

2008 MIAC Volleyball Season Preview

St. Paul, Minn. – St. Thomas looks to be a heavy favorite this season as the Tommies received 11 first-place votes and the top spot in the 2008 MIAC Preseason Coaches Poll. Several other MIAC teams look to challenge for the championship including Saint Benedict and Concordia.



St. Thomas, 11-0 mark in conference play last season, returns four starters including senior All-American Katie McCaffrey, sophomore setter Emily Foster, and at least five others with varsity experience. The Tommies also acquired Division I transfer Lauren Wagner as they look to reach the NCAA tournament for the fourth year in a row.

Saint Benedict is without a single senior this season, but have eight returning players from 2007. Junior captains Beth Hanson (setter), Emma Jaynes (outside hitter) and Andrea Millerbend (outside hitter) will be looking to lead the team back to a second consecutive NCAA Division III tournament appearance.

Concordia has earned a spot in the NCAA playoffs for five consecutive seasons and will look to do the same this year. The Cobbers have established a tradition of success both regionally and nationally with four MIAC championships in the past five seasons and five 20-win seasons in the past six years.

Carleton will look to reach the same amount of success they experienced last season when they earned an at-large bid to the NCAA tournament, as well as entertaining a climb in rankings in the conference. Among the veterans is junior Annie Eckhoff who earned All-American Honorable Mention, All-Region, and All-Conference honors in 2007.

St. Olaf and Bethel will be eyeing the MIAC postseason playoffs all season, but may reach this goal in different ways. St. Olaf ended their season in 2007 on a 6-2 run, beating out two MIAC schools that were nationally ranked (Carleton and Bethel). Co-Head Coaches Cindy Book and Traci Cook are hoping that momentum will carry over to 2008 and place St. Olaf in the MIAC postseason playoffs with experience and maturity.

Bethel, on the other hand, will be without eight seniors from last year's NCAA tournament team. Two returning starters, including three-year middle blocker Jennifer Stoa and junior Kelly Otto, leave the coaches optimistic. Several letter winners will also return after playing the role of "back-ups" last year, yearning for a chance to shine.

Augsburg will use a solid core of returning players and a mix of hard working newcomers as they set out to reach their goal of making the MIAC playoffs. Last season, the Auggies ended their season winning four out of five matches. This season, Augsburg looks to improve in the conference with the return of five starters.

Gustavus is hungry for a conference playoff berth this year after just missing out in 2007. Leading the way for the Gusties will be two-time MIAC Co-Defensive Player of the Year Emily Klein and four-year veteran Bridget Burtzel.

Hamline is hoping that the third time is a charm as they return seven players who have made back-to-back playoff appearances and twelve members of their 2007 post-season run. A solid core of veteran players will help lead the Pipers to the top of the conference including senior middle, Amanda Booth, who begins the season fifth on Hamline's career list for total blocks (316).

Looking to throw a mix in the MIAC standings this year are St. Catherine, Saint Mary's, and Macalester.

For St. Catherine, seniors Whitney Sparby, Erika Kriechbaum and Rebecca Zenefski will be providing guidance, skill and know-how for the up-and-coming team. Sparby and Kriechbaum have been starters for the squad since their freshman year, and they aim to leave the program in better shape than it was when they arrived on campus in 2004.

Saint Mary's may have a young team, but according to Head Coach Mike Lester, it is the most balanced team he has seen since 2000. The Cardinal's 17-player roster includes 11 freshmen and sophomores.

After a disappointing 2007, Macalester is optimistic for many reasons including the opening of their brand new facility, the Leonard Center. Sonia Muzikarova returns to the Macalester team from a study abroad experience after ranking second in the MIAC as a sophomore in kills per set.

2008 MIAC Preseason Coaches Poll

Coaches voted for every team in the conference except their own team. Points were assigned for each vote (1 for first, 2 for second, etc.) Teams are ranked in order of lowest point total to highest with first place votes shown in parentheses.

1. St. Thomas (11)
2. Saint Benedict
3. Concordia (1)
4. Carleton
5. St. Olaf
6. Bethel
7. Augsburg
8. Gustavus

9. Hamline
10. St. Catherine
11. Saint Mary's
12. Macalester

2008 MIAC Playoffs Dates (Top Six Teams): Quarterfinals (Tuesday, November 4); Semifinals (Thursday, November 6); Finals (Saturday, November 8).

Augsburg

Coach: Jessica Rinehart

Career Record: 77-86 (5 seasons)

2007 Finish: 9th/(4-7 MIAC, 13-16 overall)

Augsburg Season Preview

Preseason practice is in full swing for the Augsburg College Volleyball team. Although most NCAA Division III volleyball teams are just completing their first week of preseason practice, the Auggies' season got a jump start in May when the team traveled to Brazil for an eight-day training and competition trip.

"We set out with three goals in Brazil and we left feeling like we had exceeded our expectations and really set the tone for the 2008 season. This trip really solidified my confidence in the players as well as confidence in themselves," said fourth-year head coach Jessica Rinehart.

The Auggies will use a solid core of returning players and a mix of hard working newcomers as they set out to reach their goal of making the MIAC postseason tournament. Last season, the Auggies closed out the year winning four of their last five matches, including a five-game victory over NCAA tournament qualifier Bethel University. The team will look to carry this momentum into the 2008 season which will officially kick off August 29 at the Ripon College Early Bird Invitational.

"We have very high expectations from this group of players," Rinehart said. "The time has come for Augsburg volleyball to make a step up in the Conference. I feel like this team has really come into their own. They're on a mission to reach new standards and really make an impact in the conference."

Last season, the Auggies finished with a 13-16 overall record, the most wins for an Augsburg squad since 1998 (17-11). With the return of five starters, the Auggies are confident about improving on last season's record.

Offensively, the Auggies will look to an experienced setter and a dynamic and balanced offense to lead the team. Improved blocking and quickness should also improve the Augsburg defense, positioning the team as a solid contender in the Conference.

Complete season preview is online:

<http://www.augsburg.edu/athletics/volleyball/0809preview.html>

Bethel

Coach: Gretchen Hunt

Career Record: 136-89 (8 seasons)

2007 Finish: Tied 3rd/(7-4 MIAC, 24-9 overall)

Bethel Season Preview

After a season that saw a Royal volleyball player named AVCA All-American and league MVP, as well as the return of the team to the NCAA tournament for the first time since 2001, one might think that expectations would be lofty for 2008. A closer inspection of the roster reveals that the Royals will be without eight seniors who graduated from that NCAA tournament team. This includes AVCA All-American and four-year starter, Liz Glesne, All-MIAC setter Laura Naig, and CoSIDA Academic All-American Amy Anderson.

While replacing eight seniors seems like a daunting task, it also provides a clean slate for the coaching staff and an opportunity for several young players to shine. The two returning starters give Coach Hunt great reason to be optimistic. Jennifer Stoa (Sr., Brooklyn Park, Minn.) is a three-year starter at middle blocker and junior Kelly Otto (Plymouth, Minn.) transferred to Bethel last year from Trinity University (Ill.) and made an immediate impact at middle blocker. Both have extensive varsity experience and should be one of the top duos at middle blocker in the conference.

Along with Stoa and Otto, several letter winners return after playing the role of "back-ups". Leading the way is Chelsea Falck (Sr., DeForest, Wis.) who has played outside hitter, opposite hitter, and middle blocker in her junior varsity and varsity career at Bethel. Another back-up from last season is Betsy Naatjes (Sioux Falls, S.D.). Naatjes spent last year learning under Naig and is ready to run the offense from the setter position.

Defenders Bethany Shearer (Jr., Prior Lake, Minn.), Hannah Parks (So., Wayzata, Minn.), and Casey Fregeau (So., Andover, Minn.) all played in several varsity matches, with Fregeau even getting extensive game time during the MIAC and NCAA tournament run.

Finally, there are a few freshmen who should be able to contribute right away. At the top of the list are Kate Smith (Arden Hills, Minn.) and Nicole Wriedt (Pewaukee, Wis.). Both players have had extensive club volleyball experience. Along with Smith and Wriedt, Coach Hunt expects 6-0 middle blocker Kari Kjergaard (Denver, Colo.), outside hitter Haley Toter (Park Ridge, Ill.), and defensive specialist Becca Anderson (Alexandria, Minn.) to challenge for varsity playing time.

Carleton

Coach: Heidi Jaynes

Career Record: 139-99 (9 seasons)

2007 Finish: Tied 3rd/(7-4 MIAC, 19-6 overall)

Carleton Season Preview

The 2008 Carleton College volleyball team hopes teamwork can help them repeat the success they found last year, when the Knights went 19-6 overall, (7-4 MIAC) and tied for fourth in the conference. Carleton was nationally ranked, rising as high as 18th in the AVCA Top 25. They earned an at-large bid to the NCAA tournament, the team's second appearance under Head Coach Heidi Jaynes, and third appearance overall.

The squad graduated four seniors, leaving open three starting positions. The Knights biggest need is to replace All-Conference setter Heather La Chapelle, a four-year starter and owner of Carleton records in career assists (3,697) and assists per game (10.81). Sophomore Beth Jarrett (Mounds View, Minn./Irondale) is expected to fill this void.

Carleton has several other veterans returning to the lineup in 2008. This group includes junior Annie Eckhoff (MH/Northfield, Minn.), who earned All-American Honorable Mention, All-Region, and All-Conference honors in 2007. She led the team in kills (3.45 per game), hitting percentage (.342), and blocks (1.24 per game).

Laura Barsness (Jr./DS-L/Lakeville, Minn./Lakeville North) enters her third season as the starting libero and was named MIAC tri-defensive player of the year in 2007. She led the Knights in digs (5.19 per game), as well as service aces. Megan La Chapelle (Sr./OH/Eagan, Minn.) and Sarah Kunelius (Sr./MH/Eagan, Minn.) both bring experience and stability to the team. Last season, La Chapelle was second on the Knights in digs, while Kunelius was third on the squad in kills, hitting percentage, and blocks.

Katie Stanchak (Sr./Battle Creek, Mich./Lakeview) or Kyla Walter (So./Aspen, Colo.) could fill the outside hitter position, while Sarah Halls (Jr./Edina, Minn.) or Kelly Lovett (So./MH-RS/Portland, Ore./Lincoln) could step into the open right-side position. Defensive specialist Maddy Lenhard (So./ Eden Prairie, Minn.) rounds out the returners for Carleton.

Three new faces join the team this year: Erin Anderson (Fy./S-DS/Bloomington, Minn./Kennedy), Sam Baker (So./OH/Cranford, NJ/Oak Knoll School), and Ailsa McCulloch (Fy./MH/Woodside, CA/Crystal Springs Uplands).

"I believe that we can compete at the top of the conference again. We need to have all 13 of our players being able to contribute every day in practice to make whoever starts that much stronger," said Jaynes.

Teamwork will be key. Jaynes added, "I think how cooperative we are, how much teamwork we have—on the court and in practices—will really determine how well we do this season."

Concordia

Coach: Tim Mosser

Career Record: 286-179 (16 seasons)

2007 Finish: Tied 2nd/(8-3 MIAC, 17-9 overall)

Concordia Season Preview

Tradition. The Cobber volleyball program has become steeped in tradition over the past seven years. What started out as an outstanding recruiting class in 2001 has turned into a perennial powerhouse in the MIAC. The Cobbers have earned a spot in the NCAA playoffs for five consecutive seasons and have been ranked in the top 25 of the nation for the past 47 weeks. Both feats are incredible on their own but add the facts that Concordia has won four MIAC championships in the past five seasons and has five 20-win seasons in the past six years, you have a good argument that Concordia has established a tradition of regional and national success.

The mixture of returning experience and youthful exuberance new will help Concordia stay entrenched in the top of the nation as they begin the year ranked 16th in the preseason AVCA national poll. Three seniors will provide leadership off the court and skill on the court. Jill Hance (Hopkins, Minn./Benilde-St. Margaret's HS), Abby Scheel (Fergus Falls, Minn./Hillcrest Lutheran Academy) and Anna Tinkham (Fisher, Minn.) have all been an integral part of the team's success the past three seasons and will now step into the role of having to steer the ship through their senior season. Hance has 1,395 career assists and has been a part of the starting lineup since she was a freshman. Scheel blossomed as a force in the middle of the net last season. She was named to the MIAC All-Conference Team in 2007 while leading the team in blocks (98). Tinkham broke the school record for digs last year and was named the MIAC Tri-Defensive Player of the Year. Her defensive skills will be counted on to keep CC in every game now that the new scoring system has been implemented for 2008.

A group of sophomore and junior hitters will help the transition at the start of the year and that mix will be aided by an outstanding first-year class. Valerie Glynn (So.,/Fullerton, N.D./Ellendale HS), Maggie Olson (Jr., Fargo, N.D./Fargo North HS), Dana Wermers (Jr., Rapid City, S.D./Stevens HS) and Erin Sykora (Jr., Rapid City, S.D./Stevens HS) have all had significant playing time at the varsity level in the past couple of seasons and all have shown the ability to make plays in pressure situations.

With the combination of experience and youth, this should be another brick in building the tradition of Concordia volleyball – a structure that keeps getting bigger and bigger after every season.

For more on Cobber volleyball go to: www.cord.edu/dept/sports/fall/vb/index.php.

Gustavus

Coach: Kari Eckheart

Career Record: 169-141 (11 seasons)

2007 Finish: Tied 4th/(6-5 MIAC, 18-8 overall)

Gustavus Season Preview

The Gustavus Adolphus College volleyball team looks to move back into the top of the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference standings after missing the league playoffs in 2007 with an 18-8 overall and 6-5 conference record. Head Coach Kari Eckheart will look to two-time MIAC Co-Defensive Player of the Year Emily Klein and four-year veteran Bridget Burtzel, to lead the way.

Senior libero Emily Klein (Red Wing, Minn.) leads an experienced back row corps that led the MIAC in digs last season with nearly 23 digs per game. Klein became the Gusties' all-time dig leader last season and will continue to add to her total of 1,665 digs. Andrea Smilanich (Sr., South St. Paul, Minn.) and Jenny Ewert (So., St. James, Minn.) were regular defensive specialists last season and will assist Klein in the back row this year. Junior Tara Kramer (Hayfield, Minn.) and first-year Katie Ness (Excelsior, Minn./Minnetonka) add depth to the scrappy Gustavus defense.

Another strength of Coach Eckheart's squad is its presence in the middle. Meghan Gehring (Jr., Eau Claire, Wis.) and Britta Bolm (Sr., Alexandria, Minn.) stepped into starting roles last season and established Gustavus as the third-best blocking team in the league. Gehring developed into an all-around middle hitter that finished second on the team in kills (310) and blocks (104). Bolm finished second in the conference in blocks en route to tallying the highest Gustie single-season blocks total since 1999 at 130. Bolm and incoming player Angela Ahrendt (Shoreview, Minn./Roseville Area) could alternate playing time in the middle or on the right side, while Abby Roff (Fy., Plymouth, Minn./Osseo) adds another option on the right.

Veteran setter Bridget Burtzel (Sr., Cold Spring, Minn./ROCORI) will be called on to distribute the ball to young hitters. She amassed 1,094 assists in 2007 and needs only 219 assists to move into third place at Gustavus for career assists. Two other setters, Samantha Broderius (So., Hector, Minn.) and Malea Noennig (Fy., Norwood-Young America, Minn.), will add depth at the setter position.

The biggest challenge for Coach Eckheart is replacing standout outside hitters Andrea Kron and Jennifer Thelemann, both of whom graduated. One option includes moving Nicki Ainsworth (So., Eden Prairie, Minn.) from the right side to the left side, the other outside hitting spot will go to either sophomore Janey Helland (Mapleton, Minn.) or first-year players Olivia Warren (Goodhue, Minn.) and Courtney Kelzer (Mayer, Minn.).

Hamline

Coach: Lynette Jones

Career Record: 17-11 (1 season)

2007 Finish: Tied 4th/(6-5 MIAC, 17-11 overall)

Hamline Season Preview

The 2008 Hamline University Pipers are hoping that the third time is a charm as they return seven players who have made back-to-back playoff appearances and twelve members of their 2007 post-season run.

Head coach Lynette Jones begins her second year at the helm excited about the "solid core of veteran players who know how to win." That playoff experience isn't limited to the returning Pipers who have ventured into MIAC post-season play, as several newcomers to the Hamline roster have also seen post-season success with their previous teams.

Leading the Pipers on the court this year will be senior middle Amanda Booth (Champlin, Minn.), who begins the season fifth on Hamline's career list for total blocks (316), including 97 total blocks in 2007. An exceptional leader on and off the court, "Booth brings a level of maturity that will give our team confidence in the front row," says Jones. The team will look to her to stake her claim as one of the top blockers in Piper history with a strong senior season.

Supporting Booth, and leading the team offensively, will be the 2006 MIAC Rookie of the Year and a member of the 2007 All-MIAC first team, Tasha Simmons (Eagan, Minn.). The junior hitter will be a force on the outside for the Pipers, and will also be counted on for her strength in passing and serve receive. Simmons led the Pipers in 2007 with 425 kills.

A pair of sophomores coming off of a strong inaugural season will be jumping into leadership roles on the court. Setter Jackie Kelly (Blaine, Minn.) will return to run the offense. In her first year, she led the team in assists with 545 (7.17 per game). Jones believes that Kelly's "ability to read the defense and her great court sense will aid the Pipers' offense as she takes on a stronger leadership role on the floor this season."

Anchoring the back row for Hamline this season will once again be libero Heidi Larsen (Andover, Minn.). Larsen, who played in all 99 games in 2007, tallied 473 digs and had double-digit digs in 20 of the Piper's 28 matches in her rookie season. Larsen's strengths on serve receive and passing will be the center of an effective Piper defense.

Rounding out the new players to watch will be outside hitter Madyson Frank (Woodbury, Minn.), who exhibits a strong swing and will be a strong competitor for playing time. Frank's addition to the roster will provide a new level of depth to the Piper bench.

Macalester

Coach: Stephanie Schleuder

Career Record: 134-140 (10 seasons)

2007 Finish: 12th/(0-11 MIAC, 3-21 overall)

Macalester Season Preview

The Scots will put the disappointments of last season behind them and focus on 2008. After playing and practicing (at 6 a.m.) off campus in '07 and finishing with just three wins, the Scots move into the brand new Leonard Center and play all of their MIAC matches at home. Optimism for a bright future is high.

Last season, Macalester was without the services of All-MIAC outside hitter Sonia Muzikarova (Sr., Bratislava, Slovakia / Gymnazium Bilikova), who was on a Macalester study abroad program. Muzikarova returns to the Scots after ranking second in the MIAC as a sophomore in kills per set with 4.7, helping Macalester rank first in the conference in attack percentage. She also averaged .66 blocks and 0.47 aces per set.

Stephanie Schleuder, in her 11th season at Macalester and 33rd in the collegiate level, goes into the 2008 campaign with 693 career collegiate coaching victories, and is optimistic for a much improved season from this year's squad.

In addition to getting the services of Muzikarova back, the Scots will rely on some talented freshmen as well as veterans Marie Godwin (Jr., Chaska, Minn.), Kiera Coulter (So., Davis, Calif.), Majra Mucic (So., Zenica, Bosnia / St. Louis Park - Minn.) and Erin Cusac (Jr., Pine River, Minn. / Pine River-Backus).

Cusac was second on the team a year ago with 2.1 kills/set, Coulter led the team with 4.6 digs per set as the libero, Mucic contributed 1.5 kills, 0.4 aces and 0.9 blocks per set, and Godwin averaged 1.6 kills and 3.4 digs.

Expectations are for the several members of the incoming class to contribute right away.

Saint Benedict

Coach: Michelle Blaeser

Career Record: 132-96 (8 seasons)

2007 Finish: Tied 2nd/(8-3 MIAC, 21-11 overall)

Saint Benedict Season Preview

This year the College of St. Benedict will emphasize playing with passion, pride and purpose. The Blazers feel that playing with passion, pride and purpose is the key to success on the court.

In 2008 the Blazers will return to the court coming off a 21-11 record last year, including an 8-3 mark in conference play, which gave them a share of second place in the conference.

This year Blaeser brings in a team that is young, but experienced. The Blazers are without a single senior in 2008, but return a strong nucleus of players, including eight returning athletes from last season. All eight returnees played a role in the Blazers national rankings of 45th in kills per game (14.49), 28th in digs per game (21.64) and a final team ranking of 26th.

Junior captains Beth Hanson (setter), Emma Jaynes (outside hitter) and Andrea Millerbend (outside hitter) will be looking to lead the team back to a second consecutive NCAA Division III tournament appearance. All-MIAC selection and team Most Valuable Player Beth Hanson returns to the court, after breaking CSB's single-season set-assists record (1,286) and CSB's single-season assists per game (11.80). Hanson's 1,286 set-assists ranked 25th in the nation and she also is currently tied for CSB's career double-doubles record with 45.

CSB's athlete of the year Emma Jaynes will continue to be a force for the Blazers at the outside hitter position. Last season Jaynes compiled 400 kills (led CSB), a hitting percentage of .232 and raised her career double-doubles total to 38 which is currently fourth in the Blazer's record book. Jaynes earned team co-Most Valuable Defensive player, All-MIAC, All-Region, NCAA Division III All-American Honorable Mention and three all-tournament team honors last season.

Andrea Millerbend had a breakout season in which she played in all 32 matches and a total of 100 games. Millerbend ranks in the top five in set-assists (14), total assists (110), service aces (31) and digs (272) for CSB.

Sophomore Calleigh Brown gained valuable experience as a first year. After leading CSB in blocks per game (1.06) Brown is expected to hold down the starting middle hitter position.

With the experience and talent that the Blazers return they will look to challenge for a MIAC title and a second straight NCAA Division III tournament berth.

St. Catherine

Coach: Nicole Hess

Career Record: 27-107 (5 seasons)

2007 Finish: 11th/(1-10 MIAC, 10-17 overall)

St. Catherine Season Preview

The St. Kate's volleyball team looks to make significant progress this season, and to do it they will need the experience and leadership from their seven returning letter winners to mesh with the energy and talent of their large freshman class.

Seniors Whitney Sparby, Erika Kriechbaum and Rebecca Zenefski will be providing guidance, skill and know-how for the up-and-coming Wildcats. Sparby and Kriechbaum have been starters for the squad since their freshman year, and they aim to leave the program in better shape than it was when they arrived on campus in 2004.

Maria Hoffman and Lana Brand are juniors whose talent and familiarity of playing tough MIAC opponents will be vital to the team's success. Last season Hoffman earned all-conference honors from her middle hitter position with an average of 3.36 kills and 1.05 blocks per game. Brand is a strong outside hitter who is returning to top form after an off-season injury.

Hard-working and talented sophomore's Nicole Neumann and Megan Ahlbrecht are expected to make major contributions again this year. Neumann, the team's libero, led the Wildcats in digs last year. Her 5.03 digs per game average was ninth best in the MIAC. Ahlbrecht had a strong finish to her freshman year, and was second on the team in both kills and blocks last season.

Coach Hess will look to these key-returns to lay the foundation for her 12 talented incoming student-athletes. The incoming crew includes Callie Teigen, Kayla Sis, Kaitlin Reed, and Mallory Fultz, who will bring more height and depth to the front row. Meanwhile first-year athlete Katie Ellis is a strong setter who will be learning to play the position at the college level from seniors Sparby and Zenefski.

Coach Hess' assessment and excitement for the 2008 season was evident when she noted that, "Last year we did some things very well. We had glimpses of our potential, and those experiences should allow us to improve this year. The combination of experience and the depth will allow us to attack teams in new ways." The new look Wildcats will sharpen their skills with a demanding early season tournament schedule, before starting conference play. If the team can come together and remain confident in their abilities then 2008 could be a very memorable season for St. Kate's volleyball.

Saint Mary's

Coach: Mike Lester
Career Record: 176-138 (11 seasons)

2007 Finish: 10th/(3-8 MIAC, 17-12 overall)

Saint Mary's Season Preview
Setter ... Check.
Outside hitters ... Check.
Middle hitters ... Check.
Libero ... Check.
The pieces are all there — now all Saint Mary’s University volleyball coach Mike Lester has to do is put them all together.
And for Lester, that will be the fun part.
“I’m really excited about the season — we’ve only been practicing a short amount of time, but I can already see how hard this team worked in the off-season and how physically prepared they are,” said Lester, whose team finished 17-12 overall a year ago, and will kick off their season Aug. 29-30 at the Elmhurst Tournament. “It’s already evident that this is a very tight-knit group — and that can be the difference between a good team and a very good team.”
That, and a stable full of talented individuals. How talented?
Setter Rachel Monterastelli (Wonder Lake, Ill.) closed out her freshman season with 1,173 assists, including 11, 50-plus assist performances; Senior libero Theresa Perrini (Fairway, Kan.) posted a school, single-season record 690 digs; and hitters Sarah Gardner (Rochester, Minn.), Jessica Mate (St. Charles, Ill.) and Racquel Reker (Mantorville, Minn.) all finished their freshmen campaigns with 200 or more kills.
“On paper, we look like a young team, and, in a way, we are a young team,” said Lester, whose 17-player roster includes 11 freshmen and sophomores. “But our youth is in name only — we’ve got nine sophomores who saw a ton of playing time last year.
“We’re young, but we’re experienced.”
And it’s that experience that Lester is hoping will carry the Cardinals back into the conference tournament.
“This may be the most balanced team I’ve had since the 2000 season, when we made it to the (NCAA) tournament,” Lester said. “Are we are good as (2000)? That’s hard to predict at this stage in the season — but I’m not counting anything out, either.”

St. Olaf

Co-Coaches: Cindy Book/Traci Cook
Career Record: Book: 599-289 (26 seasons), Cook: 84-88 (5 seasons)

2007 Finish: 8th/(5-6 MIAC, 13-10 overall)

St. Olaf Season Preview

If the 2008 St. Olaf College volleyball season looks like the final eight games of 2007, it will be a good fall.

Last year St. Olaf, playing with only six returners, started slowly but went 6-2 over the last two-plus weeks and missed the MIAC playoffs by one game. The Oles, behind All-MIAC outside hitter Kim Smisek, defeated two ranked opponents (No. 23 Bethel and No. 21 Carleton) during the stretch.

Co-head coach Cindy Book is confident that this year's team has the experience to make a move towards the top of the MIAC standings.

"We return with a great deal of experience and maturity," said Book who, with the Oles' first win in 2008, will surpass 600 career victories.

"All nine players saw action last year and have been committed to pursuing a spot at the top of the conference."

The St. Olaf attack starts with Smisek. She led St. Olaf in kills (383) and hitting percentage (.249) and was third on the team in digs (199). Smisek finished the season with at least 13 kills in the Oles' last 16 matches and had at least 20 kills seven times.

At the other outside spot, Jane Meyer returns after a promising first year campaign. Meyer was third on the team in kills and had eight of her 11 double-digit games in the Oles' final ten matches, including a season-best 21 in the win over Carleton.

Senior middle Jess Levin, a three-year starter, returns in the middle. Levin hit .240 with 2.87 kills and 1.06 blocks a game in 2007, all career highs. She also had career match highs for kills (20) and blocks (8) in a two-week stint in October.

Opposite Levin, Paige Olson is expected to return to the other middle spot. Olson started her career outside, but moved to the middle last fall. She was fourth on the team in kills and had seven double-digit outputs.

Sophomore Kelly Prunty returns at setter. Prunty was steady as a first year, collecting 945 set assists in the Oles' 13-10 campaign.

The Oles open the season with a two-day tournament split between Skoglund Center and Carleton's West Gymnasium. After two other tournaments, St. Olaf begins its conference schedule with a Sept. 17 match at defending MIAC champion St. Thomas.

St. Thomas

Coach: Thanh Pham
Career Record: 131-39 (5 seasons)

2007 Finish: 1st/(11-0 MIAC, 28-5 overall)

St. Thomas Season Preview
Can the St. Thomas volleyball team take the next step?
Coach Thanh Pham saw his 2007 Tommies come within two points of a trip to the eight-team national tournament. St. Thomas' five-game loss in the regional final to UW-Whitewater looked even better seven days later when the Warhawks lost a 15-13 decision to Washington (Mo.) in the deciding fifth game of the NCAA championship match.
UST's 28-5 final record included a 11-0 mark vs. conference opponents. The Tommies were ranked eighth nationally and have been in the AVCA top-25 rankings 35 consecutive polls.
Pham returns four starters -- led by senior All-American Katie McCaffrey and sophomore setter Emily Foster -- plus at least five others with varsity experience. UST also has Division I transfer Lauren Wagner, a 5-11 sophomore who starred at Cretin-Derham Hall, leading another promising recruiting class.
St. Thomas will look to reach the NCAA tournament for the fourth year in a row. In the conference, UST's prime challenges are expected to again include Concordia-Moorhead, Bethel, Carleton and St. Ben's. In the last eight seasons, St. Thomas volleyball teams have compiled a 225-76 record, with five MIAC regular-season championships. The Tommies have had seven All-Americans in the last six seasons.
The Tommies got a jump start to their fall camp with a nine-day trip to Italy last June. UST played two exhibition matches on the first overseas trip in the program's history.
St. Thomas starts its season with an Aug. 29-30 trip to play in the LaCrosse Invitational. The Toms also have weekend tournaments at Augsburg, Trinity (Tex.) and at Simpson (Iowa), and will play host to the Iowa-Minnesota Border Battle. UST's conference opener is Sept. 17 at home vs. St. Olaf.