
MIDWESTERN LEAGUE VOLLEYBALL

Coaches split on favorites Thurston and Marshfield

By Paula Lincoln

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Thurston will rely heavily on Tara Hill and Marshfield will count on Ali Worthen as they chase the Midwestern League volleyball title in 2007.

According to The Register-Guard's annual coaches poll, the Colts and Pirates - who open league play against each other Sept. 25 - are an even bet for the top spot in the six-team Class 5A league.

"They both have strong programs and good coaching staffs," North Eugene coach Todd Bennett said.

The Colts, who lost nine players to graduation, have simply reloaded this year.

Hill, a 5-foot-10 senior who was first-team all-league last season, is the only returning starter among the five returners, and Jessica Oberg will be the starting setter.

Thurston coach Didier Hemelsoet has three freshmen on his 13-player roster in middle blocker Alec Goodrie, outside hitter Morgan McVein, and defensive specialist Gabby Shorey.

"All three will see significant playing time," said Hemelsoet, noting that Hill, a senior, was the last freshman to make varsity. "We have seven seniors, but we're really not that experienced, so we'll have to grow up fast. I think we'll do really well as long as we stay healthy.

"If we can pass well enough, we'll run a pretty fast offense. We're a little bit behind where we should be so it's a good thing we don't play Marshfield for three weeks."

Marshfield returns five players from last year's state playoff team, including the 5-foot-11 Worthen, who is also a track and field standout.

"We definitely rely on her," Marshfield coach Tammie Montiel said.

Worthen isn't the Pirates' only offensive weapon as they have junior Jenna Welsh and a "couple others we can go to" to help diversify the offense, Montiel said.

"I'm real excited about this team and where we're at at this point. I think the team chemistry has been very good,"

Montiel said.

Martine Loveys, a 2000 North Eugene graduate who played volleyball at Western Oregon, was hired as the head coach at Churchill.

"It's been fun to see familiar faces," said Loveys, who has six returning players, including go-to hitter Ella Forrest.

"She's really stepped it up this year and is playing great," Loveys said. "I think we've got some strong hitters and good defense. We are focusing on ball control."

If the league's coaches are correct, Springfield will battle Churchill for the third playoff spot.

The Millers return six players from last year's squad and have added Sheldon transfer Niki Stafek. But that, according to coach Sherry Kuschel, doesn't guarantee anyone a starting position.

"I've told them every position is open, and I still have to decide who will play what position and what player plays well with what player," Kuschel said.

Kuschel's indecision on a starting lineup doesn't mean she doesn't believe she has talent.

"We have some people who are hitters. We just have to get the ball to them," Kuschel said.

Those include five players 5-8 or taller, including 5-10 senior Samantha Stoner, 5-11 senior Carley King and 5-11 freshman Kassi Howarth.

"This is the tallest team I've had in some time, and I've been at Springfield five years," Kuschel said.

"I'm excited about that."

North Eugene's Bennett is excited, too. Seven of the 10 Highlanders on his team played varsity last year, and three newcomers played junior varsity and/or club volleyball.

Courtney Radekin, a 5-9 senior middle blocker, is North's go-to hitter, but Bennett said he has a lot of other players who can put the ball down consistently.

The Highlanders aren't very big - 5-10 sophomore Bethany Nyls is the team's tallest player and only four players are taller than 5-6.

"We're more aggressive and know what to do with the ball," said Bennett, who will rely on 5-5 senior setter Kayla Vance to direct the offense. "Everyone's older and more experienced. If we stay positive and stay focused, we could

have a big year."

Willamette has a new head coach in Brian Wodke, who moved up from junior varsity after three years to replace Judi Gay.

The team will be new as well, since only seniors Leah Mortenson and McKenzie Cheney return.

Though most of his players lack varsity experience, Wodke may have an advantage in that most members of his team played for him last year on the junior varsity and are familiar with his coaching style and expectations.

"We want to try and be aggressive, get better and have fun," Wodke said.
