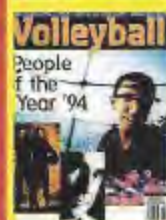
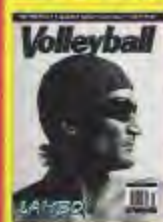


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# Forging Her Own Path

Nana Meriwether has helped vault UCLA to the top of the women's college game this season.

By George Alfano

**N**ana Meriwether starts by following her family but usually ends up on her own road. The path has led her to be one of the top middle blockers in women's college volleyball.

The 6'1" UCLA senior started college at Duke University as a track standout. Her father, Dr. Delano Meriwether, was the first African-American to graduate from Duke's medical school. He won the U.S. title in the 100-yard dash in 1971 while doing a medical residency. Her sister, Fortune Meriwether, ran track at Stanford before going to medical school.

"The fact that my father went to Duke motivated me to go there," said Meriwether, who played volleyball at Sidwell Friends, a Washington, D.C. prep school attended by, among others, the children of President Bill Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore. "Duke has a good program and it's a good school, but it wasn't the right place for me."

Meriwether had her own dream. She had attended private schools since kindergarten, but after spending a semester on the Durham, N.C. campus, she wanted to follow her heart. She also decided to major in political science over a path which would lead to medical school.

"Since the beginning of high school, I wanted to go to UCLA and play volleyball," said Meriwether, who had helped UCLA to a 21-1 record through late October.

Her club coach contacted UCLA women's volleyball coach Andy Banachowski to see if the Bruins, who had recruited Meriwether in high school, were still interested. And the rest, as they say, was history.

"I was looking for a different experience and a big college," said Meriwether. "I wanted to go to a bigger school. UCLA is a great mix of academics and athletics. I also found myself more interested in team sports."

When she got to UCLA, she found she had a lot to learn,



Meriwether originally attended Duke University and ran track.

Meriwether helped UCLA jump out to a 21-1 start through late October.





JULIAN BAUM (WWW.BIGDIBBLEMINDS.COM)

Meriwether was leading the nation in hitting percentage (.486) and was ranked sixth nationally in blocks per game (1.72) through mid-October

but Banachowski saw that he had a serious student.

"I didn't realize there were so many techniques and complexities," said Meriwether. "The coaches broke things down and taught me a lot. They developed my game so I can see the court better and beat defenses."

Meriwether started out the 2005 season as one of several candidates for the starting middle blocker position at UCLA. She came on strong, earning All Pac-10 Conference honors last year. Meriwether had 17 blocks to lead the Bruins, who started the season slowly, to a five-game upset victory over national champion Washington, which was undefeated at the time. She followed that up by notching 16 blocks against Oregon.

"She's a smart kid and figures out how to use her athletic ability to get things done," said Banachowski. "I think the key to her improvement is just experience on the court."

Meriwether's physical skills are obvious. Nellie Spicer, UCLA's sophomore setter, saw that and, with some work, things started to ascend during last season.

"I never really played on a team with girls like Nana who touch 11-feet. Maybe you see that on Team USA," said Spicer, who said Meriwether is always dressed impressively, even in casual situations. "Once I was able to figure out how she works, how she likes her ball to be set, that's when we clicked."

And now Meriwether is playing a major role for the Bruins, who were serious Pac-10 Conference title contenders

through late October.

"Coming into my junior year, I had a new awareness of the court and the game itself," said Meriwether.

Although her grade-point average in her political science major is 3.9, Meriwether now thinks medical school might be a good idea even though it will require extra science courses before applying to medical school. She might seek a position as an assistant coach or graduate assistant while working on that.

"I never thought I would want to be a doctor, but this past year I found a new interest in science," said Meriwether, whose mother, Nomvimbi, earned a law degree before starting her own travel agency. "I guess it's in my blood." ■



#### Nana Quick Hitter

- Rides around UCLA's campus on a bicycle with a basket in the front
- Enjoys cooking and counts rosemary meatloaf and spinach mushroom quiche as her favorite dishes.
- A fan of the Academy Award-winning movie "Crash"