

by **Jeremy Shere**
photography by **Paul Riley**



Returning forward Kristen Arnold celebrates with teammates after a goal.



rise

IU women's sports on the

This could be THE year for IU women's sports. ¶ Men's teams have traditionally fared better at IU, and with five NCAA basketball championships, seven national soccer titles, and an improving football program, men have earned the spotlight. ¶ But things may be different in 2008-09. Women's teams, including basketball, soccer, and volleyball, have made great strides in recent seasons, emerging as contenders in the Big Ten and on the national scene. ¶ The newfound success of IU women's sports reflects an overall devotion to excellence on the part of coaches, players, and the administration. "They [IU women athletes] compete at a world-class level

and you can see their commitment, dedication, and desire from the first moment you watch them," says outgoing athletic director Rick Greenspan. Throughout his tenure, Greenspan has been in their corner, say the women's coaches, providing both emotional support and financial (in the form of new locker rooms, training equipment, and practice facilities). ¶ That dual support pushes players and coaches to reach the next level, says Mick Lyon, head coach of the women's soccer team. "It encourages us to put in all the hours and effort to make our teams better, build team chemistry, and raise the bar for IU women's athletics across the board."

Soccer

When asked what people should know about the women's soccer team, head coach Mick Lyon has a ready, one-line answer: "They're talented, athletic, and exciting to watch."

Entering his sixth year as head coach at IU and 15th as a head coach overall, Lyon has seen the women's game explode in recent years. "It's a million miles away from where the game was in the early '90s," he says. A collegiate player himself at the University of Evansville, Lyon was women's head coach there from 1993 to 2002. "The team I had in Evansville would get thrashed 20-0 by the team I have here," he says.

Over the past five years, IU women's soccer has improved steadily, culminating in last year's 13-7 record, 4th place finish in the Big Ten conference, and an unprecedented breakthrough into the NCAA Tournament. The team made it to the final 16 where they lost to Duke.

What were once goals have "now grown into expectations," says Lyon. Established as a top-20 national program, the team has set its sights on a national championship. "What I'm most proud of," says the coach, "is that we've built a foundation for success, from our support staff to assistant coaches to making sure the training room is in order and that laundry gets done properly. Those are the little details that create a base for continued excellence."

And, of course, there's the team, which un-

der Lyon has evolved a game that's fast-paced and athletic. "Whether it's strength, speed, jumping ability, or the courageous side of going into hard tackles," he says, "you see these girls fighting hard and playing tough."

The turning point, says Lyon, was in 2006, when the IU women played #1 Penn State to a scoreless tie. "They survived us, that was the difference. I looked at that and thought what a difference from 2002, when we played Penn State away and there was one college team on the field—they—and one high school junior varsity team, which was us. But in 2006, with that game, we turned the corner. We were no longer rebuilding, we were building."

Looking to the 2008-09 season, Lyon has good reason to anticipate success. With 14 returning players and ten incoming freshmen recruited from top high school programs, the team will be experienced and deep and, says Lyon, "as exciting to watch as any team in the country, men's or women's."

Junior outside midfielder Natalie O'Bryan agrees. "We work just as hard as the men's team, we practice just as many hours, and play just as many games." The team's foremost strength, she says, is that "there's automatic chemistry. We're a true family that trains together, eats together, and works toward a common goal. It's amazing to see eleven girls on a field working together for ninety minutes."

PLAYERS TO WATCH



Jessica Boots

A junior defender from Carmel, Ind., Boots finished the year with one goal and four assists and was named to the Old National Bank Hoosier Classic All-Tournament Team.



Kristin Arnold

A junior forward from Ohio, Arnold scored ten goals, recorded four assists and was named second team All-Big Ten.

Defender Jessica Boots
shows her stuff.



“The team
I had in
Evansville
would get
thrashed
20-0 by
the team
I have here.”

MICK LYON / HEAD COACH

Climbing the Ladder

PLAYERS TO WATCH



Jamie Braun

A junior guard from Wisconsin, in 2007-08 Braun averaged a team-leading 15.5 points and 3.5 assists per game.



Jori Davis

A sophomore guard out of New York, Davis averaged 6.8 points and 4 rebounds per game in 2007-08.



Whitney Thomas

A senior forward and Bloomington North graduate, Thomas averaged 12.4 points per game and led the team in rebounding (8.7 p/g) and blocked shots (25).

Basketball

Since going 11-18 during the 2003-04 season, the basketball team has had three straight winning seasons and reached the post-season each time, advancing to the third round of the Women's National Invitation Tournament in 2006. For head coach Felisha Legette-Jack, that success is a testament to the players' determination and will to win.

"These young ladies are so tough...they've done this on their own and I'm just hopeful I'm not going to muck it up," says Legette-Jack, who was head coach at Hofstra before coming to IU three years ago. "I'm just excited to be a part of it."

While the men's game features the exhilaration of lightning-quick point guards and powerful slam dunks, the women's game is slower and more controlled—a pace that, says the coach, "allows fans to see plays evolving" and showcases the beauty of a game played below the rim.

"Our strength is our unity, oneness, and focus," says the coach, adding that her players "compete in everything we do, from basketball to

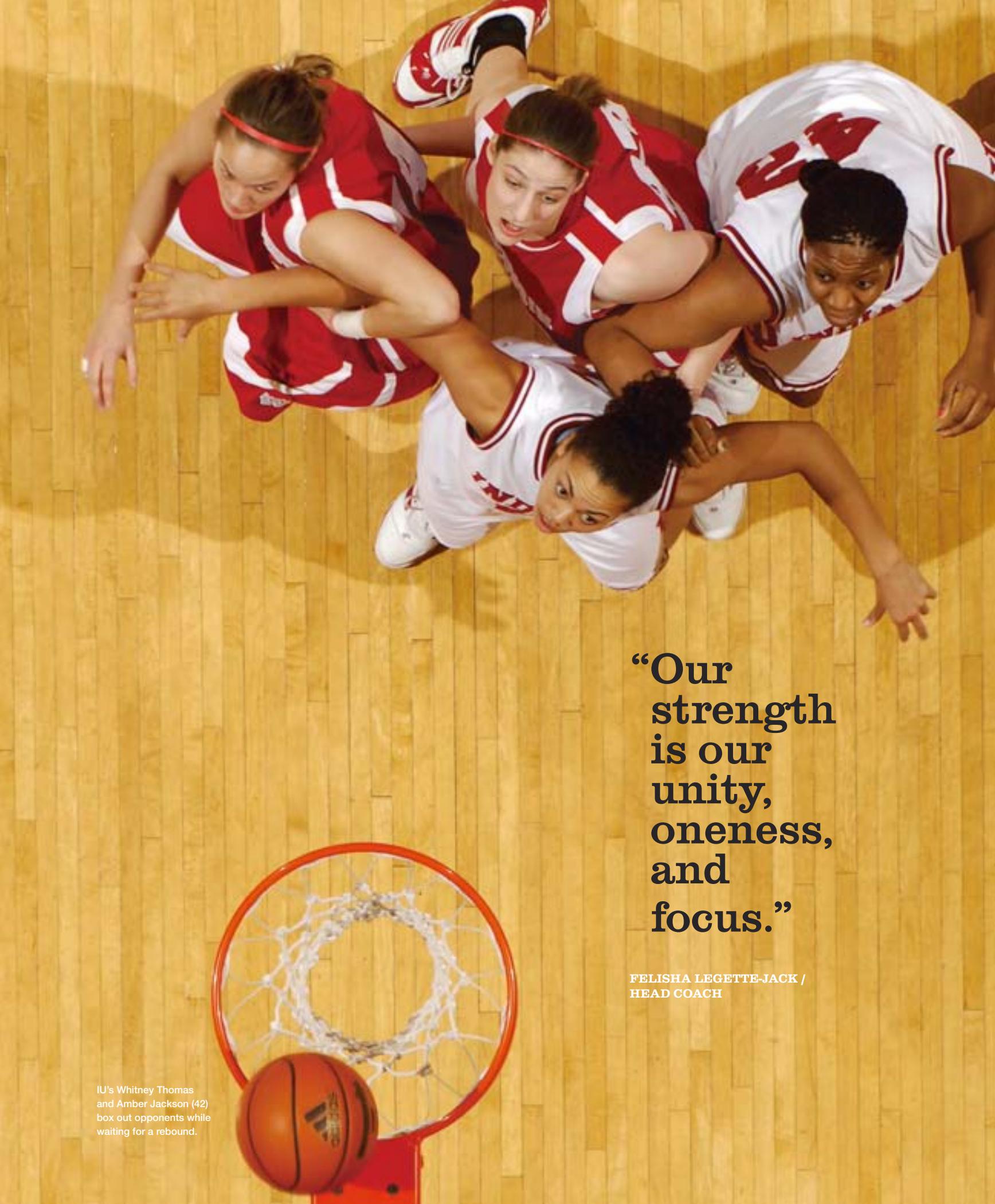
community service to excelling in the classroom."

According to senior power forward Whitney Thomas, the team's greatest asset is their desire to win. "All we care about is getting better, not being at the bottom of the pack. And we have that mentality now."

For sophomore guard Jori Davis, the goal for the upcoming season is "to improve every day and to come together as a team."

For the 2008-09 season, the coaches and players hope to build on their success of the past three years, keep their string of post-season berths alive, and continue to improve as a program.

One of the great benefits of being a winning program with a good reputation is that it's easier to convince top high school players to come here, says Legette-Jack. "When I talk to recruits I don't do a hard sell because I don't have to. I just say, "This is Indiana—if you want to be part of something special and enthusiastic, to get in on the ground floor, and help build something unique, IU women's sports is where it's at."



“Our strength is our unity, oneness, and focus.”

**FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK /
HEAD COACH**

IU's Whitney Thomas and Amber Jackson (42) box out opponents while waiting for a rebound.

Volleyball

Some people may not be aware of volleyball as a spectator sport in the same way as soccer and basketball. But for Sherry Dunbar, IU volleyball head coach, the game is second to none when it comes to athleticism and excitement, “because it involves complex strategy, speed, and teamwork.” For example, when the opposing team serves, Dunbar will call in a play to the setter, who relays the strategy to the hitters, who before the ball is served can run to different positions according to the opponent’s offensive scheme. As in basketball and soccer, teams run several defensive sets throughout the course of a match.

Recent rule and position changes have added greatly to the game’s excitement. Instead of being able to score only when your team is serving, you can now win points from the defensive side—a rule shift that speeds up the game. Rallies now last longer as well because of the addition of the libero, a new defensive position that coaches can substitute for a backline player. Unlike the six-footers manning the front line, the libero is often a shorter player who specializes in digging

out tough serves and powerful spikes.

IU libero Juli Pierce, a 5th-year senior, relishes the role. “When the other team goes up and they think they’re going to get a kill and you just dig it out like it’s nothing, the crowd goes crazy. I love having that responsibility.”

It’s leaders like Pierce, Dunbar says, who, alongside incoming freshmen from high school state championship teams, are turning the program around. “The girls we have coming in are winners who have the right mentality,” she says.

The coach credits outgoing IU Athletic Director Rick Greenspan for making it easier to recruit top players. “It’s not just financial support but also emotional support,” says Dunbar, who grew up in Bloomington and got her head coaching start at the College of Charleston. Still, the money helps and amenities like new wooden lockers, charter planes to Big Ten matches, and a new tape-editing system make a big difference in recruiting. It’s also advantageous, says Dunbar, to have a winning atmosphere for a program on the verge of turning the corner.

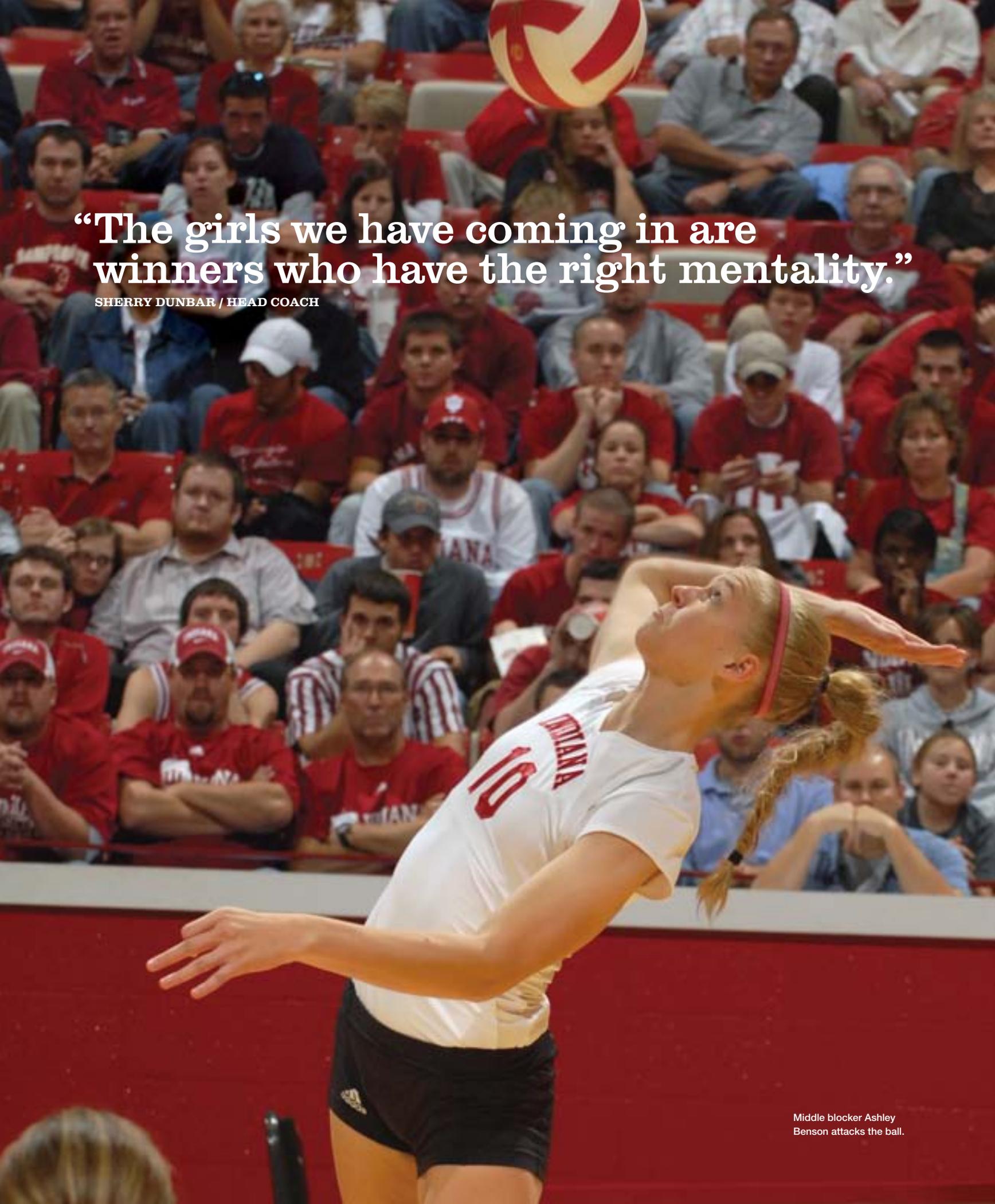
PLAYERS TO WATCH



Ashley Benson
A Bloomington North grad and the daughter of IU Basketball legend Kent Benson, in 2007 the middle blocker set the IU freshman record for most total blocks, with 140.



Juli Pierce
The senior defensive specialist from Georgetown, Ind., led the team in 2007 with 481 digs and 40 service aces.



“The girls we have coming in are winners who have the right mentality.”

SHERRY DUNBAR / HEAD COACH

Middle blocker Ashley Benson attacks the ball.