## Volleyball

blocking performance and some major contributions from the younger generation of Badgers.

national Player of the Year, performed like one, especially on the defensive end where she had 13 blocks, to match her career high. The Badgers finished with season-high 24 team blocks, including 10 by sophomore Devyn Robinson.

Rettke also finished with 11 kills, fittingly providing the biggest of her career to give the Badgers their coveted championship point.

At the news conference nearly an hour later, she was still trying to process that championship feeling.

"I honestly don't think it's set in yet," Rettke said. "I mean, I kind of imagined, like, dropping to the floor and crying and I kind of just stood there in shock.

"And maybe that's a testament to just because we have played that moment over and over again in our

minds — I think every single one of us. So, I think for now we're just going to really enjoy this. Soak it all in. Wow, last time wearing a Wisconsin jersey. Just really going to enjoy it. It will sink in in a couple of days."

The Badgers (31-3) needed that Rettke, who Friday was named kill after an apparent winning point was overturned on review in which a touch was called on UW, aborting the Badgers' first mid-court celebration.

> While the Badgers got big performances from all of their veteran players, freshman Anna Smrek followed up her dominating 20-kill performance in the semifinal win over Louisville with a team-leading 14 kills and a personal-best seven blocks. That helped her earn Most Outstanding Player honors.

> "She didn't flinch," Sheffield said. Sophomore Jade Demps also played a major role with 12 kills and a key seven-point service run to start the fifth set.

> Nebraska (26-8) was led by Madi Kubik with 16 kills and Kayla Caffey

The first set was pretty much all

Nebraska as the Huskers jumped out to a 5-1 lead. The Badgers got back into it for a while with a 5-0 run that included an ace by Giorgia CIvita. But the Huskers later answered with their own 5-0 run to open up a

UW managed to get back within two points three times but couldn't get any closer. The Huskers got to set point at 24-19 before the Badgers put together a 3-0 run. But Lauren Stivrins then finished things off with a kill.

The Huskers again jumped out to a 5-1 lead in set 2, but that was just the start of a very long story. The Badgers were down 13-7 and looked like they could be on the way to a quick exit, but they showed the resilience that has marked their season. A 4-0 run got them back into the set and they finally managed to overtake the Huskers at 21-20 on a kill by Rettke to cap a 3-0 run.

The Huskers rallied and got to set point at 24-23, the first of four set points the Badgers would have to

The last of those came at 29-28 Batenhorst.

after a kill by Kubik. That's when Rettke took things into her own hands with a kill and back-to-back solo blocks to give the Badgers a heart-stressing 31-29 win to even the match

The third set was a back-andforth affair until the Badgers twice managed to open up four-point leads, the last one coming at 21-17. But the Huskers showed their mettle, putting together a 3-0 run to pull even at 23.

This time it was Robinson who put it away for the Badgers with back-to-back kills to give UW a 2-1 lead in the match.

The fourth set followed that same theme with the teams trading points much of the way until Nebraska went on a 5-0 run to take a 21-17 lead. The Huskers got to set point at 24-20 before the Badgers mounted one last rally with a 3-0 run, the last two with Loberg serving, to cut it to 24-23. But Nebraska forced a fifth set with a couple wild defensive plays to set up the decisive kill by Ally

The Badgers appeared to have taken command of the fifth set when they raced out to leads of 7-0 and 9-2 with Rettke contributing two kills and two blocks to the first eight points. But the Huskers wouldn't go away without a fight even after UW got to championship point at 14-9. The Huskers reeled off three consecutive points before Rettke finally put an end to

While there were plenty of offensive firepower on both sides, it was the defense that stood out for both. The Badgers dominated at the net, but the Huskers kept the ball off the floor with 93 digs. The Badgers also played well in the backcourt, with Barnes picking up a match-high 31

wisconsin 22 31 25 23 15 Nebraska 25 29 23 25 12 WISCONSIN (kills-digs-blocks) — Barnes 0-31-0, Hilley 2-13-5, Civita 0-9-0, Robinson 6-1-10, Ashburn 0-0-0, Smrek 14-0-7, Demps 12-9-0, Rettlee 11-0-13, Loberg 10-4-3, Orzol 5-12-6. Totals 60-79-24.

MEBRASKA (kills-digs-blocks) — Hames 0-23-1, Knuckles 1-10-0, Caffey 15-1-4, Akana 0-24-0, Rodriguez 0-13-0, Kubik 19-14-2, Batenhorst 11-0-2, Krause 12-6-5, Stivrins

Hitting percentage — W.183, N.141. Aces — W 7 (Ashburn 4), N 4 (Knuckles 2). Assists — W 59 (Hilley 51), N 63 (Himes

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## **Polzin**

From C1

as he noted a day earlier how "painfully close" the Badgers had come to breaking through and winning a national title to officially join the sport's royal family.

When that crowning achievement finally arrived, with the No. 4 Badgers outlasting No. 10 Nebraska 22-25, 31-29, 25-23, 23-25, 15-12, Sheffield celebrated briefly but was so overcome by emotion - and exhaustion — that he found a spot on the bench. The look on his face was equal parts shock and satisfaction as he took in the scene around him.

"I wanted to take it in," Sheffield said. "This is about them, it's about the team, seeing the joy in their faces and the love for each other."

The final point was fitting, a long rally that ended with Hilley feeding fellow first-team All-American Dana Rettke. This was the 148th match of Hilley's career and 147th for Rettke. It was kill No. 1,821 of Rettke's career and assist No. 6,138 for Hilley.

It was power, finesse and resiliency, all in one.

Legends such as Hilley, Rettke and libero Lauren Barnes will get the rings, but they'll be the first to say this championship is about more than them.

It's for Lauren Carlini, Molly Haggerty, Hayleigh Nelson and others who helped get this train rolling during the Sheffield era but never got to experience the joy of winning it all. It's for Sherisa Livingston, Lizzy Fitzgerald and everyone else on a 2000 UW team that fell one set short of knocking off unbeaten Nebraska and accomplishing that mission. It's for Arlisa Hagan, Lisa Bovd, Liz Tortorello and the rest of a 1990 group coached by the late Steve Lowe that broke through to win the program's first Big Ten title.

"This team stands on the shoulders of the alums that have come before them," Sheffield said.

UW had come up short in three previous title matches, including two under Sheffield, but there never seemed to be an if-notnow-then-when cloud hanging over these Badgers, even with first-team All-Americans Hilley and Rettke exhausting their eligibility along with Barnes, Grace Loberg and Giorgia Civita.

Sheffield sat in a nearly empty UW Field House four days before this NCAA tournament run began and brought up the train analogy and how the program needs to keep moving throughout a season, how it can't ever rest in a stationary spot for long even when things are rolling. It was near the end of

that explanation that it became apparent just how confident he was that a title was coming at some point, the clincher being when he said "when" - not if -"we win it all."

When I pointed it out, Sheffield didn't try to brush it off as a mistake and shared an anecdote about seeing Tiger Woods get interviewed after winning the 1997 Masters, his first of 15 major titles for the professional golfer. Woods quickly corrected the interviewer and said it didn't feel like his first major championship because he'd won it in his mind thousands of

So had Sheffield, which made him just like his players in that regard.

"You've got to see it and believe it," he said at the time, "before it happens."

Sheffield tells his players all the time that there are people in the crowd who never have seen them play and to show them what Badgers volleyball is all about. There were a lot of late jumpers to this bandwagon, and they got quite a show, whether they joined before the Final Four or two nights earlier when UW beat previously unbeaten Louisville in five sets, or during Saturday's grand finale that lasted 3 hours, 14 minutes.

Rettke was a picture of calm Friday as she and Hilley did an interview together. Their chemistry on the court is magical and it showed even in this setting, with the roommates finishing each other's sentences at times.

They were asked about their legacy, win or lose against the Cornhuskers, and Rettke gave a thoughtful answer between bites of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"I know I'm going to have the accolades and the honors and the awards and the stats and all that stuff, but I don't want that to be my legacy at Wisconsin," Rettke said. "I want my legacy to be being a great teammate and a great person and loving the game more than anyone has and loving my teammates more than anyone has."

Whether it was Rettke, Hilley, Barnes or Sheffield, nobody within the UW program had stopped to savor the final moments together over the past week. Barnes turned to Hilley after the seniors' final practice at the Field House earlier this week and asked, "Does it feel weird to you? It doesn't feel weird to me."

Sheffield said he thought briefly during Friday's practice about it being the final one with this group before snapping his attention back to the task to hand: It was going to be difficult to beat Nebraska for the third time this season, and he needed every second of focus to

help the Badgers make that hap-

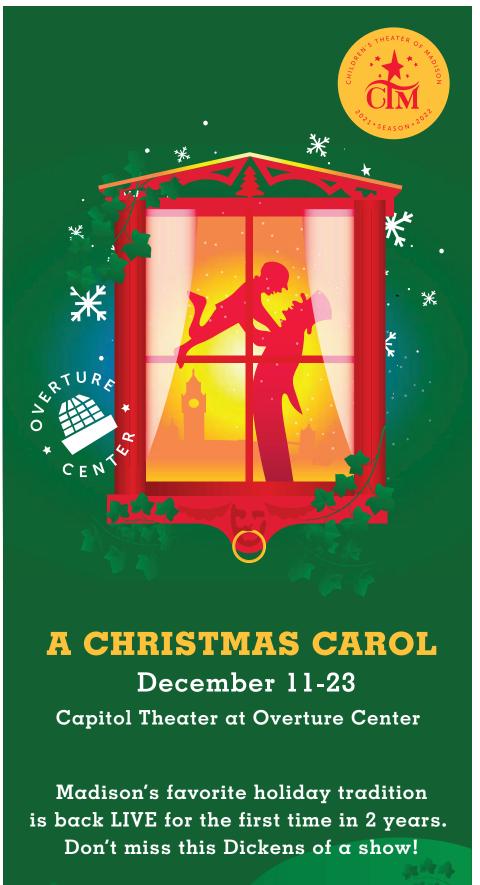
"We try to practice gratitude," Sheffield said. "And it's really tough when you're in a grind ... but (it's about) going through the season of appreciating what we all have and what we get to do and what we get to be a part of and how many people are supportive of us."

Now it's all of us who get to be thankful. These players would have left as champions even without the national title, but raising the trophy was special. And finally getting that celebration and confetti was something they deserved.

They'd won it in their minds thousands of times and finally did it for real on Saturday night, ending a remarkable ride that had an overflowing bandwagon by the time it reached its final and glorious destination.

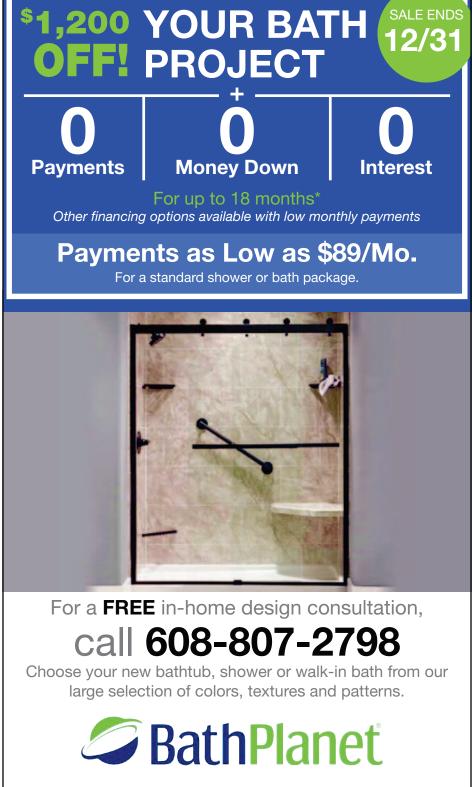
"I think most of it was just shock," Hilley said of when that moment finally arrived. "You look around, everyone's crying. You could see how much love there is with every single person on this team. And the fans were incredible. And it's an amazing moment I'll never forget just seeing how happy my teammates were. And that's the best feel-

Contact Jim Polzin at jpolzin@madison.com.



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