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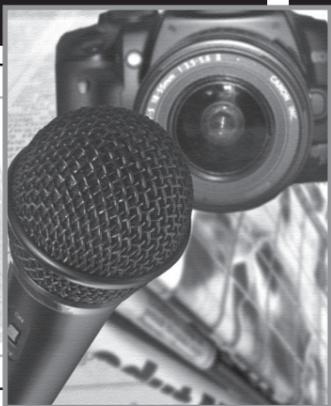
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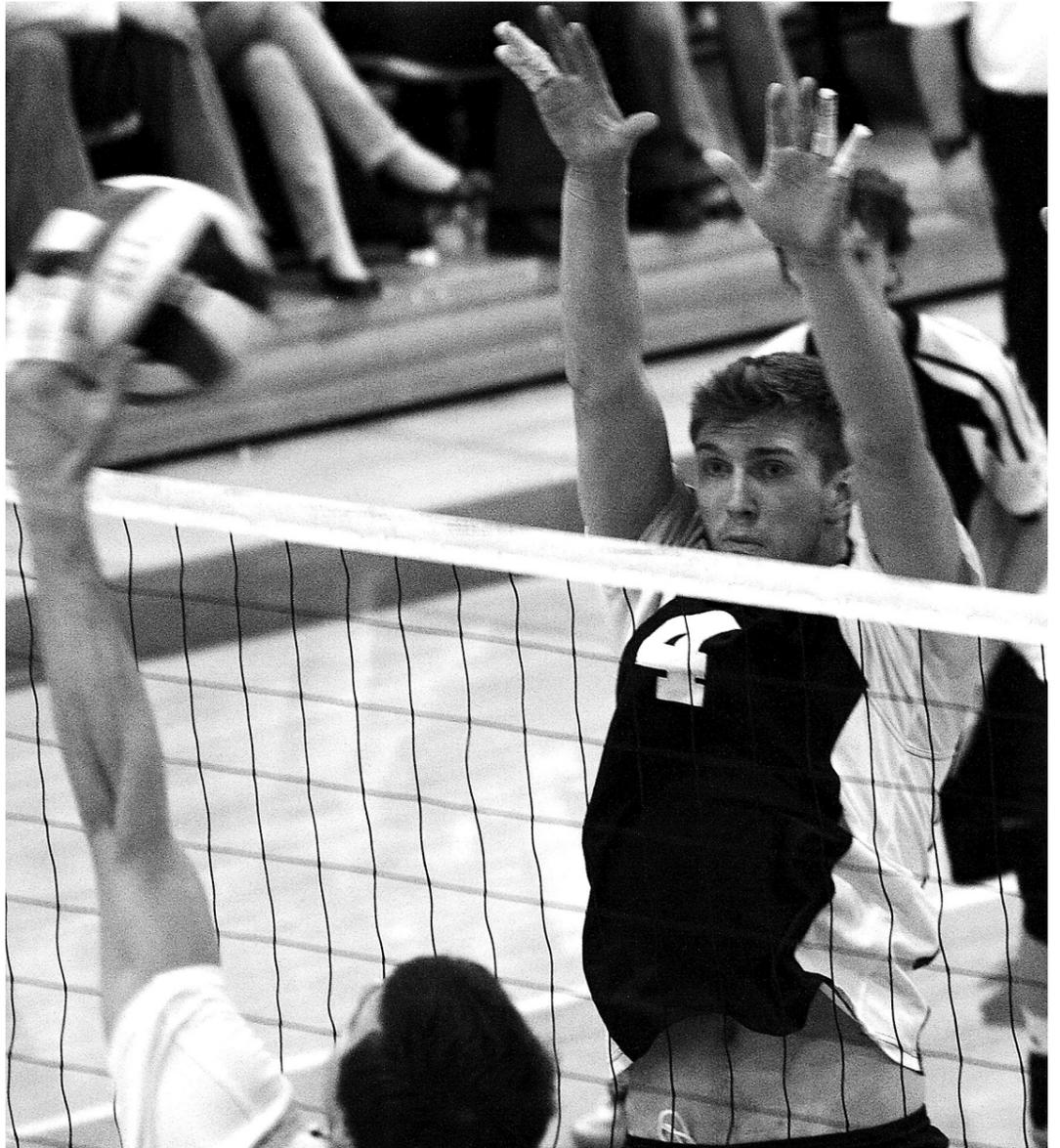
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FILE PHOTO: KIM SMITH

EXCHANGING BLUE FOR RED Trinity Western's Josh Howatson (4) hopes to make the Canadian National Team.

National centre vying with universities for volleyballers

DAN PLOUFFE
CUP Sports Bureau Chief

HAMILTON, ON (CUP)—Since the CIS men's volleyball season wrapped up with the National Championships in Hamilton last weekend, many of the graduating seniors are wondering what's next now that their university careers are over.

Many CIS volleyball players have aspirations of taking the next step and playing for the Canadian senior national team—a goal that may be within their reach seeing as 18 out of 22 athletes on Team Canada's extended training roster went through the Canadian university system.

Since 1996, CIS has pretty much been the only option for Canadian prospects, but since the Team Canada full-time training centre in Winnipeg was recently re-established after a decade-long absence, players now have a question to ask themselves about which route to take if they want to reach the next level. It was for this training centre that Golden Bear standouts Alexandre Gaumont Casias and Dallas Soonias left the Alberta program at the end of 2005/06, even though they hadn't exhausted their CIS eligibility.

National team head coach Glenn Hoag thinks that for Canada to excel on the international stage, its best young players should spend at least a year or two at the centre.

"[CIS] is a pretty good training ground, but it's not perfect obviously because they're student athletes—their emphasis is not volleyball; their emphasis is academic," he said. "We just cannot take a CIS athlete, put him on the international stage and expect

him to perform."

When the majority of national team members are playing with their clubs professionally, the centre becomes tailored to young players, where they can be put on individual training regimens and be closely watched over as they work to improve on their weaknesses.

One of those hopefuls is 20-year-old Louis-Pierre Mainville, who got the chance to play at the 2006 World Championships after the team was hit by a few injuries. Last year, Mainville had been accepted to study at the Université de Sherbrooke—where Hoag coached from 2003 until the end of this season—but chose Winnipeg instead.

"It was a difficult decision," Mainville said. "In the end, university wouldn't have allowed me to improve as much as at the full-time centre in Winnipeg. I had talked to Glenn a lot about what the centre was all about and I decided to move out there and give myself a better chance to live my dream of playing for the national team."

Hoag noted that in Winnipeg Mainville can focus all his energy on volleyball—to eat, rest and train properly.

"I think some people said, 'You can study later, but you can't play volleyball that long,'" Hoag said of Mainville's decision. "So he made his choice and he's very happy with it. He's really improving really fast and he's going to be a great asset."

On the other side of the coin are players like Josh Howatson, this year's CIS MVP, who used all five years of his university eligibility at Trinity Western. Howatson, a 6'7" setter, also dreams of becoming a national team member and got a taste of what that's

like when he played for Canada-2 at an exhibition international tournament last September in Ottawa.

"As far as competition level, playing pro would probably be better for your overall development as a player, but I think as a whole person, you definitely want to go CIS," explained Howatson, who's hoping for an invite to the training centre. "One thing I like about CIS is that you get a degree as well."

Larry McKay, head coach of the 2007 National Champions, the Winnipeg Wesmen, and an assistant with Team Canada, also likes the idea of players competing in the CIS and then moving on to the centre once they're done at university.

"[The CIS] is the highest level of volleyball in the country beneath the national team," he noted. "It's the place where kids, for anywhere from one to five years, can get the highest-level training possible prior to the national team level."

However, he agrees with Hoag that most players can't make the jump from CIS right onto the national team and says they need to encourage grads to go to the full-time centre to bridge the gap.

Hoag does recognize that the CIS will remain the main feeder system for the national team at least for the foreseeable future, and that it's going to be up to each individual player to help Canada move up from its current ranking of 12th in the world.

"They need to be super structured in their school and sports," Hoag said. "Sometimes they need to sacrifice things like their social lives to focus totally, but even then they still have school, so it's not easy. They just won't develop as fast."