday night, around 9:30 p.m.

For the past half hour, Ailes has been lounging in a chair and watching her teammates' cars pull up and park in front of her house.

Wilson is busy carrying her 13-inch television downstairs and hooking up the wires. She brought an entertainment center to the duplex. It once housed a large



TV, but that TV has been broken for a long time. Now all 14 teammates have to watch Wilson's tiny TV.

Not that they mind. The pretense for these Sunday night get-togethers is the ABC drama *Grey's Anatomy*, but it's clearly not just the show that brings them together. After all, most of the players could watch it alone in comfort on much larger screens. This Sunday evening, like so many others, is getting chaotic. Girls crowd next to each other on the couch. Some run around downstairs, laughing, joking and sharing memories of the season.

One other such night, while a few girls sat at the kitchen table playing the card game Phase 10, sophomore Melissa Allbery threw her hands up during a particularly exciting moment. Allbery is 6 feet 3 inches tall, and when she lifted her arms, she hit the ceiling light fixture. It shattered, and for an instant the room was silent. Everyone looked at Wilson and Shen, who stared at the ground, then looked at each other and started laughing.

Soon the whole room was laughing together. It was business as usual.

Wilson says that whether the teammates

are fighting over chairs, winning a hand in Phase 10 or grabbing each other during a scary movie, they do things together. They've created a foundation of friendship that withstands tough moments — even broken glass.

### What made this season special

Missouri volleyball players haven't always been comfortable enough with each other to use the word "sisters."

In 2004, for the first time in school history, Missouri hosted to Rounds 1 and 2 of the NCAA tournament. The Tigers won their first match against Arkansas but fell to Louisville in the second round. That team in 2004 was different, even though most of the players were the same. All six starters returned in 2005 for Missouri, but they returned much more experienced, driven and mature.

Arkansas Coach Chris Poole noticed that change in the 2005 Tigers. After Missouri eliminated the Lady Razorbacks in the second round at the Hearnes Center on Dec. 3, 2005, Poole noted a stronger motivation and drive in this year's squad. "They were driven just to not let it slip away," he said.

Senior setter Lindsey Hunter, a first-team All-American, felt that change, too. "We all have a common goal in mind this year," she said during the season. "And we hang out all the time, more than in years past. Even if we have days off, we're probably still with each other. We're a close team and we're really good friends ... it's good to have everybody together working collectively instead of one person who's not in it. Even the freshmen, it's everybody together. I think that's our strength this year definitely."

### Seeing it in action

Observers could see that collective action on the court all year, but it may have been most evident during Game 2 of the Tigers Nov. 20 sweep of then-No.10 Texas.

The game was nearly flawless. Each pass from the back-row seemed to float perfectly up to Hunter, whose sets would fall right into the crashing arms of Missouri's attackers. The Tigers went on an 8-2 run

**The Tigers volleyball team huddles up before every game. Throughout the 2005 season, their closeness was the driving force behind the team's achievements.**



during that game. Not much that Texas hit got past Missouri. Ailes was flying all over the backcourt picking up balls. Even sophomore Na Yang got into the defensive frenzy, throwing her body out of play and knocking over a folding chair to try to save the ball.

After an especially big block by Wilson that put Missouri up 14-9, the Tigers gathered for a cheer. They looked amazed at their own play, yet completely in sync and prepared to win the next point.

"You always hear people talking about being in the zone," Coach Wayne Kreklow says. "I think definitely in the second game our players were in that zone."

The energy and excitement didn't come from any one player, he says. It came from the team, and the athletes' trust in one another.

### Closeness from coaches

With such a family-like atmosphere, it's not surprising that the team's coaches are husband and wife. Susan and Wayne Kreklow have three children, and they call the team their second family. That feeling goes both ways. Ailes calls the Kreklows her second parents, and Hunter compares her relationship with them to the one she has with her parents.

"I can talk to them about the things I talk to my parents about," Hunter says. "They just listen to everything."

That easygoing relationship shows up in unpredictable ways on the court. For instance, Hunter recalls a practice when she smacked Wayne in the face with a ball. Her high school coach would have been furious in that situation, she says. But Wayne just looked at Hunter, smiled and vowed to "get her back" on the next play. The rest of the team grinned, too. They knew Wayne wouldn't be mad.

Wayne and Susan "just keep us on an even keel every day at practice," Hunter says. "That's what helps us stay consistent."

### Making it last

Unlike in 2005, the 2006 volleyball team won't have the benefit of having all six

returning starters. Hunter, Shen, and middle blocker Lisa Boyd will not return for the Tigers. It might be difficult to recapture the magic of 2005 — the wins, the memories, the captivating athleticism of six individuals playing as one.

But the Tigers of 2005 may have created something that will last.

Although Ailes, Shen and Wilson might not get to host get-togethers every Sunday night and Hunter has joined USA Volleyball to train for the 2010 Olympics, it seems likely their friendship will continue. Hunter plans to stay in touch with the team, and Shen will remain in Columbia for another year to finish her master's degree.

"I still will be here. I want to know what's going on with the team and help as much as I can even though I can't be on the court," Shen says. "I think I will still be involved."

She hesitates, then shakes her head and smiles that trademark smile, "I mean I will definitely."

Nicole Wilson looks at her roommate, someone she probably never would have met without volleyball, and then she smiles, too. She says her roommates and teammates inspired her to do better, and feel better, in each game.

"We all get something from each other, and we all have each other's backs," she says. "Lots of times, if somebody's not playing well, we just have to look at each other and make each other smile."

Maybe it's those smiles — those genuine, excited grins — that demonstrated the 2005 Missouri volleyball team's difference from so many of their competitors. That warm feeling didn't come only after personal achievements. It came every time something good happened for the team.

In 2005, that's what the Missouri volleyball season was all about. ■

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## Records for kills, digs, fans and more

Here's a sample of the record-breaking moments for 2005 Tiger volleyball.

- The Tigers finished the season 25-5 (.833), placed eighth in the AVCA Coaches' Top 25 Poll and finished third in the Big 12 behind Nebraska and Texas.

- Missouri reached the Elite Eight of the NCAA Tournament, after entering the bracket with an all-time school record-high 10th seed. The Tigers swept both Missouri State and Arkansas in the first and second rounds and advanced to the team's first-ever regional competition. Mizzou upset then-No. 6 Hawaii in the regional semifinal to advance to its first-ever regional final.

- Lindsey Hunter became the first Tiger volleyball player to earn AVCA All-America First Team honors. Jessica Vander Kooi and Nicole Wilson earned AVCA All-America Honorable Mentions.

- Mizzou went unscathed in nonconference play, winning all six matches in sweeps, including wins over then-No. 9 Tennessee and then-No. 9 Wisconsin.

- Mizzou won 12 consecutive matches to begin the season. The streak, which ended with a four-game loss to No. 1 Nebraska, was the team's longest since 1982.

- Mizzou finished sixth nationally in attendance. The Tigers drew 40,052 fans to the Hearn Center, an 83 percent increase over the previous year.

- Lindsey Hunter broke Mizzou's all-time assist record previously held by Heather Gerber (4,954). Hunter finishes her career with 6,096 assists, a performance in the top 15 all-time in NCAA history. Her career average of 13.73 assists per game throughout her career places her sixth in NCAA history.

- Shen Danru became the Tigers' all-time leader in digs (1,372), service aces (181), kills (1,658) and kills per game (3.73).

- Nicole Wilson became the current Tiger all-time leader in hitting percentage, ending the 2005 season with a .361 career average. She also became the Tigers' all-time leader in blocks per game with 1.07.