

## Blaze of Glory



*Written by Phil Brozynski*

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Coaches Leandra, left, and Lesley flank the NAVC 16 Blaze team

A clerical error forced North Atlanta Volleyball Club 16 Blaze to compete in the Open division of the 2009 AAU Junior National Girls' Volleyball Championships in Orlando, Florida a few weeks ago where it finished a distant 27th out of 37 teams.

But for that small snafu, an 11-year-old boy might not be alive today.

"Everything works out for a reason," said NAVC 16 Blaze assistant coach Leandra Golyer, a 20-year-old nursing student at Chattahoochee Technical College outside Atlanta. "We were supposed to be in that bracket and we were supposed to get home at that time."

"Home" in Orlando was a private residence where some of the NAVC players and coaches stayed during the tournament. The house had a pool in the backyard where team members and their families relaxed when the team was not competing.

It was neither a large nor deep pool, about five-feet deep at one end and three feet at the other. Shaped like a figure 8, it provided a welcome respite from what proved to be a very trying tournament for the Blaze.

But on one particular day, the pool was anything but an escape from the day's tournament tribulations. It was the scene of a desperate, determined response by a pair of quick-thinking coaches whose actions were nothing short of heroic.

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Lesley Thompson runs her own cleaning business in the Atlanta area when not tending to her family, which includes 7-year-old son Jerrett, and coaching at The Galloway School in Atlanta and the North Atlanta Volleyball Club.

Thompson played high school volleyball in Alabama where she grew up. After high school, she took some courses at a community college, but did not play there. She has been coaching volleyball for about seven years.

This year, under Thompson's tutelage, NAVC 16 Blaze enjoyed a banner regular season, finishing either second or third in six tournaments in addition to winning the 16's division at the Allstate Sugar Bowl Volleyball Classic in mid-February.

But in the Open division at AAU's, Blaze 16 was in over its head. The team had prepared to compete in the Club division, but instead they found themselves going up against a talent-laden Open field dominated by Front Range, Sky High and Northern Lights.

"A big difference," Thompson said. "Still, it was a great season. Maybe the outcome at AAU's was not very good. Our season didn't have the most cheerful ending. But I think it was a great experience."

NAVC 16 Blaze assistant Leandra Golyer was born to coach. Volleyball is as important to her family as Disney World is to Florida tourism. Her father is Ron Golyer, director of the Cobb Extreme Volleyball Club in Atlanta.

"Everybody in the family played volleyball," Golyer said. "I played in middle school and high school. My parents played. It's a family sport. Everybody knew when I stopped playing volleyball, I would coach it."

Leandra Golyer is pursuing a career in nursing, and what happened in Orlando a few weeks ago only reinforces her determination to undertake a career helping others in need.

"This proved to me that I can handle these kinds of situations," Golyer said. "Everybody has been telling me I should be an emergency room nurse."

But no matter what lies in Golyer's future, volleyball will be a part of it.

"I can't seem to get away from it," she said.

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Thompson, Golyer and the Blaze players had returned from the tournament just minutes earlier when Thompson's son Jerrett decided to join "Jack," the 11-year-old brother of one

of the team members, in the pool where they had spent so much time that week.

The two had developed a routine where Jerrett would wait in the shallow end while Jack, a very good swimmer, would dive in the pool at the deep end, swim underwater the length of the pool and come up on Jerrett from underneath.

Only this time, Jack never reached Jerrett.

"I went out to follow my son to the pool and he was jumping up and down in the shallow end asking Jack to come up," Thompson said. "I tried to see Jack, but from my vantage point I could only see him from below the waist. I noticed he was just floating.

"A couple of seconds later as I got closer, I thought maybe he was doing a dead man's float," she added. "Then I noticed he was starting to sink deeper into the pool. My son tried to grab him to pull him up and try to get him out of the water."

Golyer, who had followed Thompson out onto the deck, instinctively jumped into the pool and the two women worked feverishly to lift Jack out of the water.

"My only thought was to get him out of the water," Thompson said.

That in itself was no easy task. At 5-foot-6 and about 150 pounds, Jack was much bigger than either the 5-foot-2 Thompson or the slightly taller Golyer.

"He was a very big boy," Golyer said. "We were struggling to get him out of the pool. He was essentially dead weight, and then you add in the aspect that he was soaking wet. We were trying to get him out as fast as we could."

Once they were able to roll Jack onto the edge of the pool, the women noticed that he was not breathing and his lips were dark blue.

"He was lifeless," Thompson said.

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Both Golyer and Thompson are certified in cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR as it is commonly referred to. They were the only ones at the house who were certified.

"Learning CPR was a requirement for one of my science classes," Golyer said. "Then I had to be certified again for one of my health occupation classes. So I'm double-certified, I guess.

"Actually, I was really hoping I'd never have to use it," she added. "But it's something that you like to have in your back pocket."

Fortunately, during the trip to Orlando, Golyer had mentally reviewed some of her first aid

training in case she was called upon that week to tend to an injured player.

Still, performing CPR on a rubber dummy and performing lifesaving techniques on a human being are two very different things.

"As much as you might be prepared, it's nothing compared to sitting there at that moment and realizing that everything you've worked for and everything you've done is about to pay off," Golyer said.

Thompson had to learn CPR as part of her coaching duties at Galloway. However, like Golyer, she too had never performed CPR on an actual person.

That was about to change.

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Once they had Jack out of the water, the women immediately went to work. They alternated a series of chest compressions with mouth-to-mouth breathing to force air into Jack's lungs.

"We didn't get any response after the first set of compressions," Thompson said. "After the second set, we got a little bit of gurgitation. All three of us (both women and young Jerrett) were yelling, 'C'mon Jack. C'mon Jack."

"After the third set of compressions, we got a pulse and realized that he was breathing on his own," she added.

About that time, Thompson said she could hear ambulance sirens in the distance. Someone in the house had dialed 911.

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The women later learned that Jack had been diagnosed with a viral infection weeks earlier. He had become unconscious after suffering a seizure at home and was briefly hospitalized. He was treated and expected to completely recover.

Apparently, Jack suffered another seizure in the pool and lost consciousness. He coughed up very little water during CPR, an indication that he was not drowning before the women found him.

"He did not have any bumps or bruises and no signs that he hit his head or anything in the pool, so they determined he must have had another seizure," Thompson said.

Jack is doing fine now, and the entire episode has actually had a beneficial effect. Many of the team's parents have indicated a desire to learn CPR.

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North Atlanta Volleyball Club 16 Blaze did not bring home any trophies or medals from its trip to Florida. For the players and coaches, the Milk House was a haunted mansion and the Orange County Convention Center a carousel of little progress.

What had been a solid season with many highs and very few lows ended quietly and unremarkably.

But off the court? That was another story.

"You keep thinking about the tournament and all the negative things that happened," Thompson said. "But to be able to give a family more time together, to keep a child alive...I'm just glad we were there at the right time at the right place.

"I think all the girls and their families now take that whole experience as a positive," she added.

Golyer said it was providence that she and Thompson were there when Jack suffered his seizure in the pool.

"We'd only been home for 20 minutes, and if we had not been in the bracket we were in, we might not have been there when this happened," Golyer said.

A few losses on the court seem like a small price to pay for a young boy's life.

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