You’d have never been able to tell. Not by their on-court demeanors, which were all business – no smiles under the net, no wide-eyed looks, no “is this really happening?” giggles. Not by the way in which they were playing, jumping out to a roaring 12-9 start, stretching that to 17-12 and 21-16 by the end of the first set, one filled with shots that could raise eyebrows: digs over on one, poke lines over a peeling blocker that hit the back corner.

No, you’d have never been able to tell that, just moments before the start of that bronze medal match in Chetumal, Mexico, site of a three-star FIVB in late October, that Megan and Nicole McNamara had looked to the scoreboard and saw their names right next to that of Kerri Walsh Jennings, and it all felt a bit surreal to them.

McNamara? Next to Walsh Jennings, the greatest of all time? McNamara? Competing against the one they watched as kids, for a medal, in an Olympic qualifier? McNamara? Hitting that poke line shot deftly over the outstretched arms over the three-time gold medalist?

“If you had told our young selves that one day we would be playing Kerri Walsh for a medal at an FIVB, we would say ‘You’re kidding,’” Nicole said.

And, if everyone, with rare exception, who has worked with the two is being honest, they’d have said roughly the same thing. Now, to be clear, few, if any, have ever doubted the McNamara’s talents as individuals on a beach volleyball court. There is no mistaking that each of them is exquisitely gifted at the game of beach volleyball.

But as a team? Different story. Neither stands a hair above 5-foot-9. In an era where the game is only getting bigger, where 6-foot-5 blockers such as Sarah Pavan and Alix Klineman are populating the world rankings, a pair of defenders looking to beat teams with ball control and crafty shots seemed an antiquated concept.

It’s why, four years ago, when the McNamara’s were compet-
ing for South Delta Secondary School in Vancouver, Canada, nearly every recruiting pitch looked the same: “We would love for you to play for us, but would it be OK if we split you up?”

It was the same refrain, over and over: “You’re just not big enough to play together. We’ll find each of you a blocker.”

It’s exactly what sold them on the one school that didn’t: UCLA.

Truth be told, it only took a few minutes into the first match that UCLA coach Stein Metzger watched the twins play for him to know he had little interest in splitting them up. He, alongside a number of other coaches, was in attendance at a USAV High Performance tournament during the McNamaras’ summer between their sophomore and junior years.

He saw other girls ripping balls in warm ups, and, with that sample size, it would have been fair to label the McNamaras the underdogs in most every match they played. Pokey line shots, after all, aren’t much of a show of strength.

Until, that is, the match started.

“It was a whole other level in terms of controlling the ball, in terms of volleyball IQ,” Metzger said. “Once it was game time it was obvious that they were playing at another level. It was something I couldn’t stop watching.”

Metzger told them that, while they did need to prove they could win at the next level together, they didn’t need bigger blockers. They’d beat teams with their ball control. And anyway, added his assistant, Jeff Alzina, how many points is a big blocker worth, anyway? At the college level, ball control, keeping rallies alive, having the ability to run plays, change the tempo, move those big blocks around, may carry a more premium value.

There is no way they could have realized it at the time, but when the McNamaras agreed to play for Metzger and UCLA, the tectonic plates of college beach volleyball shifted just a bit.

At the time, USC was amidst a run so dominant that it wasn’t only the most formidable program in beach volleyball, but perhaps all of college sports. In 2015, the McNamaras’ senior year of high school, the Trojans went 28-0 and won an AVCA National Championship, an end of season ceremony they’d repeat in 2016 and 2017 as well.

But while the vast majority of other schools were following the same paradigm of the professional level – bigger, bigger, bigger – Metzger took his program the opposite direction. With the McNamaras providing the mold, he went smaller, craftier, more ball-control oriented, with plays and changes in tempo and a bit more complexity than most teams were capable of running.

“Once they arrived on campus, we followed the program very much to their strengths and they’ve been the role models for what it means to train diligently,” Metzger said. “They show up every day and they take care of the ball control and all those important ball control drills. They’ve been the ones who set the bar for what it means to control the ball.

“The growth of our team the last four years has been in large part because of them. They came in at the No. 1 position and since then people have been looking to them in terms of what it means to pass and set. They don’t quit on plays. These are all the little things. That’s the secret to our success. When you watch our team play, we’re the smallest team of the top five teams in the country but we beat them with ball control and the details of the game. Without the
“They’ve just always had that connection,” Kristina said. And, yes, they’ve always had a knack for what siblings do best as well: bicker. Kristina jokes – it’s also quite possible she’s not joking – that she had bruises on her stomach during her pregnancy from the twins fighting before they were even born. Both admit that they’ll say things to each other they wouldn’t dare say to a partner not named McNamara. And yet their sometimes-unrealistic expectations of one another, of pushing, of demanding the sometimes impossible, is another element, another ingredient to that secret sauce, that allows them to not only compete with players named Walsh Jennings and Sweat, but to challenge them, to take a set, to vie for a medal.

“The expectations of each other are through the roof, and they probably wouldn’t have such high expectations for a different partner,” Alzina said. “It makes them push so hard all the time, and try to outdo each other all the time.”

This Twin Power, whether it be the ethereal connection or the expectations only a sibling could have for another, is what Alzina believes has led to “any big win” they’ve had, of which there have been many.

“There are plenty of players who can hit it harder than them and jump higher than them and dig as many balls as them,” he said. “To me, all their big wins are when their chemistry kicks in, when they decide, clearly, between them, that they want to crush their opponent. When they decide, ‘We’re going to kill that team. That team cannot beat us today.’ Their positivity and aggressiveness doubles in a way no other partnership could. It’s not only that these are siblings, it’s These are twins throwing every ounce of their energy against someone. It’s totally dangerous.”

He knows just how to get that dangerous vibe out of them, Alzina. And when.

Prior to a match against USC’s No. 1, Abril Bustamante and Tina Graudina, he reminded the twins that the Trojans were largely considered the best team not only in the Pac-12, but in the nation.

“Do you want it?” he asked them. “Because you can go out right now and take it.”

“They just champ at the bit for stuff like that,” Alzina said. “They’re internally motivated for sure, but when you throw in some external motivation, it matters. It helps, as long as it’s positive in a way.”

The twins won that match in straight sets. By season’s end, they would be named Team of the Year, while Nicole, the lefty of the two, was dubbed Player of the Year.

The same team that every other coach wanted to split up, save one. “It can be a disadvantage,” Metzger admitted of their lack of height. “And in some matches, they have to be perfect, but I’ve seen them be just about perfect, so I’m not going to be the one to tell them they can’t do it. I wasn’t going to be the one at the college level to tell them they couldn’t play together, and I’m not going to be the person to tell them they can’t do it at the pro level.”

They’ve already proven Metzger prescient at the college level. As freshmen, the twins went 16-12; sophomores 28-7, juniors 35-7, a rise that coincided with the Bruins’, who improved from 22-8 to 30-6 to 40-4, culminating with the school’s first National Championship.

Now they’re proving him prescient again at the pro level.

The twins did not win that match in Mexico against Walsh Jennings and Sweat, falling 21-16, 8-21, 10-15. But despite how competitive the two are, they weren’t all that mad about the result.

“They just champ at the bit for stuff like that,” Alzina said. “It makes them push so hard all the time, and try to outdo each other all the time.”

Simply put, they’re not twins. “They have this twin power,” teammate Elise Zappia said. And they’ve always had it. They played together on the same hockey line. The chemistry was evident on the softball field, where Megan was short stop and Nicole manned first base.

nothing but reps reps reps reps.

“It could get a little lonely,” Megan, identified on the court as the righty of the two, admitted. “But that really helped elevate our game.”

To the point that, when they arrived at UCLA, they came with a set of plays they could run, able to execute a complex offense not seen a whole lot at the college level at that point.

“From the beginning, [our coaches] were like ‘You’re going to have to come up with different ways to attack because if you’re put up at the net with a 6-foot-5 girl, you’re probably going to lose that battle,’” Nicole said. “So we’re going to have to move the set faster and have two-balls or quick sets.”

This is made easier, of course, by genetic alchemy that cannot be replicated anywhere else. No matter how long another team has shared a court together, they did not share a womb. They did not grow up peppering in the front yard together. They did not get thousands upon thousands of reps throughout the entirety of their childhood together.

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