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LAMORINDA SPORTS

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SMC women's volleyball surpassing expectations halfway through season

By Jon Kingdon



Lindsey Knudsen (17) and Sienna Young (6)

Photo Tod Fierner

It's a fine line between victory and defeat. Last season the Saint Mary's women's volleyball team had a record of 9 and 19. This year, it only took the Gaels 11 matches to reach last season's win total and now have an overall record of 11-3 halfway through the season.

Head coach Rob Browning doesn't see that much difference in both teams: "I thought we were a good team last year but we had a lot of injuries and did not have a good record in five set matches going 2 and 6. This year we have won all five of our five set matches. Still with such a solid group of seniors, we are a better team this year."

This is a very balanced roster comprised of three seniors, four juniors, two sophomores and six freshmen. Browning has come to rely on his group of seniors, Lindsey Calvin, Lindsey Knudsen and Emily Bible: "The leadership of our seniors shows on and off the court. This group is a stronger, competitive team with great desire and a team connection which is allowing us to win the close games."

Browning utilizes an offense that is flexible and it allows the players to transition easily into the program: "We have a program that we like and we get our players to learn that system. In terms of personnel, they may play different positions. It's a simple system but it is a good one. The players are ready to jump in there when they arrive and run our type of offense. It's a fast offense and a little unique. We set the outside hitters faster and set slower in the middle. Together, it's hard to defend."

The two Lindseys, senior middle blocker Lindsey Calvin (132) and Lindsey Knudsen (127) are leading the offense in kills. Says Browning: "Calvin has really stepped up in her game as an attacker and Knudsen along with junior Sienna Young have also im-

proved their play on offense."

The overall improvement of the offense is apparent in the team numbers. Last season Saint Mary's averaged 46 kills per match. This season, the kills/match average is 53. The assist numbers have also improved from 43 to 50 per match.

Junior Alexa "Crash" Parker leads the team with 340 assists. Parker, who earned the nickname "Crash" from falling off a bicycle, does live up to her nickname, leading the team with 27 saves and is third on the team with 95 digs. Says Browning: "Alexsa came to Saint Mary's after being named as the Gatorade Player of the Year in Utah as an outside hitter but was moved to setter and is a very good all-around player." Freshman Alosina Thompson is backing up Parker. Says Browning: "Alosina has done a nice job stepping in and is learning quickly. Crash has been a good model for her and she has seen significant playing time in big matches." Thompson is second on the team with 115 assists and 104 digs.

The Gaels defense took a big hit when starting freshman libero Kelsey Knudsen (Lindsey's sister) was lost early in the season due to a serious knee injury. Fortunately for Saint Mary's, Bible has stepped in to replace Knudsen and the team has not seen any fall off in this area.

Browning takes great pride in the defense he installed, which was unique at the time: "We were the only ones that ran our type of defense with our blocking system and now everyone has taken on our philosophy and system utilizing swing blocking (using your open, cross, hop footwork along the net while swinging your arms in order to penetrate further over the net to block your opponent) but now it's much more common throughout women's volleyball."

Besides Knudsen and Thomp-

son, a third freshman outside hitter, Breyon Ashley from Dublin has also seen a fair amount of playing time. Says Browning: "Breyon is a very good player. At this point she is primarily a serving sub but she is also a dynamic blocker and player."

With victories over Utah and California, the Gaels entered into the league season with great confidence. The team began their league schedule playing the 24th ranked University of San Diego and No. 1 ranked team in the nation, BYU, on the road. Saint Mary's defeated San Diego 3-2 and lost to BYU 3-0. The victory over San Diego was particularly pleasing to Browning: "We beat San Diego on their home floor, one of the top programs for the past 15 years and that was a big win. The players believe in themselves and what they have built. This has led to our winning record and some very impressive comebacks."

With the maturation of the freshmen class and the anticipation of future commitments to the program, Browning sees a bright future for the women's volleyball team: "Along with our returning players, we have some top recruits coming in next year and also commitments from some high school juniors that will help us to continue on our track. We always want to be competitive in the West Coast Conference and to compete for championships."

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NEXT LEVEL FLAG FOOTBALL OVERVIEW

- SEASON -- LEAGUE PLAY RUNS FROM EARLY JANUARY TO MID MARCH
- GRADE-BASED ORGANIZATION -- TEAMS ARE FORMULATED WITHIN RESPECTIVE GRADES, NOT BY AGE GROUPS
- STUDENT-ATHLETE COACHES -- ALL TEAMS WILL BE COACHED/MENTORED BY A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE
- COMMUNITY-CENTRIC LEAGUE -- PARTICIPANTS GET TO PLAY WITH FRIENDS/CLASSMATES, PARENTS ENJOY WEEKEND GAMES WITHIN SOCIAL CIRCLES
- PERSONALIZED JERSEYS -- EACH PARTICIPANT WILL BE KNOWN WITH A PERSONALIZED NAME AND NUMBERED JERSEY
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