

SPORTS

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UW VOLLEYBALL | NCAA FINAL



JEFF DEAN PHOTOS, ASSOCIATED PRESS

UW players celebrate after defeating Nebraska on Saturday in Columbus, Ohio. The two programs also met in the 2000 title game, with Nebraska prevailing in five sets.

WORTH THE WAIT

Back-and-forth thriller delivers first crown

DENNIS PUNZEL
For the State Journal

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A season that began with epic aspirations and expectations concluded with a huddle filled with hugs and tears and, eventually, a shower of gold and silver confetti Saturday night for the University of Wisconsin volleyball team.

The Badgers captured the first national championship in program history with a thrilling five-set victory over Big Ten Conference rival Nebraska 22-25, 31-29, 25-23, 23-25, 15-12 in the NCAA final at Nationwide Arena.

The opportunity for such an achievement was a large part of the motivation for the Badgers' celebrated super senior class — Dana Rettke, Sydney Hilley, Grace Loberg, Lauren Barnes and Giorgia Civita — to return for one last try at making history.

"Epic weekend," coach Kelly Sheffield said. "So happy for these guys (Rettke, Hilley and Barnes) and the other seniors. They came back for a goal and a dream and had some adversity along the way and were rewarded."

They realized that dream on the strength of an overpowering

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**Badgers 3,
Nebraska 2**

Key: UW freshman Anna Smrek has a team-leading 14 kills and a career-best seven blocks.



UW's Anna Smrek (14) and Devyn Robinson defend Nebraska's Lauren Stivrins.

Vision of title a joyous reality

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Sydney Hilley had pictured the scene so many times that it felt like she'd actually lived it at some point.

But here it was for real Saturday night at Nationwide Arena: The super senior setter being mobbed by her University of

Wisconsin volleyball teammates as the Badgers celebrated the program's first NCAA title.

The dogpile Hilley envisioned never came and the confetti was delayed, apparently due to a malfunction with the machines. But it finally arrived as Hilley and the Badgers were hoisting the national championship trophy, and they soon after dropped to the ground and did snow angels on the court, with their 8-year-old good-luck charm Izzy Eaton joining them in the fun.

This moment had been a long time coming and it showed on UW coach Kelly Sheffield's face



**JIM
POLZIN**

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