

Story by Sue Durio

## Queen of the Court

### Austin Businesswoman Serves Up Life Lessons Along with Volleyball

**MOST ANY WEEKEND FROM SEPTEMBER** to June, you're likely to find Austin businesswoman Barb Shelton in a gym. But these gym visits aren't about lifting weights or taking yoga. As founder and director of one of Austin's largest competitive volleyball clubs, Shelton's gym time is all about supporting the 160 young women who train and compete on her AIM (Athletes in Motion) Club Volleyball teams.

While some other 40-something empty-nester moms might prefer lazy Saturday mornings indulging in hobbies put off while raising kids, Shelton relishes the energy of a noisy gym full of teenage female athletes. It's an environment that was new to her when her own

daughter, then a middle schooler, first showed an interest in the sport. At the time – the mid-1990s – club volleyball was a fledgling sport with limited team choices in Austin. After a disappointing first year with a local club, both mom and daughter were disillusioned.

Rather than give up, the self-avowed “fixer” decided she could create a better alternative. Friend and mentor Shantal Davis, a University of Texas volleyball alum married to Olympic gold medalist Josh Davis, suggested Shelton establish her own club. “She planted the seed, and it took about two minutes for me to realize what a great idea that was,” recalled Shelton.

A former Borger High School track

star who ran track on scholarship for Oklahoma State University, Shelton knew the rigors of training and competing. And, though she had never played volleyball, she had just completed two seasons coaching volleyball to fourth and fifth graders at Regents School of Austin. There, she had immersed herself in learning the sport and its deceiving complexities. “Our teams were the only ones in town running positions on the court,” she explained.

For business advice, Shelton turned to Long Beach State University head volleyball coach Brian Gimmillaro who recommended she establish a corporation, unlike many clubs that operate as a nonprofit. “I didn't want to be doing

all the work, and then have a board of directors call all the shots,” she said.

Shelton leveraged her own management experience as well. She had been manager and buyer for Britton's, popular Austin clothing retailers in the 1980s. She launched her own clothing store, Shelton & Company, in 1986, as well as a children's clothing business. “I applied a lot of my retail background to how I wanted to run AIM,” she said. “In retail, you learn the customer is always right and to be successful you must listen to your customer.”

Year one, 1998, AIM ran two teams of 13-year-olds. Though created primarily as an outlet for daughter Shelby to play volleyball, that year Shelby saw little

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In eight years, Austin entrepreneur Barb Shelton has grown a fledgling volleyball club into a business comprising some of the top junior volleyball players in the state. "If you want equal play time, go to a league," she said of the sport's high competitive level.

court time. "When parents complain to me about playing time, they don't realize that I have been there and completely understand," said Shelton, who told Shelby she had to fight her own battles. "What I wanted to create was a club where teaching life lessons is as important as teaching to pass, set and hit.

"It is the rare parent that is there for the team as a whole, understands this is a team sport, and sees the life lessons involved," she said. "In school ball, you play everybody no matter what. Here, you're not guaranteed anything."

Having outstanding coaches, who buy into that philosophy, has been the key to AIM's success, she says. In 1999, the business expanded to six teams and the addition of assistant directors Brian Wright, then president of the UT men's club volleyball team, and Miguel Saenz, head volleyball coach at Regents School. Since then, AIM has grown to encompass 16 teams ranging from ages 12 to 18 - with several ranked among the top teams in Texas. In each of the past three seasons, two AIM teams have qualified for the Junior Olympics making them among the most elite junior volleyball teams nationwide.

"Most people's club experience comes down to coaching," said Wright. "Barb has done an amazing job of hiring great coaches. Her success has

been from sticking to her ideals that we're all about the girls, and that there's more to teach than volleyball."

When she interviews prospective coaches, Wright said, Shelton first focuses on their character, before addressing experience. The coaching staff includes former collegiate players and some of the top school coaches in the area - many of whom continue to play on competitive teams themselves.

Her philosophy: seek like-minded individuals with exceptional credentials, pay them well and treat them as you would your own children. When she established AIM, the typical pay for club coaches was a paltry \$200 per month, said Wright. She more than tripled that. When AIM teams travel to national tournaments, she opts for quality accommodations for coaches and players. And, when there are issues with parents or players, she defers to the coach first. "They know they have my full support," she said.

And, then there are the little things. "Barb runs everything in a first class way," noted team parent Judy Stanke. "In Las Vegas, she rented a limo to take the girls and coaches sightseeing. In Tampa, she rented a bus to take the teams to the beach."

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Recruiting top quality coaches has attracted top talent players, and college recruiters are taking note. "Virtually all our players who desired to play in college have earned a scholarship,"

said Jenny Krueger, AIM recruiting director. "By being visible at major tournaments, we help our athletes get exposure to college coaches. We have the experience and knowledge to help AIM athletes play in college if they desire."



PHOTO BY DAN RICHARDSON

AIM teams compete with other national top teams for the opportunity to play at the Junior Olympics. Shelton, left, listening in during an AIM 14Nike team timeout at the Pacific Northwest Qualifier in Spokane, WA in March. The team was one of four AIM teams to finish in the top 10 in their age division.

While college recruiting is important, for Shelton, club volleyball is more about having fun and building character. The "it's all about the girls" philosophy is not just a public relations pitch, according to longtime AIM parents. "There are a lot of great volleyball clubs in Austin, but AIM has been a perfect fit for my daughter," said Stanke. Daughter Taylor, a 2006 McCallum High School graduate, has played for AIM since eighth grade and will attend The Citadel next fall on a volleyball scholarship. "Barb wants to make sure that each girl playing for AIM has a memorable experience. It's the complete package...great competitors, mixed with character, confidence and spiritual building."

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Though her daughter is now 20 and long ago quit volleyball, Barb Shelton will likely be on the sidelines of a volleyball court for some time to come. "I want to do something I'm passionate about, and this is what I love," she said. "This is a thinking-girl's sport... setting up a block and outmaneuvering is a continuous mathematical, geometric game of angles. And the three steps to move the ball is like athletic group ballet on a small landscape." Why does she pour so much of her life into this? "Volleyball is a great life lesson sport...in such a small area, you have to figure out everybody's place," she said. "To sit on the bench with the girls, and see the fire in their eyes, that's why I do this." ★

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