

# VB: Fuentes reflects the vitality of a great setter

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By Caleb  
Logue

While not dominating a box score, the setter is the most important and difficult position for its essential roles on and off the court.

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Missouri setter Andrea Fuentes celebrates with teammates after a successful point in the Tigers' season-opening win over Alabama on Oct. 21, 2020. Alabama Athletics

The volleyball flies over the net, whirling with top spin into the arms of the digger waiting to stunt the speeding projectile. Locking her arms, the digger ricochets the ball high into the air towards their setter as the hitter prepares for a new kill.

The team has practiced this series thousands of times. Bump, set, hit. Bump, set, hit. While it is a simple pattern, this offensive scheme requires a complex coordination and technique. Much of this system revolves around the setter.

“Being able to have control over the game and knowing what’s going to happen before it’s even going to happen, that’s the favorite part for me,” Missouri setter Andrea Fuentes said. “The setter chooses who and when a hitter gets to hit. The decision making that goes into the setting position influences every other aspect of the game.”

Setters must synchronize with their entire team but also be aware of their own position and technique while on the floor. The number of variables that a setter must keep in their mind make it one of the most demanding positions in all of sports. They operate similar to a quarterback or point guard, determining who will have a chance to score based on what they deem the most effective avenue to scoring.

Sophomore defensive specialist Leandra Mangual-Duran played in every single set of the 2019 campaign and was able to witness Fuentes’ effectiveness firsthand. Fuentes led the Southeastern Conference in assists per set at 11.7 and commanded a Missouri offense that tied for third in the SEC in 2019.

“There are a lot of very good setters in the NCAA in general, but what I think sets apart the good ones and the great ones is their attitude off the court and how they lead the team,” Mangual-Duran said. “It’s really hard to have a setter who does not lead you or who is not very vocal.”

Setters are the center of the team's chemistry, both on and off the court. Through hundreds of repetitions in practice and connecting with teammates, great setters are the main variable in creating the environment needed for the team to succeed.

"It truly is focusing on everyone else," Fuentes said. "Regardless of how I'm playing, good, bad, if I'm struggling mentally, I'm struggling with myself, that can never be an obstacle that affects other people. I have to figure it out in the matter of a couple minutes to focus on my teammates because I don't have time to struggle with myself or to be not confident."

"You can be a great team on the court, but at the end of the day, it will show if you aren't a great team off the court because you guys are going to battle together," junior outside hitter Anna D'Cruz said. "I think those relationships off the court is what builds the momentum and chemistry on the court which would lead to a very successful team."

During the season opener against Alabama, Fuentes demonstrated remarkable poise and distribution of the ball. She distributed the ball between her hitters and contributed heavily to Missouri's offensive onslaught in the first set. Setting forward or backward, bump setting or overhand, Fuentes' control was exceptional throughout the entire game.

The game plan of a setter results from hours of film and practice in the days and weeks prior to the game, and the setter must understand the game plan to its entirety. The mental aspect of setting is just as difficult as the physical aspect, if not more so.

In timeouts, the setter will participate in their own huddle away from their teammates with the setting coach, laying out game plans and adjustments based on a variety of game variables. They must know the capabilities of each of their players and how that synergizes with the strategy.

The setter must also be aware of the other team's strategy and how best to counter it, and be able to adjust to their playstyle as the game progresses. As Alabama began to adjust to Missouri's gameplan and their defense solidified in the third set, it challenged Fuentes and her coaches to adjust their own strategy to expose Alabama in the fourth set.

"If I wasn't a middle, I would be a setter, because I love it so much. I think it's the hardest job in the world," D'Cruz said.

Fuentes finished Missouri's season opener with 39 assists, leading Missouri to the win against Alabama 3-1. She also contributed 14 digs, showing how vital her presence is as both a setter and defender. As demonstrated in the game against Alabama, Missouri's setters will need to be a consistent element that the team will rely on for success.

*Edited by Jack Soble | [jsoble@theman eater.com](mailto:jsoble@theman eater.com)*

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