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## Life's a beach for Nicole Branagh

By Jon Kingdon



Nicole Branagh at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China Photo provided

Lamorinda has been blessed with many great student-athletes. There have been multi-sport athletes that have lettered in three sports. The number drops precipitously when you restrict the list to the people who have been recruited by various colleges to play any or all three sports. Nicole Branagh, who grew up in Orinda and graduated in 1997 from Miramonte High School, is one such individual.

Starting out, like most in Lamorinda, as a swimmer, Branagh also played softball and soccer. Entering high school, she played basketball, volleyball and did the high jump, triple jump, and long jump for the track team. Branagh was the league MVP in volleyball and basketball and still holds school records in the high jump and triple jump all of which ultimately led her to be inducted into the first Hall of Fame class at Miramonte in 2017.

"I loved the whole experience of playing sports at Miramonte with the rivalries with Acalanes and Campolindo," Branagh said. "I had a lot of great memories like the road trips with the team with all of the team camaraderie and the Lamorinda community. I will not admit to painting the rock, but it was always fun to drive by the rock and see what school had done the latest painting."

Branagh chose to attend the University of Minnesota, accepting an athletic scholarship to play volleyball for the Golden Gophers. It was between basketball and volleyball as to which sport she would play. "Actually, I think that basketball was my best sport," Branagh said. "I had played it the longest, but I may have been burned out on it a little bit and I really loved volleyball and saw that there would be a lot of opportunities to continue playing volleyball after college."

With so many colleges offering scholarships, what was it that led Branagh to choose to go to the University of Minnesota where the winters are cold and snowy, and the summers are hot and humid? It was the personal touch by head coach Mike Hebert that won Branagh over. "I had actually canceled my scheduled visit to Minnesota because I did not want to go that far from home. However, I kept getting hand-written letters from Coach Hebert and there was something about him that drove me to check him and the school out."

Hebert, considered one of the architects of modern high-competitive professional volleyball, won Branagh over when she made her recruiting trip. "After the trip, I told my family, 'That's the one. I just have a feeling about it,'" Branagh said. "I was won over by the people, the academics, and the great support they had for the athletic programs. As for the weather, it was only going to be for four years, but I loved it there. I did grow up skiing, so snow wasn't new to me. It was just a great place to go to college."

Branagh did not totally turn her back on basketball, giving some thought to playing with the Minnesota varsity after finishing her final volleyball season. "I would usually hang around after practice and shoot with the basketball team," Branagh said. "However, playing two seasons of college sports back-to-back, and being a full-time student would have been too much."

Branagh led Minnesota in kills all four seasons and was named First Team All-Big Ten as a sophomore, junior and senior, named the Big Ten Player of the Year as a senior and was chosen All-American twice. Her 2,370 career kills remain the most in school history and remains among the top 15 in NCAA history and was inducted into the University of Minnesota Hall of Fame in 2014.

To the surprise of no one, Branagh was asked to join the U.S.A. National Team from 2001-03, winning a bronze medal at the Pan American games in 2003. She also played for the one season of the United States Professional Volleyball League with the Minnesota Chill winning the only championship for that league, and was named the Finals MVP. When the league folded, Branagh went on to play professionally in Japan from 2002-03 and in Italy from 2003-05.

While working for the family business, Branagh Inc. in 2004, Branagh got a call from a friend that led her on a new career path. "A friend invited me to come down to Southern California to play beach volleyball even though I had never played it before," Branagh said. "It is a different game from indoor volleyball (with only two players on the team) but the basic skills are the same. Fortunately, it worked out to be a great career for me with many opportunities. I traveled all over the world and went to the 2008 Olympics which was a dream come true."

Beach Volleyball is a bit like the pro golf tour - it's all prize money and you must pay for all your expenses. So, for two years, Branagh played both indoors and beach volleyball where she had sponsorships with Under Armor and Hilton. "Once I began to win awards and do well, I got more sponsors," Branagh said, "which helped."

After being named rookie-of-the-year with American Volleyball Professionals (AVP), what led her to fully commit to beach volleyball was when she was asked by three-time Olympian Holly McPeak to be her playing partner. "This was huge," said Branagh. "It was then that I wanted to see how good I could do on the beach. I committed to training in the off-season, training with and learning from the best players."

Along with the AVP, Branagh also competed in the International Volleyball Foundation (FIVB). Competing in both leagues was taxing on the players. "We might play a final match on Sunday in California and that night we would be on a plane to Europe to start another tournament the next Wednesday," Branagh said. "Either we would come right back to the United States or stay overseas for a couple of weeks to compete in tournaments. We would play 26 to 27 tournaments in a season and with all that travel, it took a lot out of you."

Finding the right teammate is not easy and changes are often made. Branagh at various times partnered with six Olympians through her career. It was Elaine Youngs who was Branagh's partner in the 2008 Olympics where they finished in fifth place. For Branagh, competing in the Olympics was a dream fulfilled that began when she was 6 when Matt Biondi, a Campolindo graduate and 11-time Olympic medalist, came to Branagh's swim practice and gave everyone an Olympic pin. "I still have that USA pin with the Olympic ring," Branagh said. "I carried it with me throughout the Olympic qualifications and brought it to the Beijing Olympics and I still keep it in my car today."

Biondi was also in Beijing doing commentary for the swimming events. "Matt came to my match and we got to hang out and chat a little bit," Branagh said. "I'll never forget that first meeting with Matt Biondi and the lasting effect it had on me. It all came full circle in Beijing and it was all very special."

The travel experience for Branagh was an education itself. "I was exposed to many different countries and their people," Branagh said. "Once you learned about their cultures, it wasn't a problem for anyone. It was a great experience to go overseas but there were many times when our baggage did not show up and all I had was one bikini in my backpack and a pair of sunglasses. The worst part about all the traveling was being away from family, missing out on weddings and birthdays. When you're on the road, you can't make it back for these important events."

Even in the Middle East, competing in Dubai, the bikini outfits were not an issue. "We weren't sure what it would be like there, but we wore our normal bikini uniforms, (which my team won), and then we had to wear a coverup for the medal ceremony. We had different colored long gowns on because the prince was coming and that was their culture. We were all fine with it."

After retiring in 2018, married with two children, 7-year-old Tegan and 4-year-old Will, Branagh began to look for a new career. Having traveled all over the world, competing in Australia, Brazil, China, Dubai, Japan, Norway, Poland, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, and other countries would certainly have qualified her for a career as a travel agent.

However, Branagh chose to utilize her degree in public relations and advertising, pursuing a career in real estate. "I was referring a lot of my friends to Julie DeCoste who works at Remax and one day she told me that I needed to get my license since I was sending her so much business and that's what I'm working on now. I really do love helping people to find a home."

Branagh still maintains a connection with volleyball. "I've been coaching at the number one beach volleyball club team in Manhattan Beach with Holly McPeak, Barb Fontana and Erik Fonoimoana for six years. When I started, I was still playing and it was a good way for me to give back by helping the younger generation. I am also doing TV commentating with the Pac 12 network for beach and indoor volleyball."

Still, it all comes back to family for Branagh: "Fortunately, I have a supportive family with my parents and siblings. I never felt any pressure from my parents (Tom and Diane). They always encouraged me to do what I loved and were always there to support all of us with our passions and we're very thankful for that."

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