

The Double Life *of* Madison Ward

OU senior Madison Ward is a student-athlete by day and night, and a singer/songwriter whenever her busy world allows it.

By JAY C. UPCHURCH

For most people, the thought of standing up to perform in front of a stadium filled with 60,000 fans, not to mention a national television audience, would be incredibly intimidating.

Madison Ryann Ward is not most people.

When the University of Oklahoma student was invited to sing the national anthem at the men's NCAA Final Four in Houston, she jumped at the chance. Then again, bright lights and cheering crowds are nothing new for Ward, who has spent a good portion of her life showcasing various athletic talents, including the past four years with the OU volleyball program.

"I loved the opportunity," says Ward, who was joined at center court in Houston by fellow student-athlete representatives from the other three participating Final Four schools. "It was a blast and such a special way to represent my university on a big stage. Feeling the crowd and the energy like that before tipoff was incredible."

For a few precious moments, Ward got to swap her trademark kneepads and competitive, win-at-all-costs mentality to show off an entirely different set of skills — singing and harmonizing, which offered a glimpse into her life beyond collegiate volleyball.

When Ward finishes her playing career with the Sooners this fall, she plans to move to Nashville to pursue a professional singing career. And by no means is she starting from ground zero. There is a network of supporters, including music representative Jake LaGrone, waiting to further introduce Ward and her soulful voice to the world.

"Madison is an unbelievably gifted singer," says LaGrone, whose Nashville-based company, Spalding Entertainment, already represents country artists Jason Aldean and Rascal Flatts. "She has the voice and she's a young lady of many talents, and is someone we believe has a very bright future in the music industry."

But if Ward truly has what it takes to potentially find success as a singer, then why is she still hanging around campus and playing sports?

No doubt, a fair question — and one the 21-year-old gets asked fairly often.

Truth is, it's a question Ward had to ask herself a few times once the door to the music world had been flung wide open this past year thanks to a couple of singing performances that generated some serious attention via Twitter and YouTube.

The temptation to follow her voice to Tennessee was difficult to ignore. It's a journey she has admittedly been dreaming about for a while now. Ward based her decision on a few key factors — beginning with the original commitment she made to the volleyball program.

"As a student-athlete and a member of this team for the past four years, I felt a loyalty to Coach Santi and to my team-

When she's not competing, practicing or studying, Ward turns her attention to her promising music career. To hear Madison perform, go to our online edition at sooneromag.oufoundation.org.







OU Athletics

In her junior year, outside hitter Madison Ward started in 25 matches and averaged 2.95 kills and 2.60 digs per set, while hitting .202. She reached double figures in kills 18 times and posted nine double-doubles during the season.

mates,” says Ward, referencing OU coach Santiago Restrepo. “I feel like I have some unfinished business here, especially after this past season turned out to be fairly difficult and kind of left a bad taste in my mouth.

“I feel like I have a chance to do music the rest of my life, but I’ll never have another opportunity to finish my OU career on a more positive note. So ultimately, I decided to come back and give it my best shot as a fifth-year senior.”

Ward simply could not shake free of the competitive spirit that has been a driving force in her life since adolescent days when she shadowed her brother Weston’s every move in every sport imaginable.

“Wherever Weston went, I was right there following him, trying to keep up with all of the things he was doing in sports. He’s two years older, but whatever he did, I wanted to do,” says Ward. “I am ultra-competitive and just grew up loving to play sports.”

Ward’s work ethic, determination and natural athletic ability allowed her to excel in sports like basketball, golf, and track and field, along with volleyball. She was a four-sport letterman at Cache (Okla.) High School, earning All-State honors in volleyball and golf. Ward capped a remarkable prep career by being named the Oklahoma Female Athlete of the Year by the OSSAA.

An injured shoulder slowed her progress at OU during her freshman season in 2012, but she rebounded to earn a starting outside hitter position and eventually All-Big 12 Freshman honors the following season, finishing fourth on the team in kills and blocks.

As a redshirt sophomore in 2014, Ward started 26 matches for the Sooners, twice earning conference player of the week honors and was a unanimous first team All-Big 12 selection.

“Madison is a talented player. She gives us a very powerful presence on the outside,” says Restrepo. “I knew she had a very tough decision to make after this past season. Her music is waiting for her and that’s very enticing. But she told me that she had made a commitment to the program and she wanted to see it through to the end.

“Obviously, I’m proud of her and extremely happy to have her back.”

Oklahoma earned NCAA Tournament berths in each of Ward’s first three seasons in Norman. But last fall, the Sooners struggled through a 12-16 campaign that saw them fail to qualify for postseason play for the first time in seven seasons.

That failure gnawed at Ward during the offseason.

Even though she had plenty of other things to occupy her



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Ward has been singing for as long as she can remember and her first musical influence was her mother, Jennifer, who played piano for years at church.

“I was always close by when she was playing or practicing, and our piano was actually in my baby room,” says Ward. “So music is something that has been part of my life since I was really young. In fact, both of my parents have said I was singing songs even before I was talking.”

Ward recalls a world filled with gospel and various kinds of inspirational music before she eventually gravitated toward R&B and other styles. Her father, Stanton, owned a Lawton-based restaurant that featured a barbecue and blues theme. It was there that young Ward first picked up on artists like B.B. King and Stevie Ray Vaughn.

“You could see at an early age that music was her heart,” says Jennifer Ward. “She’s very passionate about it. Madison has a lot of God-given talent, but she’s also worked hard to put herself in the position she is now. She’s an amazing young woman and I believe she is going to do amazing things.”

Ward is quick to point to her family and credit them with keeping her grounded and encouraging every step of her journey.

“My parents are both very talented people in different ways and I can see their influence on my life in so many things that I do,” says Ward. “Same thing with my brother, Westin, and sister, Morgan—they have both been a positive force in my life in so many ways.”

Back on the OU campus, Ward has become somewhat of a celebrity. The music videos she has posted on her YouTube page have attracted fans from across the country, including a famous professional athlete or two and more than a few talent scouts searching for the next big thing.

Fame and promise of future fortunes, however, are not what dictate Ward’s musical aspirations.

It’s something much more profound.

“As far as I’m concerned, the power of music is unlike anything in this world. It is something that can bring people together and is such an important part of our lives,” says Ward. “I feel in my heart that music and singing are a big part of what I am supposed to do with my life. To have the opportunity to share it is very exciting and humbling.

“Of course, I’m anxious to pursue that part of my future, but I also realize that life is all about timing. Right now, it’s important for me to finish up here at OU the right way and appreciate every moment I have left in college. It all goes by so fast, and I want to soak it all in and enjoy every possible minute.”

thoughts — not the least of which was her music — Ward could not stop thinking about redemption.

“I was fortunate enough to be around Madison quite a bit while she was going through the process of deciding whether or not to come back for another season,” said OU teammate and middle blocker Micaela Spann. “It was not an easy decision, but I came to respect her more than ever because of her character and her commitment to the program. She’s a phenomenal player and an amazing teammate.”

Ward’s return will help solidify a talented lineup that also includes Spann, All-American middle blocker Marion Hazelwood and outside hitter Kimmy Gardiner. If preseason predictions prove true, the Sooners should be contenders again in the Big 12 title chase, as well as on the national stage.

“I’m excited about the possibilities for next season,” says Ward.

Until then, Ward has plenty to keep her busy over the next few months.

In between volleyball practice and offseason training, Ward focuses on schoolwork, while working on her own clothing line and writing a book of children’s tales.

“Time management has presented a major challenge for me because I want to be invested in so many different things — and there are only so many hours in a day,” says Ward, whose major involves an entrepreneurship planned program. “I map out my days to help make it all manageable, but even then, it’s hard to keep up at times.”

And all of that does not even include her main passion.

“I love music and my passion for it has really just kind of evolved as I’ve grown up over time and discovered different types of music and artists,” says Ward. “I never took any voice lessons or joined the school choir, never was involved in any voice competitions or anything like that. I was always too busy with sports to do any music classes or lessons.”

Jay C. Upchurch is editor of *Sooner Spectator*.