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College volleyball preview: UIS coach Riggle has more options

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Unless she wants to, Angie Riggle won't have to shuffle the University of Illinois Springfield Prairie Stars women's volleyball players around the court like chess pieces this fall.

"We're deep in all positions whereas last year we had one setter and we had one true middle," said Riggle, who's in her second season with the team. "We were having to make a lot of adjustments and switching people to positions that they weren't used to playing last year."

Senior outside hitter Courtnee Brown and junior outside hitter Cayla Baggerly are among five returning players. Brown was first on the team in kills (313) and digs (263). Baggerly had 147 kills and 114 digs.

Sophomore outside hitter Ashley King, junior middle hitter Courtney Kombrink and senior defensive specialist Britni Prusa also return.

Eight newcomers could help them improve on last year's 11-20 overall record and 2-12 Great Lakes Valley Conference mark.

"They're a very competitive group," Riggle said. "When I was recruiting that was the biggest thing that the girls emphasized: They wanted to feel like they were competing for a spot. Size-wise we're a much bigger team. Skill-wise they are so much further advanced than what we were last year."

The Stars will be tested early since they'll spend almost the entire month of September on the road. UIS plays its home opener Sept. 28 against Benedictine University at Springfield.

"It'll be interesting to see how they react to that . . . being on the road," Riggle said.

Benedictine Bulldogs

Drew Aschenbrenner is a coach who focuses on defense, and defense will be the Bulldogs' calling card this fall.

"We're going to be defensive-oriented," he said. "We really don't have a lot of height. Defense and passing are going to be key." The experience of outside hitter Kayleigh Skaggs and right-side hitter Missy Chott should help the Bulldogs make the switch from competing at the junior college level to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics.

Sophomore Lexie Steindl is the returning setter for Benedictine, which had a 25-20 overall record in 2009.

"We played with a couple of setters last season, but by the end of the year she was our No. 1 setter," Aschenbrenner said. Newcomers Rachel Cunningham, a 5-foot-11 middle hitter, and libero Katie Howard, an Auburn High School graduate, are likely to have an immediate impact.

Lincoln Land Loggers

The presence of sophomore outside hitters Beka Pruemer, a Mid-West Athletic Conference Co-Freshman of the Year last fall, and honorable mention all-conference player Becky Breakfield give the Loggers a familiar look, but LLCC coach Jim Dietz has made major changes.

"We've really redone the offense and defense," he said. "We have a new system in place.

"All the changes are based on the fact that we're athletic. So we're going to try and take advantage of the fact that from top to bottom we're very athletic."

LLCC is coming off a 33-11 season that ended in the semifinals of the National Junior College Athletic Association Region 24 tournament.

"We don't have the same physical talent, but we have a better work ethic," Dietz said. "We're just a different team."

Sophomore middle hitter Megan Vlastic is the Loggers' most improved player, according to Dietz. He says sophomore setter Shauni Hernandez, who returns from a torn anterior cruciate ligament, is the wild card.

Incoming players to watch are freshmen Abby Hunt, who can play any position, and opposite hitter Paige Boyer.

Robert Morris Eagles

Coach Mark Moore can mix and match lineups, which he expects will bring positive results and improve RMU's 2009 record of 23-12.

"The best thing about this team is there's a lot of versatility," he said. "Katie (Johnson) and (6-foot middle hitter Courtney Cummings) will hold down the middle. Rachel Charles and Amy Striker are both capable of hitting middle. Rachel is able to play all three positions in the front row."

Senior Nicole Dawdy returns at setter. Senior Sara Gibson, a pitcher on the softball team, brings depth to the front row along with

Pleasant Plains product Abby Bruce and Striker, an LLCC transfer, who are both outside hitters. Johnson plays bigger than her 5-9 frame.

"We're pretty solid in the back row, too," Moore said. "We can have just as good of a season, if not better."

The Eagles will rely on the defensive skills of Jacksonville Routt graduate and libero Alyssa Redd in the back. Senior setter Jamie Shoot is also a defensive specialist.

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