

## Church Signs With Bluefield

Written by Mike Kelly

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Watauga High senior Anna Church made it official Tuesday afternoon as she signed her National Letter of Intent with Bluefield College, an NAIA school in Bluefield Va. And Church will join teammate Colby Combs at Bluefield on the

volleyball team next fall. Combs signed with Bluefield last Thursday.

"I'm glad I'm going to school with Colby" Church said. "We've been playing volleyball together since middle school, about six years. We've become good friends, and going away to school together will make things a lot easier next fall."

And for Bluefield coach Brian Votaw, signing Combs and Church, is quite an accomplishment, especially for a program hoping to turn its fortunes around.

"Anna is quite a player," he said. "She's tall, and you don't find too many 5-10 players that can do the things she does on the floor, especially on the back row. She is so versatile and athletic. It's like having six players in one. She plays each position very well."

And like he did with Combs, Votaw, who has done his home work, found Church on the same website, Recruitme.com. And Church, who played a number of positions for the Pioneers this fall, is thankful for the chance to play in college.

"You can't master every position, of course," she said. "But you concentrate on what each position requires, and you play it to the best of your ability. I even played the Libero a couple of times this year. It was difficult, but I did the best I could. I've been very fortunate, especially to catch on fast when the coaching staff moved me around. It was a big plus, because it taught me a lot about the game, and in the long run, I feel it's made me a better player."

And Votaw won't hesitate to moving Church around next season when the Rams take the floor. "She can play any where on the floor," he said. "There's no doubt in my mind, she can be a successful player in college. Like Colby, I look for Anna to start for us right away. That's why I'm recruiting at least eight incoming freshmen for next year. This is the group that's going to be my building block."

And coming from a winning program like WHS is an added bonus. Keep in mind, dating back to 1995, the Pioneers have only had one losing season (2002), and they've made it a habit to go deep in the state playoffs. They've reached the sectional finals nine consecutive times, and they've played in four regional championship games, which includes a 3-1 loss against Providence this season. They've also reached the state finals twice---1995 and 1998.

"This has been a great experience for me," Church said. "The coaches have been great, and I really enjoyed my teammates. It's a close-knit group. A lot of us will be playing with a traveling team this off-season (in Charlotte). It'll keep me in shape before I go to Bluefield next summer to begin my workouts there. But I'm going to miss these girls. We've become very close. It's hard to say good-bye."

But at least she won't face her new challenge alone. Having Combs around will help a great deal, especially when she gets home sick.

"It's going to be different, that's for sure," Church said. "But Colby and I will room together. We'll get adjusted. I'm very comfortable with my decision, and I'm confident everything will work out."

"I've been honest with Anna, Colby and all the girls I've signed so far," Votaw said. "This is a new experience for all of us. I'm coaching at the collegiate level for the first time, and they're

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playing at that level for the first time. It's going to be a gamble. But it has to start somewhere, and I feel getting Colby and Anna, especially coming from a program like Watauga, is a great first step."

And in the long run, it should prove to be a prosperous journey.