



Friday, October 26, 2007 - Page updated at 01:46 PM

*Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail [resale@seattletimes.com](mailto:resale@seattletimes.com) with your request.*

## Volleyball coach has higher calling

**By Zach Landres-Schnur**  
*Special to The Seattle Times*

EVERETT — Miriam James Heidland soars above the net and smashes the ball. The Archbishop Murphy assistant coach's slap echoes through the gym.

Another practice, another kill for Heidland.

She has the size, power and hops of the college volleyball player she was, and the smarts of the coach she is. But her clothing tells you there's far more to her story.

Instead of a tank top and shorts, a white habit covers her hair and a long charcoal-colored skirt flows beneath an Ichiro T-shirt toward the tops of her sneakers. Her players don't call her coach, but sister.

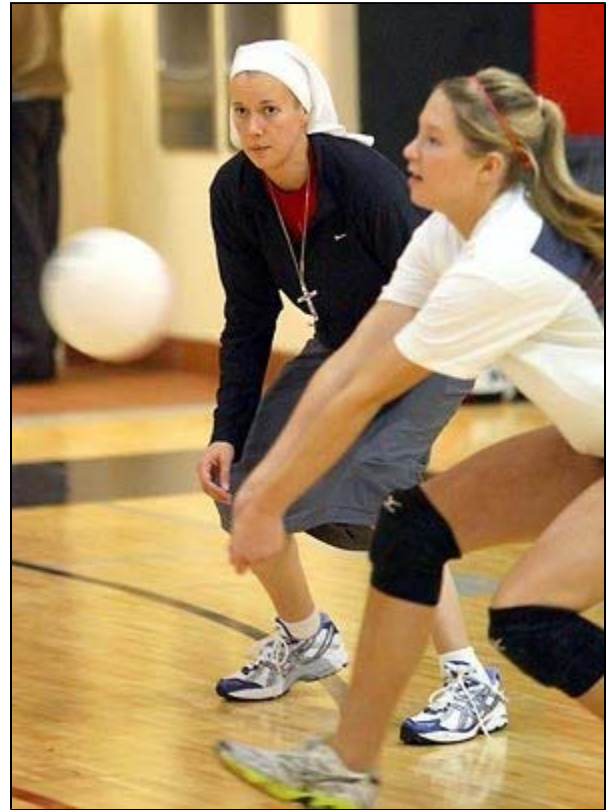
The 31-year-old is a Roman Catholic nun who also serves as a first-year assistant and junior-varsity coach for the Archbishop Murphy Wildcats, a Catholic school near Mill Creek.

Beneath the habit and crucifix is a complex young woman, someone who can't be clumped and categorized into someone's stereotype. Heidland is athletic, outgoing and funny. But she's also sincere, devout and passionate.

How's this for unusual? A 6-foot-1 nun who wears tennis shoes and writes a blog — NunEssential.

### Parties and "90210"

In a previous life, she was Sharon Heidland. She went to the University of Nevada-Reno on scholarship to play volleyball. She dated a football player, partied with her friends and watched "Beverly Hills, 90210."



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Sister Miriam James Heidland's schedule is filled with prayer time and teaching middle-school P.E. and music. Most afternoons she drives about 20 miles to Archbishop Murphy in Everett, where she coaches JV volleyball and assists with varsity.

"We attended parties together, gave our money to the slot machines, shopped and did all the things college girls do," longtime friend Jennifer Sanderford remembers.

For Heidland, though, something was missing. She remembers looking out a window as a freshman and taking "a mental inventory of my life."

"OK, I have a boyfriend who's really good-looking," she told herself. "I've got a full scholarship. I have decent grades, school's never hard, and I do pretty much whatever I want. So why am I so unhappy?"

Her life began a gradual transformation.

"It was at that moment that I felt God really pierced my soul," she says. "I realized I was living in total darkness. I was making a lot of stupid decisions even though I knew the difference between right and wrong.

"It was really after that moment that gave me a light at the end of the tunnel, I started asking myself, 'What is the meaning of life?' I thought I wasn't happy because I had to go to church and do all this boring stuff, but then I got everything I wanted and I was still unhappy."

Her mother, Agnes, sensed her daughter needed something more.

"Superficially, she looked like a gal who had it all together and she did, to a great extent," she remembers, "but there were aspects in her life that weren't the best they could be."

Sharon Heidland was at a crossroad in 1998. By her senior year, she was regularly attending church, a commitment she had dropped when she first moved 800 miles away from her home in Woodland in southwest Washington. She was about to graduate from college and wanted to be a sportscaster. She majored in speech communication, minored in journalism and had internships at a TV station, radio station and public-relations firm. Her résumé was as strong as her volleyball game. She longed to be, "rich and glamorous and the CEO of a company."

But beyond those dreams was something else, something of which she was not fully aware.

"This deep desire to do something that mattered," is the way she puts it. "I didn't want to be ordinary, like a cog in the wheel so to speak, this little ant in the skyscraper. I wanted to do something great with my life."

### **Rome, North Dakota, Seattle**

She never began climbing the corporate ladder. After graduation, she reconnected with Father Santan Pinto, who had been introduced to her by her parents her freshman year of college. Father Pinto, who founded the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Ministries, encouraged Heidland to visit a mission in New Mexico, and she found her calling.



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Before becoming a nun, Sister Miriam James (then Sharon Heidland) played volleyball for the University of Nevada-Reno.

After a three-year training period in Rome, she took her vows. Her first assignment landed her in Dunseith, N.D., a small town near the Canadian border where she coached the high-school volleyball team.

Four years ago, through what she calls a "true blessing," she was sent to Seattle. She is a member of Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity and lives at Ballard's St. Alphonsus Parish, where her schedule is filled with prayer time and teaching middle-school P.E. and music. Most afternoons she drives about 20 miles to Archbishop Murphy to coach volleyball.

"I never really set out to be a coach," Sister Heidland said. "But I feel there are desires that are divinely inspired, and I really think this is one of them."

Sister Heidland was recruited by first-year Wildcats coach Jim Hardy and received approval from the parish's mother superior.

"I felt that this was an opportunity for Sister Miriam James to connect with the youth in an area that they were interested and involved in," said Sister Anne Marie Walsh. "And given that Sister herself has a lot of experience and gifts in this area, it seemed like a good fit."

### **No cursing, no gossip, no problem**

During a practice drill, Sister Heidland pulls one of her JV players aside. With a downward motion of her left arm, she demonstrates what the girl needs to do. They share a few more words, a quick laugh, and the player re-enters the drill.

"She gives really good advice," says junior Rachel Shober, one of the Wildcats' top varsity players. "She knows a lot about volleyball."

Do players find being coached by a nun intimidating? Confusing? Just plain weird?

"It was real hard to adjust to her in the habit," said Hardy, whose team has a 10-2 record. "Her being a sister is always there."

You won't hear a bad word when Sister Heidland is around, and the coach discourages gossip. But that doesn't mean her players can't have fun and joke around.

"She's such an amazing person," Shober said. "She's really fun and outgoing. She's really open. You don't feel shy around her."

And why would you? The nun in tennis shoes can crack a joke as well as a serve. She's a coach who happens to wear a habit. And she's back in her home state, has found her life's calling and coaches the game she loves.

"Do you follow the path of truth or the path of darkness?" she asks. "I chose to live this life."

And couldn't be happier with the road she chose to travel.

[Copyright © 2007 The Seattle Times Company](#)