

2009 MIAC Volleyball Season Preview

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St. Paul, Minn. – The Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC) has proven to be one of the strongest volleyball conferences in the nation and 2009 should be no exception as four teams enter the season ranked in the American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) Preseason Top 25. Saint Benedict (tied for 10th), St. Thomas (tied for 10th), Concordia (17th), and Gustavus (21st) are the four MIAC teams ranked in the national poll and are the first four teams ranked in the 2009 MIAC Preseason Coaches' Poll.

In 2008, Saint Benedict marched all the way to the NCAA Division III Elite Eight without a single senior on the Blazer roster. A talented senior class that includes setter Beth Hanson, outside hitter Emma Jaynes, libero Andrea Millerbernd, and middle hitter Candace Bartels will lead the Blazers in 2009.

Two-time reigning MIAC Champion St. Thomas returns junior All-American setter Emily Foster and only one senior in outside hitter Kyle Crotty. The Tommies will be playing all their home contests in 2009 at Concordia-St. Paul's Gangelhoff Center as a new facility is being constructed on the St. Thomas campus.

Concordia has made the NCAA Tournament for six straight seasons and has been ranked in the national top 25 poll for 50 consecutive weeks. Dana Werners is the only junior or senior on a Cobber roster that features talented sophomore Jenna Green, Katie Vohnoutka, and Amy Sykora.

Gustavus has hopes of another strong season as the Gusties return 11 letterwinners from a 2008 squad that went 26-5, finished second in the MIAC, and advanced to the NCAA Tournament. Gustavus' top four hitters from last season, Meghan Gehring, Olivia Warren, Angela Ahrendt, and Nicki Ainsworth all return.

St. Olaf head coach Cindy Book will look to add on to her 600 plus career wins with a talented roster in 2009. Junior setter Kelly Prunty and outside hitter Kim Smisek have both been named to the All-MIAC team in their careers and will look to lead the Oles.

Saint Mary's looks to build upon the success they experienced last season when they finished 19-12 and advanced to the MIAC Playoff Semifinals. Virtually the entire Cardinal line-up returns with All-MIAC selection Jessica Mate and All-MIAC Playoff Team pick Amy Kujak leading the way.

After missing the MIAC Playoffs for the first time in six seasons, a strong core of returners and a promising recruiting class will look to bring Carleton back to the postseason. Senior middle hitter Annie Eckhoff, right side attacker Sarah Halls, and libero Laura Barsness will lead Carleton in 2009.

A successful 2008 season has Augsburg hopeful for continued improvement this season. The Auggies feature a talented roster that includes senior Barbara Simmons, Shanna Reed, Dani Tanaka and leading attacker junior Katie Christensen.

St. Catherine looks to break into the upper half of the conference standings led by a dynamic pair of middle hitters. Senior Maria Hoffman, a two-time All-MIAC performer, and junior Megan Ahlbrecht will anchor the Wildcats at the net.

A young Bethel team gained a great deal of experience in 2008 and the Royals hope that translates to increased victories in 2009. Providing leadership for Bethel will be seniors Kelly Otto and Bethany Shearer and juniors Betsy Naatjes and Hannah Parks.

Hamline will look to rebound in 2009 and make it back to the MIAC Playoffs as they did in 2007. Senior captain Tasha Simmons, a former MIAC Rookie of the Year and All-Conference pick, will be a key playmaker and leader for the Pipers.

Macalester is optimistic about the 2009 season as the Scots look to bring head coach Stephanie Schleuder her 700th collegiate victory. Junior Majra Mucic, sophomore Taylor Tinkham and four-year starters Erin Cusac and Marie Godwin return to a roster that only lost one player from last year.

2009 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. Saint Benedict (6)
2. St. Thomas (4)
3. Concordia (2)
4. Gustavus
5. St. Olaf
6. Saint Mary's
7. Carleton
8. Augsburg
9. St. Catherine
10. Bethel
11. Hamline
12. Macalester

2009 MIAC Playoffs Dates (Top Six Teams): Quarterfinals (Tuesday, November 3); Semifinals (Thursday, November 5); Finals (Saturday, November 7).

| [2009 MIAC Schedule](#) | [2008 MIAC Statistics](#) | [MIAC Recordbook](#) | [MIAC Archives](#) |



Augsburg

Coach: Jessica Rinehart

Career Record: 47-68 (4 seasons at Augsburg)

2008 Finish: Tied 6th (5-6 MIAC, 17-12 overall)

Augsburg Season Preview

After missing out on the MIAC playoffs a year ago on tiebreaking criteria, the Augsburg College volleyball team is determined to claim a playoff spot in 2009. Last year's squad finished 17-12 overall, tying the most victories for an Auggie volleyball team since 1998 (17-11 overall, 6-5 MIAC) and marking the Auggies' fourth consecutive season with an improved win-loss record.

Augsburg was able to accomplish numerous goals in 2008, and the Auggies can't help but feel optimistic for the upcoming season. A year ago, Augsburg claimed four consecutive five-set victories over MIAC opponents, qualified for the MIAC-IIAC Border Battle for the first time in school history, and claimed a thrilling five-set victory over conference rival St. Olaf, snapping a 31-match losing streak to the Oles which dated to Sept. 25, 1989.

"We're extremely excited to enter this season. We've been waiting for this day since the conclusion of our '08 season," said head coach Jessica Rinehart, entering her fifth season at Augsburg. "While we were extremely happy with last year's accomplishments, not making playoffs left us unfulfilled and hungry for more. I have no doubt that this group will reach its full potential and push to grab a playoff spot. This is collectively the most committed, hardworking and focused group of athletes to pass through the volleyball program since I've been here."

The Auggies will be returning solid experience in its upperclassmen and has one of its most talented and tallest recruiting classes in the past few years. Blocking will be one of the key strengths for the Auggies this season. With added height and experience, Rinehart is predicting that Augsburg will challenge opposing hitters and will stop more balls at the net.

Barbara Simmons (SR, Minneapolis, Minn./South HS) returns to anchor the Auggie block. Simmons finished third in the MIAC in blocking last season, averaging 1.09 blocks per-set in conference games. Transfer Erin Jugasek (JR, Big Lake, Minn.) is expected to team up with Simmons from the right side to create a strong block for the Auggies. Jugasek, who helped lead her Central Lakes College squad to the NJCAA Division III national championship in 2007, is the school record holder for blocks in a single season and blocks in a career at Big Lake High School. In addition, first-year Amanda Unze (FR, Chaska, Minn.) is expected to help set-up the wall in either the right side or middle position.

Guiding the Auggie offense will be Shanna Reed (SR, Eagan, Minn./Holy Angels HS), who will be entering her fourth year as the team's primary setter. Reed has great court presence, leadership and runs a consistent offense, Rinehart said. She led the team in assists in 2008 with an 8.73 assist per-set average and she currently ranks third on the school's all-time assists list with 2,225. Assuming the other setting responsibilities will be Denielle Johnson (JR, Blaine, Minn./Spring Lake Park HS).

Offensively, the Auggies will have a balanced attack. Katie Christensen (JR, North Mankato, Minn./Mankato West HS) returns as the Auggies' leading attacker. Christensen was second on the team in kills in 2008, collecting 249 (2.44 kills per-set). In addition to their blocking abilities, Jugasek, Unze and Simmons will also be looked to contribute to the Auggies offense. Simmons finished with 179 kills a season ago and will be counted on to contribute in 2009.

Defensively, Augsburg will be anchored by four-year starter Dani Tanaka (SR, Bloomington, Minn. / Jefferson HS). Tanaka led the team in digs in overall matches last season with a 5.02 digs per-set average and ranked fifth in the MIAC in conference matches-only with a 4.83 digs per-set average. Tanaka is currently ranked ninth on the school's all-time digs list with 1,026 and is on pace to move into the school's top five.

[Complete Augsburg Season Preview](#)



Bethel

Coach: Gretchen Hunt

Career Record: 145-107 (8 seasons)

2008 Finish: Tied 10th (2-9 MIAC, 9-18 overall)

Bethel Season Preview

After a 2008 season which included ten on the varsity roster in only their first or second season, it is tempting to believe that one more year of experience would be enough to get the young Royals back on the winning track. However, head coach Gretchen Hunt and her players did not just wait for time to change things back to their winning ways; they took matters into their own hands.

The change starts with the returning athletes and their preparation for this season. Leading the way have been captains Kelly Otto (Sr., Plymouth, Minn.), who had the fifth best hitting percentage in the MIAC last season, Bethany Shearer (Sr., Prior Lake, Minn.), Betsy Naatjes (Jr., Sioux Falls, S.D.), along with outside hitter Hannah Parks (Jr., Wayzata, Minn). Other returning athletes include Brianna Falck (Jr., DeForest, Wis.), as well as Kate Smith (So., Arden Hills, Minn.), and Nicole Wriedt (So., Hartland, Wis.), who had 10 or more points eight games in a row, including a 23-point effort late in the season.

Another change will come from a recruiting class that will immediately bring experience and depth at key positions. Defensive specialist Val Smith (Fr., Alexandria, Minn.) brings a wealth of elite level club experience and athleticism. The other top recruits will be pushing each other at the middle blocker position. Caitie Helle (Fr., Onamia, Minn.) and Amy Werner (Fr., Three Lakes, Wis.) both bring an incredible athleticism and work ethic. Helle was named to the Class A All-State Honorable Mention team, and she was also selected to participate in the Minnesota Volleyball Coaches Association's High School All-Star match as one of the top seniors in the state. Werner is a three-sport who also found time to play for the very competitive Northern Pride volleyball club, which won the North Country Region's President's Day Festival in their age category in 2009.

Other incoming athletes include defensive specialist Shannyn Rosendahl (Fr., Andover, Minn.), who was the starting libero for Andover, a qualifier for the Class AAA State Tournament, outside hitter Allie Strubel (Fr., Chaska, Minn.), setter Samma Fallgren (Fr., Becker, Minn.), and middle blocker Ellee Owen (Fr., Brooklyn Park, Minn.).

In addition to the new players, there will also be three brand new members on the coaching staff. All of the new staff members were very successful former collegiate players, who also have a great deal of experience coaching.

[Complete Bethel Season Preview](#)



Carleton
Coach: Heidi Jaynes
Career Record: 150-113 (10 seasons)
2008 Finish: Tied 6th (5-6 MIAC, 11-14 overall)

Carleton Season Preview

After missing the playoffs last fall (due to the third tiebreaker) for the first time in six seasons, the 2009 Carleton College volleyball team pairs five rookies with a solid corps of returners in hopes of making it back to the postseason.

This year's squad will lean heavily on ability and leadership of its three seniors: middle hitter Annie Eckhoff (Northfield, Minn.); right side attacker Sarah Halls (Edina, Minn.); and libero Laura Barsness (Prior Lake, Minn./Lakeville North).

Eckhoff earned a spot on the AVCA All-Region Team in 2007 and was named AVCA All-American Honorable Mention, becoming the fifth Carleton player since 2004 to receive All-American distinction. She led the team in blocks last season and was second in kills. Halls got her first major taste of game action last fall, participating in 22 matches and ranking second on the team in hitting at .228. Barsness, the MIAC's tri-defensive player of the year in 2007, ranks fourth all-time for the Knights with career 1,390 digs.

The graduation of outside hitter Megan La Chapelle and All-MIAC middle hitter Sarah Kunelius opened two spots in the starting lineup.

Juniors Kelly Lovett (Portland, Ore./Lincoln) and Kyla Walter (Aspen, Colo.) were major factors in the Knights rotation last year and will have opportunities to increase their roles in 2009. Lovett, an All-American on Carleton's track and field team, was fourth in kills last season. After being hampered by an injury early in the year, Walter was second on the team in kills over the season's final three weeks.

Junior Beth Jarrett (Mounds View, Minn./Irondale) and sophomore Erin Anderson (Bloomington, Minn./Kennedy) shared setting duties a year ago. Jarrett averaged 6.79 assists per set while Anderson accumulated 2.57 assists and a team-best 31 service aces. The pair will be pushed for court time this fall by a pair of rookie setters with impressive résumés.

Morgan Jones (Menlo Park, Calif./Castilleja School) guided her high school team to the California state championship in 2008 and was tabbed for the All-State Tournament Team. Hannah Folz (Evanston, Ill.) was an honorable mention all-state pick after guiding Evanston Township High School to fifth-place finish at state tournament.

Three rookie attackers join the Knights' roster for 2009: Jessa Youso (Virginia, Minn.); Elissa Walter (Aspen, Colo.); and Sarah Nielsen (Altoona, Wis.)

Youso was an all-conference and/or all-state performer in volleyball, basketball, and track and field while at Virginia High School. Elissa Walter, an all-state honorable mention hitter for Aspen High School, is the sister of Carleton junior Kyla Walter. Nielsen was an all-conference performer and All-Midwest selection.

Three other returners round out the Carleton roster. Defensive specialist Maddy Lenhard (Jr./Eden Prairie, Minn.) appeared in 18 matches last fall, making her mark as one of the top servers in the conference. Both Sam Baker (Jr./Cranford, N.J./Oak Knoll School) and Ailsa McCulloch (So./Woodside, Calif./Crystal Springs Uplands) made their collegiate debuts last season.

[Complete Carleton Season Preview](#)



Concordia

Coach: Tim Mosser

Career Record: 308-105 (16 seasons)

2008 Finish: 4th (8-3 MIAC, 22-6 overall)

Concordia Season Preview

At some point in time you would think Concordia head coach Tim Mosser would stop trying to play the game "Can You Top This?" After all, the Cobbers have been to the NCAA Tournament for six straight seasons and have been ranked in the top 25 of the nation for over 50 consecutive weeks. Both streaks are currently the longest in the MIAC and their consecutive weeks of being ranked in the nation is an MIAC volleyball record. Concordia is also coming off their best run in the national tournament as the team advanced to the NCAA Regional Final in 2008 for the first time in program history. After losing a pair of All-Region players to graduation you would think Mosser would be content to sit back and continue the trend of getting to the postseason and staying at the top of the MIAC. Guess again. Mosser states this year's team goal with purpose when he says, "we want to get to the Elite Eight."

In order to accomplish that lofty task, Concordia will have to count on a very young crew stepping up their play. The Cobbers enter 2009 with only one junior or senior on the team. Senior Dana Wermers (Rapid City, S.D./Stevens HS) is the lone player on the team with more than one season of collegiate experience. Last year Wermers was fourth on the team in kills but her biggest role for 2009 will come in the form of leadership and helping the youngsters avoid the ups and downs of the MIAC season.

Wermers will not be the only returning player who has pressure-match experience. Sophomores Jenna Green (Dilworth, Minn./D-G-F HS and Katie Vohnoutka (Eden Prairie, Minn.) led the team in kills and points in 2008. Green was named the league's Rookie of the Year and Vohnoutka had at least 10 kills in seven of the team's 10 matches including all three NCAA Tournament matches. The two will be a dominant force at the net and carry on the tradition of outstanding Cobber hitters. After those three, Concordia will rely on other sophomores and a talented group of freshmen to help with the attack in 2009.

Leading the Cobber offense from the setter position will be left up to sophomore Amy Sykora (Rapid City, S.D./Stevens HS) and freshman Danelle Loomis (Clara City, Minn./MACCRAY HS). Sykora led the team with 593 assists last year and was named the tournament MVP of the Colorado College Invite. Loomis is a highly decorated first-year player who was a Minnesota All-State player in 2008.

Loomis is one of 11 freshmen on this year's roster. Mosser is excited about the potential of this crew and calls the last two recruiting classes his best back-to-back groups in recent memory.

Perhaps the biggest role to fill will come from the graduation of libero Anna Tinkham. Tinkham was the vocal leader for the Cobbers last season and earned All-Region honors for her performance. If Mosser can find someone to fill Tinkham's shoes on the defensive side of the net, then Concordia's lofty goals for 2009 could well be within reach.

[Complete Concordia Season Preview](#)



Gustavus

Coach: Kari Eckheart

Career Record: 195-146 (12 seasons)

2008 Finish: Tied 2nd (9-2 MIAC, 26-5 overall)

Gustavus Season Preview

Gustavus Head Coach Kari Eckheart is excited about the upcoming volleyball season as the Gusties return 11 letterwinners from a squad that finished 26-5 overall, and placed second in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference with a 9-2 record last season. The Gusties are ranked 21st in the American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) Division III Pre-Season Top 25 Poll.

Gustavus looks to be strong offensively this season as the team returns its top four hitters from a squad that was second in the MIAC in kills per game at 13.24 and in hitting percentage at .201 a year ago. Middle hitter Meghan Gehring (Sr., Eau Claire, Wis.) (321 kills), outside hitter Olivia Warren (So., Goodhue, Minn.) (308 kills), middle hitter Angela Ahrendt (So., Shoreview, Minn.) (270 kills), and right side hitter Nicki Ainsworth (Jr., Eden Prairie, Minn.) (237 kills), give the squad significant experience on the attack. The one question mark for the offense will be at the setter position where four-year starter and all-conference honoree Bridget Burtzel has graduated. The Gusties will look to junior Samantha Broderius (Hector, Minn.) and sophomore Malea Noennig (Norwood Young America, Minn.) to step in and run the Gustie offense.

The Gusties, who were one of the top defensive squads in the MIAC last year, look to be solid again this season as four of their top five blockers return. That group includes Gehring, who paced the team with 136 blocks, Ahrendt who turned away 105 shots, and Ainsworth and Warren who registered 45 and 22 blocks, respectively. The question mark on the defensive side will be in the back row as three-time MIAC Defensive Player of the Year Emily Klein (664 digs), Burtzel, and defensive specialist Andrea Smilanich (218 digs) have all graduated. The cupboard is not bare however, as three players who registered over 200 digs a year ago, return. Ainsworth recorded 295 digs, followed by Olivia Warren with 218, and Jenny Ewert (Jr., St. James, Minn.) with 217.

Coach Kari Eckheart's squad will definitely have a new look in 2009 with the loss of All-Region performers Klein and Burtzel, and four-year letterwinners Britta Bolm and Andrea Smilanich, but there is enough talent in the program for the Gusties to be competitive once again. Senior captains Gehring and Tara Kramer (Hayfield, Minn.) will look to fill the leadership role, while a solid group of underclassmen including juniors Ainsworth, Broderius, Ewert, and Janey Helland (Mapleton, Minn.), and sophomores Ahrendt, Warren, Katie Ness (Excelsior, Minn.), Abby Roff (Plymouth), and Noennig will need to take their games to a new level after gaining valuable experience last year.



Hamline
Coach: Lynette Bernardy
Career Record: 33-22 (2 seasons)
2008 Finish: 9th (4-7 MIAC, 16-11 overall)

Hamline Season Preview

Head coach Lynette Bernardy enters her third season at the helm of the Pipers looking to bring her team back to the MIAC playoffs, where they finished at the end of her first season in charge. Bernardy will have to do so after the loss of 2008 all-MIAC players Amanda Booth and Emily Amici due to graduation. Several key players return from the last two years, including many with playoff experience who will be expected to step up to fill leadership roles.

Senior captain Tasha Simmons (Eagan, Minn.) will be expected to fill in for the loss of Booth in the front row – both in kills and leadership. Simmons was the MIAC rookie of the year during her first-year campaign and followed that with an all-conference season her second year. Bernardy expects her to be a key playmaker for the Pipers as Simmons looks to make her final season on the court a memorable one.

Preparing for an explosive senior campaign is Anita Rojas (Valle Del Cauca, Colombia), who transferred to Hamline before her junior season. After overcoming injury, Rojas came on strong for the Pipers at the end of the 2008 season. With a full year of experience with the Pipers and coming in to the start of the season healthy, she will look to pick up where she left off.

Setter Jackie Kelly (Jr., Blaine, Minn.) will once again be relied upon to quarterback the Piper attack and serve as a floor captain. Kelly comes into the 2009 season with an elevated level of confidence and control on the court after two complete seasons in that role. Bernardy expects her game to reach another level in her junior season.

Kelly's classmate Heidi Larsen (Andover, Minn.) returns as libero and is one of the strongest passers the Pipers have on the court. Bernardy expects Larsen to continue to provide solid back row play and come up with tough digs in key situations for the Pipers.

A third senior returns to the court with a great deal of match experience in defensive specialist and captain Jenni Burns (LeSueur, Minn.). Burns played in all 27 matches for the Pipers last season.

Bernardy brings in strong new players to help support the front row in Lauren Fisher (Fy., Tacoma, Wash.), Heather Byl (Fy., Amery, Wis.), Danielle Bennett-Curry (Fy., Minneapolis, Minn.) and Aisha Baker (Minnetonka, Minn.). Fisher will strengthen the Piper block, while Bennett-Curry, Byl and Baker bring an offensive punch to support returners Simmons and Rojas.

Byl and Bennett-Curry are strong players on the court and will challenge the returning players. Byl will see time on the outside while Bennett is an athletic player who is strong in both the front and back row.

Alexandra Anderson (Fy., Minneapolis, Minn.) joins the Pipers as a sophomore academically after sitting out the 2008 season. She will add depth in to the Piper roster as a middle blocker.

With a young roster, Bernardy expects her team to rely on their strong defense and scrappy play to make a mark in the MIAC this season. Her team will also have to use the serve as an offensive weapon to take control of points early and keep opposing defenses off-balance. If those game plans play out for the Pipers, Bernardy hopes to return the team to the MIAC playoffs for the second time in her tenure and the third in four years.

[Complete Hamline Season Preview](#)

Macalester



Coach: Stephanie Schleuder
Career Record: 138-164 (11 seasons at Macalester)

2008 Finish: 12th (0-11 MIAC, 4-24 overall)

Macalester Season Preview

The Macalester Scots are optimistic that 2009 will see the beginning of a significant rebuilding process. With their fourth victory this fall, the Scots will present Stephanie Schleuder with her 700th collegiate head coaching win.

The Scots lose leading hitter Sonia Muzikarova to graduation. Everyone else, however, returns, and six frosh join the program with expectations of playing major roles right away. The impact of this first-year class will largely determine what kind of conference record the Scots can compile.

Majra Mucic (Jr., Zenica, Bosnia / St. Louis Park – Minn.) led the Scots last fall with a .249 hitting percentage and was second on the team with 0.63 blockers per set. Taylor Tinkham (So., St. Louis Park, Minn.) also returns at the net after providing the team with 1.41 kills per set and .195 hitting percentage. She led the squad with 0.69 blocks a set.

Erin Cusac (Sr., Pine River, Minn. / Pine River-Backus) and Marie Godwin (Sr., Chaska, Minn.) are four-year starters who will be team leaders for the Scots again this year.

The season opens Sept. 1 when the Scots play host to Luther (Ia.). Macalester begins MIAC competition Sept. 16 at home against Gustavus.

[Complete Macalester Season Preview](#)



Saint Benedict

Coach: Michelle Blaeser

Career Record: 161-103 (9 seasons)

2008 Finish: Tied 2nd (9-2 MIAC, 29-7 overall)

Saint Benedict Season Preview

The College of Saint Benedict volleyball team has implemented the motto "Teamwork Makes the Dream Work." With the motto in mind the Blazers have their eyes set directly on an MIAC championship and a deep run into the NCAA Tournament, including competing for the national championship.

Without a single senior last year the Blazers made their second straight NCAA tournament appearance. The young but experienced team advanced all the way to the Elite Eight and ended their outstanding season with a final ranking of fifth in the nation.

Michelle Blaeser returns for her 10th season as head coach and will look to add to her 161-103 career record. Blaeser brings in a veteran team that has a strong core of nine returning players. All nine returning athletes played a role in the Blazers national rankings of 15th in kills per game (12.8), 44th in assists per game (11.2) and 31st in winning percentage (.806).

Once again Saint Benedict will lean on the leadership of senior captains Beth Hanson (setter), Emma Jaynes (outside hitter), Andrea Millerbernd (libero) and Candace Bartels (middle hitter). Hanson had another excellent year for CSB earning All-MIAC, All-Region Honorable Mention and team MVP honors. Hanson also broke her own single season assist record (1,439) and is currently in second place in career double-doubles (61) and assists (3,938). Jaynes surpassed the 1,000 kill milestone received All-American Second Team, All-Region, All-MIAC, CoSida All-Region, NCAA Central Region Tournament MVP and team co-offensive and defensive player of the year honors. Jaynes also broke the career double-double record (63), the career digs mark (1464) and is currently in fifth place in career kills (1,184). Millerbernd, who was named the team's co-offensive and co-defensive player of the year also moved in to fifth place in single-season kills (508). Bartels, who recorded 106 blocks last season received the team's Coaches Award, and will be counted on again this year to make an impact at the middle hitter position. Saint Benedict will count on the quartet of seniors to provide guidance on their way to accomplishing their goals.

Other returning athletes for the Blazers include junior Calleigh Brown (middle blocker), junior Kayli Schumacher (right side), junior Amber Wortz (right side), sophomore Chelsie Sobieck (outside hitter) and sophomore Alex Lenzen (libero). Brown will continue to make her presence felt close to the net, where she led the team with 117 blocks last season. Schumacher recorded 241 kills last season along with 67 blocks and Wortz led the Blazers with 53 service aces. Sobieck, who was named to the Battle of the Borders All-Tournament team, had an exceptional first-year season in which she gained valuable experience and recorded 374 kills. Lenzen also had an excellent first-year for the blazers, playing in 129 games will be counted on to continue her success at the libero position.

With the terrific leadership and experience that the Blazers return, an MIAC championship and a third straight NCAA Division III Tournament bid are within reach.

[Complete Saint Benedict Season Preview](#)



St. Catherine

Coach: Nicole Hess

Career Record: 39-134 (6 seasons)

2008 Finish: Tied 10th (2-9 MIAC, 12-17 overall)

St. Catherine Season Preview

During the 2008 season the St. Kate's volleyball team just missed out on collecting a handful of conference wins that could have changed the direction of their entire season. The 2009 team hopes those experiences will push them to an even higher level in the MIAC.

If the Wildcats are to turn in an even stronger performance they will once again be looking at their pair of outstanding middle hitters to lead the attack. Senior Maria Hoffman, who has been team MVP the past three seasons and has earned MIAC All-Conference honors each of the past two seasons, needs only 132 more kills to reach the illustrious 1,000 kill mark for her career.

Joining Hoffman upfront will be rapidly emerging junior Megan Ahlbrecht. Last season Ahlbrecht broke Hoffman's single season kills record with 340 while finishing fourth in the conference with a 3.15 kills per game average.

Joining Hoffman and Ahlbrecht along the front row will be sophomores Kayla Sis and Mallory Fultz, first year athletes Stephanie Meschke, Marie O'Neil and Brittnei Wangerin. Also providing MIAC playoff experience, depth and talent to the front row will be transfer student Racquel Reker.

With the graduation of Whitney Sparby, the Wildcats will be looking for a new setter for the first time in four years. Fortunately Coach Hess has two players with good experience that will vie for the starting position. Sophomore Katie Ellis picked up invaluable experience during her freshman season under Sparby. Meanwhile, first year Nina Lindquist joins the team after an impressive high school career. Lindquist was a four-time state meet participant at St. Cloud Cathedral. She was also named to the 2008 Minnesota All-State Tournament Team and was the West Central Conference MVP setter three years running.

Patrolling the back row for the Wildcats will be a collection of student-athletes with MIAC experience. Included in that group is the energetic and athletic team libero Nicole Neumann and sophomore defensive specialist Callie Teigen, who finished 5th in the conference in service aces and led the Wildcats with 427 digs last season.

The Wildcats open their 2009 campaign by hosting a pair of home matches on September first. Then after travelling to three tournaments, the Wildcats settle into conference play on September 23rd when they play the first of three straight home matches against Concordia, St. Olaf and Hamline.

[Complete St. Catherine Season Preview](#)



Saint Mary's

Coach: Mike Lester

Career Record: 195-151 (11 seasons)

2008 Finish: Tied 6th (5-6 MIAC, 19-13 overall)

Saint Mary's Season Preview

After a season that saw the Saint Mary's University volleyball team post a sixth-place finish in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference regular-season standings, earn an MIAC Tournament berth — not to mention a first-round conference tournament win over Saint Benedict — and rack up a 19-12 overall record, it would seem logical that the Cardinals spent the summer basking in the glow of their 2008 successes, right?

Wrong.

In fact, according to SMU head coach Mike Lester, two weeks after their second-round tournament loss to Gustavus, the Cardinals had already erased 2008 from their memory banks.

Their focus was already crystal clear — what to do for an encore in 2009.

"Last year was a great year," said Lester, whose team's 19 wins were the most by a Cardinal volleyball squad since SMU went 21-10 in 2004, which, ironically, was also the last time SMU had qualified for the MIAC Tournament. "Everyone was excited about making the conference tournament — but they weren't satisfied with just getting there, they wanted to prove they belonged. I think we proved by our performance that we deserved to be there, and that experience left everyone with a good taste in their mouth."

And left the Cardinals hungry for more.

With virtually his entire lineup back, including First-Team All-MIAC selection Jessica Mate (St. Charles, Ill.) and MIAC All-Tournament pick Amy Kujak (River Falls, Wis.), Lester has a pretty good idea what that answer could be — but he's not about to take anything for granted.

"As nice as it was to qualify for the conference tournament last year, we have to be careful to keep everything in perspective — a win by someone else in the last match of the season and we not only would not have been in the (conference) tournament, but we would have finished eighth," said Lester, whose team finished in a sixth-place tie with Carleton and Augsburg, and earned the final playoff berth via the second tiebreaker. Since all three teams were 1-1 in head-to-head competition — Augsburg beat SMU, SMU beat Carleton and Carleton beat Augsburg — the next tiebreaker was "game record percentage during matches between all tied teams." Saint Mary's was 5-3 (3-0 vs. Carleton, 2-3 vs. Augsburg); Carleton was 3-3 (3-0 vs. Augsburg, 0-3 vs. SMU) and Augsburg was 3-5 (3-2 vs. SMU, 0-3 vs. Carleton).

"There's no question in my mind we have the talent and the ability to be considered among the top teams in the conference this season — but we are going to have to be at our very best day-in and day-out in order to achieve that level of success."



St. Olaf

Coach: Cindy Book

Career Record: 620-301 (27 seasons)

2008 Finish: 5th (6-5 MIAC, 21-12 overall)

St. Olaf Season Preview

The St. Olaf volleyball team enters 2009 with a balanced roster stocked with quality returners and three first year attackers that head coach Cindy Book, in her 17th season leading the Oles, hopes can lead her team to the NCAA's.

Book eclipsed 600 career wins in the Oles' 21-12 2008 season and the team's 2009 roster brings back two juniors – setter Kelly Prunty and outside hitter Kim Smisek -- that could lead the squad to another 20-win campaign. Prunty was one of the Oles' two All-MIAC honorees, with the graduated Jess Levin, after finishing third in the MIAC in set assists.

One of Prunty's main recipient's has been, and will be, Smisek. The 6-1 Smisek was All-MIAC as a first year and was second in the league in kills last year (461). She was one of the steadiest hitters in the conference collecting at least 10 kills in all but six matches and had at least 20 five times.

First year Katie Wolfram (Woodinville, Wash./Bear Creek), a two-time all-state pick, will play the other outside spot. Francis Xin, who was solid when she played during an injury-plagued first season, could play outside if needed. Xin will start the season playing defensive specialist.

Aside from Xin, seniors Alyssa Williams and Janet Sully and sophomores Katie McDonald and Kristin Boyum will compete for defensive specialist spots. Williams was the team's primary libero in 2008 and has led the team in digs in each of the last three seasons. Her 537 last year rank ninth all-time. Sully has spent time as the team's libero in her career and had 261 digs last season. McDonald played in 26 matches as a serving specialist while Boyum saw action in 19 matches.

Senior Paige Olson will return to the middle this fall. Olson has a career-best .211 last season and has experience on her side (81 matches, 313 games in three seasons). With the departure of Levin, first year Maddy Kreykes (Ann Arbor, Mich./Pioneer) will get the opportunity to play early and often at the other middle spot.

The right side will likely be patrolled by first year Melissa Burch (Lawrence, Kan./Free State), an all-area selection as a high school senior. Alise Carlson will also compete for time in the middle and right.

The team also brings back reserve setter Anna Meneely, who appeared in five matches in her first season last fall.

The Oles open the season with a non-conference game at MIAC foe Gustavus Adolphus College on Sept. 1 before playing in a pair of tournaments on Sept. 4-5 and Sept. 11-12. St. Olaf opens the MIAC schedule on Sept. 16 with a home match against defending MIAC champion St. Thomas.

[Complete St. Olaf Season Preview](#)



St. Thomas

Coach: Thanh Pham

Career Record: 159-42 (6 seasons)

2008 Finish: 1st (11-0 MIAC, 28-3 overall)

St. Thomas Season Preview

As some things change, other things stay the same. The 2009 Tommie volleyball team is banking on that theme this fall as it looks to remain among the national contenders and conference elite.

Despite some off-court challenges and some key graduation losses, St. Thomas will look to contend for another MIAC title in 2009.

With construction underway for UST's Anderson Athletic and Recreation Building, the Tommies will play 2009 home matches at Concordia University's Gangelhoff Center and practice across campus at McCarthy Gym. The Tommies said goodbye to Schoenecker Arena, where they compiled a 39-5 record over the last four seasons.

Three key contributors from last year's 28-3 Tommie team graduated -- two-time All-American Katie McCaffrey (Career: 1,200 kills, 500 blocks, .340 attack percentage); starting libero Katie Kremer (2,555 career digs), and hitter DeJurnett Prioleau. The lone senior on this year's team will be Kiley Crotty.

Despite the new digs -- and new diggers -- Coach Thanh Pham hopes the Tommies have enough depth (17 returners) and newcomer talent to again be a force in the conference and region.

UST is ranked 10th in the 2009 Division III preseason poll by the American Volleyball Coaches' Association (AVCA).

St. Thomas and St. Ben's share 10th place. Concordia-Moorhead (17th) and Gustavus (21st) are other ranked MIAC teams. The Wisconsin state schools have three teams ranked -- Oshkosh (fourth), Whitewater (15th) and Eau Claire (20th).

UST has made its mark on the national and conference scene in Pham's first six seasons. Pham's 79.1% win percentage (159-42 record) ranks fifth nationally among active Division III coaches. Over the last four seasons, St. Thomas has the eighth best won-loss record out of 350-plus teams in Division III. The Toms' 115-22 record since 2005 includes a 50-5 record vs. MIAC opponents.

The Toms bring a 28-match MIAC win streak into 2009 but will be pushed in their title defense. St. Ben's returns all of its players from a 29-7 team that lost in the national quarterfinal to NCAA champion Emory. Last year's region runner-up, Concordia-Moorhead, has had seven 20-win seasons in the last eight years and returns several players. Gustavus and St. Olaf are also expected to push for top-three conference finishes.

The Toms, who have an eight-match winning streak against St. Ben's, ended their season with a five-game loss to UW-LaCrosse in the 2008 NCAA playoffs. They didn't face the Blazers in either the MIAC or NCAA playoffs.

Pham returns 17 players from his varsity and JV teams, led by junior All-America setter Emily Foster (Career: 64 matches/235 sets, 2,838 assists). The Tommies are 56-8 in her two seasons as starting setter.

Three hitters who had more than 200 kills last season return in Crotty, Carlie Waibel and Alesha Nelson.

Squad newcomers include freshman MB Ann Zager, who hails from Anchorage; junior OH Katie Bonine, a transfer from Minnesota-Crookston; and freshman libero Kaitlin Wachter of Eastview, who made Pioneer Press second-team all-state.

[Complete St. Thomas Season Preview](#)