

## Stewart Signs With Emory & Henry

Written by Mike Kelly

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Watauga High senior Hannah Stewart made it official Thursday afternoon by signing her National Letter of Intent to play volleyball

at Emory & Henry College next fall.

She becomes the third WHS volleyball player to play at the collegiate level next season. Anna Church (an all-NW3A/4A selection) and Colby Combs (the NW3A/4A Offensive Player of the Year) both signed with Bluefield College, an NAIA school in Bluefield, Va., back in November. Emory & Henry is a Division III school in Emory, Va., and is a member of the Old Dominion Athletic Conference. And according to Stewart, the Wasps were the perfect fit.

"I love the school, and I love the area," she said. "And they're giving me a chance to play college volleyball. It was a goal of mine for many years. I really love the game, and to play it at the next level, is very gratifying."

Ironically, Stewart didn't really like playing volleyball when she first picked up the game in the fifth grade. But as fate would have it, her interest for the sport began to grow, and so did her skills.

"My mom really pushed me to play on this traveling team," Stewart said. "It was an adjustment for me and I really wasn't enjoying it at first. But my family kept encouraging me, and my mom really supported me. That's what finally did it for me. My family enjoyed watching me succeed. And that really made me take the game more seriously."

Seriously enough that Stewart was promoted to varsity as a freshman, which was an unexpected surprise.

"Coach (Kim) Pryor wanted to move me up," Stewart said. "I was honored, of course, but I was also pretty nervous. I was the youngest player on the team. There were several seniors on the varsity team that had played together for at least four years or more. But they really made me feel comfortable. They allowed me to fit in."

"But it was crazy, too. I can still remember going to watch Watauga play when I was in middle school at Green Valley. My goal was to be a part of this program. I was really hoping to be playing with the varsity my sophomore year. But to play varsity right away was something I never dreamed of."

And the move really paid off for the Pioneers and for Stewart in general. Stewart became a three-time all-conference performer, and she played on three Northwestern 3A/4A Conference championship teams (the Pioneers actually shared the NW3A/4A title with Alexander Central in 2009). Last year's team made it to the sectional finals and this year's team made it to regionals before the Pioneers were eliminated by Charlotte-Providence.

"It's bitter-sweet to move on," Stewart said. "I've made so many friends playing this game, and I will definitely miss Watauga. Coach Kim and coach Kris (Hagaman) were wonderful to me, and they really elevated my level of play. We're blessed to have great coaches here at Watauga. That's why we can hold our own, especially with the Charlotte schools."

And the Pioneers held their own this season by defeating a pair of Charlotte schools---Lake Norman and Hough---before they reached the Western Finals.

"Those girls have a tendency to look down on us because we're from the mountains," Stewart said. "It doesn't matter to us, though. We're confident in our abilities, and every year we go deep

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into the playoffs."

Stewart, who is currently undecided on a possible major at Emory & Henry, will join former Pioneer Nicole Tesh, who is currently a sophomore for the Wasps. Tesh had 205 kills (third on the team) and 55 blocks in 27 games last year. And she was also second on the team in serve percentage (.843).

"The players will definitely be bigger at that level, so I have to make the proper adjustments," Stewart said. "It's really nothing new. It's playing volleyball at a higher level, and getting use to the speed and size of the game. It takes time, and I'm confident in my abilities. Yes, I'm excited, but I'm also a little nervous. I'm also very happy to be playing at the next level."