

# SPORTS

Laurie Los, Sports editor  
508-979-4525  
laurielos@s-t.com

Brendan Kurie, Digital sports editor  
508-979-4454  
bkurie@s-t.com

NATIONAL SIGNING DAY

## Miami on the mind



With coach Neil Macedo looking on, New Bedford High volleyball star Janice Leao talks to the media after signing her National Letter of Intent to play at the University of Miami on Wednesday. [MIKE VALERI/THE STANDARD-TIMES/SCMG]

### New Bedford's Leao inks National Letter of Intent to play volleyball for Hurricanes

By Brendan Kurie  
bkurie@s-t.com

NEW BEDFORD — Janice Leao can't help but laugh when she thinks back to her first volleyball practice as a freshman at New Bedford High.

Standing feet away from the scorer's table where she had just signed her name to a National Letter of Intent to play volleyball at the University of Miami, the 6-foot-3 middle blocker recalled choosing the sport on a whim as a side gig to basketball.

"I thought I was going to play volleyball just to play and have fun," she said. "I didn't know I was going to commit to a (Division I) school. It's been amazing. It took a lot of time, but it was worth it."

"I think the best way to put it," her high school coach Neil Macedo noted, "is as a freshman she played on our freshman team."

It wasn't until her sophomore year that Leao took the sport seriously, joining the Max Performance program in the offseason and beginning to play in elite camps.

"Wow, what a jump she made sophomore year," Macedo said. "She had constant leaps, but the biggest one was definitely freshman to sophomore year. She went from playing freshmen to playing varsity, skipping over the JV level."

By the conclusion of her senior year last weekend in the Div. 1 South finals, Leao was a Whaler record-holder for kills in a season (434), kills in a match (40 against Case), hitting percentage (.561) and percentage of hits that were kills (64). Her hitting percentage led the state by a significant margin and her 945 career kills trailed only 2011 graduate Maura Manley, a former Under Armour First Team All-American and Massachusetts Gatorade Player of the Year, in school history.

All that came after a junior season in which Leao recorded 335 kills, good for seventh in the state, to go with 66 blocks, a .505 hitting percentage, Standard-Times Player of the Year honors and a trip to the Div. 1 South finals.

"The four years of hard work she put in, she absolutely deserves this," Macedo said.

On Wednesday afternoon, in a trainer's room between the gym where Leao laid down more than 900 kills, and the fitness center where she worked to fill out her thin frame, Leao was joined by her parents, Lucia and Jose, and her siblings Jack and Ariana, while siblings Cyril and Javon were unable to attend.

"It was life-changing," Leao

See LEAO, B5



New Bedford's Janice Leao gets up in the air for a kill. [MIKE VALERI/THE STANDARD-TIMES/SCMG]

# LEAO

From Page B1

said. “My parents didn’t have this opportunity. Having them here to experience this with me makes me grateful. I know that they’re proud of me. I’m doing this for them, and for my family and for myself. Having them here was great.”

In front of a “Whalers” step-and-repeat and wearing a Miami sweatshirt and hat, Leao smiled bashfully as she inked her name while facing of a throng of cameras and supporters.

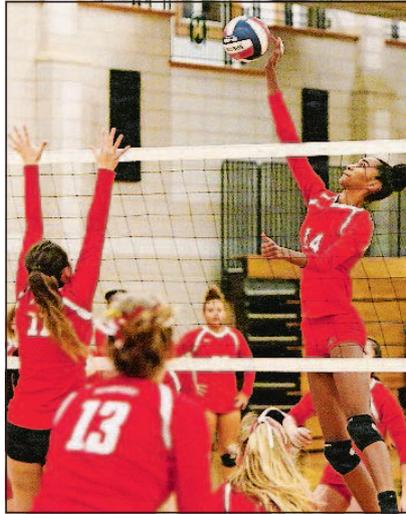
“When I was signing it, I felt the rush come through me,” she said. “I’m finally realizing that I’m really going to college. This is real. This is epic. It’s a great opportunity and I’m so thankful to everyone who has been in my life through this whole journey.”

Starting in the winter following her sophomore season — knowing she wanted to play volleyball at the highest possible level, and also knowing her interest in marine biology and entrepreneurship — Leao started to narrow down her list of potential schools.

“I started by looking at colleges that had my interest in majors,” she said. “I narrowed it down and started to email coaches. I started talking to Miami my sophomore year and that’s where it all started.”

That a program as strong as Miami’s was looking at Leao took Macedo by surprise at first. The Hurricanes have reached the NCAA Tournament seven times in the last eight seasons, including three trips to the second round in the last seven years.

“When I first heard that a Division I school at that high a level was looking at her, I was like ‘Oh my gosh, I’m not sure she can



**New Bedford’s Janice Leao leaps high to send the ball over the net.** [PHOTOS BY MIKE VALERI/THE STANDARD-TIMES/SCMG]

play at that level,’” Macedo said. “By junior year, it was like ‘Maybe she can play Division I.’ Then her senior year it was like ‘She can definitely play Division I.’”

Leao was sold on Miami after she visited during March of her junior year.

“I absolutely loved it the first time I was there,” she said. “I had that vibe already. I felt like I belonged there.”

The Hurricanes, who are sitting at 13-10 this season following a four-game losing streak, have a senior returning at middle hitter next year, but according to Macedo, Miami does not plan to red-shirt her.

“The coach says they can use her right away,” Macedo said. “She can definitely play. Hitting and blocking are her best skills, and that’s what we’ve worked on for three years. It’s her power and her consistency.”

“When she gets good sets, she puts the ball down hard. You’re not digging her balls unless you guess right at where they’re going. Her blocking skills and her vision



**Janice Leao and New Bedford coach Neil Macedo talk after she signed her National Letter of Intent to play volleyball at the University of Miami on Wednesday.**

of the court are huge strengths of hers. Once in awhile someone will come and double-block and she’ll see that and tip over to the open spot on the court.”

That’s a long list of superlatives, but ask Leao, who hopes to play overseas after college, what she needs to improve on to take her game to the next level, and she

gets rolling on a list just as lengthy.

“Definitely back row,” she started. “I want to play back row so bad. I want to improve my serve a lot. I want to improve my swing. It’s not amazing, so I want to work on it more. And blocking. Mostly everything about my game I want to prove.”

One thing Macedo hopes she

never changes is her approach to life.

“She’s a great kid,” he said. “Very seldom do you see her in a bad mood. She’s always happy. She’s friendly. She’s just a great person and a great role model.”

Follow Brendan Kurie on Twitter @BrendanKurieSCT