

Heart of a Tiger: Riley Tinder and the value of competition and collaboration

HAYS, Kan. – I have always greatly appreciated the creative arts and am especially proud of the work our art and design department students produce. I am also a huge fan of all Fort Hays State sports. I'd like to share with you a story about an FHSU student who excels in two very different pursuits-volleyball and graphic design. While volleyball and graphic design have very little in common, both are pursuits where intense competition and open collaboration can be the keys to success.

Riley is a senior graphic design major from Basehor. At a relatively early age, Riley learned the importance of keeping life's ups and downs in perspective. She's learned the importance of finding a balance between all the demands on her time and attention.

Riley has always loved competing. She ran track and played basketball, softball, volleyball, and swam. While softball was her first love, she eventually gravitated to volleyball, joining a club team in 4th grade.

"I love the adrenaline rushes that are so much a part of volleyball. There are a lot of ups and downs, but I love that it is totally a team game," Riley said.

As the years progressed, Riley began to settle on volleyball as her sports passion. Although she loved art, math was her academic area of greatest interest, that is, until her senior year of high school when she did a job shadow at a marketing agency called Global Prairie. Until stepping into their offices, Riley believed that a career in art would equate to a vow of poverty. Once she saw the possibilities of what a graphic designer could do in an agency, she knew that was what she wanted to study in college.

While Riley knew she wanted to study graphic design at Fort Hays State, she wasn't willing to give up on the dream of playing college volleyball. She reached out to FHSU volleyball coach Jessica Wood-Atkins but was told there wasn't a spot on the roster for her. Then, late in the recruitment cycle, one of coach Wood-Atkins' seniors decided to forgo her final season of eligibility and left the team. Fortune unexpectedly smiled on Riley as she got her shot as a walk-on with the Tigers.

A steady passer, an aggressive server, and a smart and disciplined hitter, Riley quickly found her way to the starting lineup in her sophomore season. Last season, Riley led the squad in both kills and service aces. She has been recognized several times for her performance on and off the court, earning the All Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association (MIAA) honorable mention honors in 2021 and 2022 and the MIAA Scholar-Athlete Award and selection to the College Sports Communicators Academic All-District team in 2022.

Riley pours her heart and soul into Tiger Volleyball both during the fall NCAA season and in the spring, where the competition schedule is limited, but the training, weight-lifting, and conditioning regimes can be exhaustive.

"This is all I've ever done. I probably take things way too serious and too personally. I'm learning not to make it my identity when I do well or not," Riley said.

When she's not eating, sleeping, or fulfilling her volleyball responsibilities, Riley can usually be found in a studio with her classmates at the Schmidt Foundation Center for Art Design. When deciding to pursue graphic design, Riley was concerned that she wouldn't fit in. Thankfully, she was wrong. Together, in the studio for countless hours, Riley and her fellow graphic design students quickly formed a strong bond.

"Sometimes, usually at around 2 am, when we're all kind of exhausted and delusional, are the times when we make the best memories," Riley said.

Each spring, junior and senior students in the graphic design program have the opportunity to participate in the Pencil Project portfolio competition. The competition is sponsored by Leo Burnett Worldwide, a Chicago-based advertising agency. The brainchild of former FHSU graphic design majors who found success working for the agency, the Pencil Project was created more than 25 years ago as a way for Leo Burnett to partner with FHSU to help shape future agency professionals. More than just a simple portfolio project, the Pencil Project is really about helping FHSU graphic design students develop the personal brand they will present to potential employers and the world. Riley calls it a test of everything she's learned in the program.

As a junior last spring, Riley won the competition. She points to this experience as one that truly hammered home the importance of each student designer's role in maintaining the well-earned reputation of the graphic design program at FHSU.

"All of us knew that we were next in line to carry the torch for the legacy of our program," Riley said, "maintaining that legacy was a shared responsibility," and one that brought her and her colleagues closer. Even though the Pencil Project was an individual and not a team competition, Riley believes the best part was their shared commitment to collaboration. They really saw the greatest outcome was to see everyone succeed.

This summer, Riley plans to intern with several firms in the Kansas City area. She wants to learn as much as possible from these experiences so she can carefully choose the setting to launch her career. Riley will graduate in December of 2023, right after her final season with the Tiger Volleyball team comes to a close. In December of this year, she will graduate from FHSU with the ability to compete fiercely at the highest levels, but balanced by a personal commitment to being a compassionate and selfless friend and colleague.