

2017 MIAC Volleyball Preview and Preseason Coaches' Poll

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[Jump to:](#) | [Poll](#) | [Storylines](#) | [Marquee Matchups](#) | [Playoffs](#) | [Record Book](#) | [Notes](#) |

BLOOMINGTON, Minn. – Gustavus Adolphus College heads into the 2017 volleyball season as the clear-cut favorites in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC) after the defending Conference Playoff champs claimed eight of a possible 11 first-place votes in the annual MIAC Volleyball Preseason Coaches' Poll.

Ranked 24th in the nation by the American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) earlier this month, the Gusties return not one, but two AVCA All-America selections in 2017. The MIAC's top setter a season ago, **Nora Holtan** helped guide Gustavus to the program's first win at the NCAA Championships since 1986. Holtan – a First Team All-American and MIAC Player of the Year as a sophomore in 2016 – led the Conference with 1,255 assists, the most in the MIAC by more than 300 last season. Meanwhile, teammate **Lauren Hanson**, who earned honorable mention All-America honors as an outside hitter in 2016, paced Gustavus with 419 kills, the most by a Gustie since 1992. Not to mention, defensive specialist **Brittany Luethmers** became the eighth player in Gustavus history to reach 1,000 career digs – a feat she managed to accomplish before the halfway point of her eligibility. The best part for Gustavus? All three are juniors.



As good as Gustavus looks on paper, there is no shortage of competition in the MIAC, as three other programs – Bethel, Augsburg and St. Thomas – also received first-place votes in the Coaches' Poll and their margins of separation are incredibly narrow.

Last year's overwhelming favorite in the Preseason Coaches' Poll, Bethel comes in at No. 2 heading into 2017. While the Royals may not have put together the type of season many expected coming off an appearance in the Elite 8, the squad did find their way into the MIAC Playoff Championship Game and was the only team in the Conference able to crack the Augsburg code in 2016. This season, the Royals return an experienced lineup; however, Bethel will be tasked with replacing All-Conference hitter Callie Sinclair and one of the finest players in program history, four-time All-Conference selection Carlee Hoppe. An All-MIAC outside hitter as a sophomore last season, Carlee's sister, **Tina Hoppe**, finished fourth in the Conference in kills (160) and third in total attacks (464). Both the younger Hoppe and junior setter **Holly Ellwanger** will look to build on impressive postseason performances that resulted in each being named to the 2016 MIAC Volleyball All-Tournament Team.

After putting together a perfect 11-0 record in regular season Conference play last fall, No. 3-ranked Augsburg is once again projected to be a top contender this season, and with good reason. Reigning MIAC Coach of the Year Jane Becker returns an experienced lineup featuring a pair of AVCA honorable mention All-Americans in **Macey Terhell** and **Taylor Linn**. Terhell became the first Auggie ever to receive an individual MIAC postseason award when she was named the Conference's Defensive Player of the Year as a sophomore last season after collecting 609 digs – including 20-plus digs in 17 matches – in 2016. Her 5.39 career digs per-set average is the most in program history. With senior middle blocker **Taylor Linn** back in the lineup as well, the Auggies boast high-level experience with well-balanced production to match. Linn has tallied 575 kills, 207 blocks, 449 digs, 42 aces and 40 assists during her 83-match tenure at Augsburg.

The No. 4-ranked St. Thomas Tommies bounced back from a disappointing 9-17 season in 2015 to finish 22-9 with an at-large berth in the NCAA Division III National Tournament last year. Some of the credit for the turnaround belongs to defensive specialist **Ellie Meyer**, who earned both MIAC and AVCA Central Region Rookie of the Year honors in her first collegiate season last year. One of just two first-year players to earn All-MIAC honors, Meyer notched 227 digs, 35 assists and 14 aces in Conference play last season. **Whitney Lloyd** will also figure to provide veteran leadership for St. Thomas. The senior middle blocker tallied 302 kills, 123 blocks and 100 digs in 31 matches last year.

As an assistant coach Jackie Kiecker helped lead Saint Mary's to four straight appearances in the MIAC Playoffs. The Cardinals aim to continue that trend in Kiecker's first season as the program's head coach. With Second Team All-American **Brandi Blattner** back in the lineup, there is a good chance of that happening for Cardinals, who were claimed the No. 5 spot in this year's Preseason Coaches' Poll. Blattner, a junior outside hitter, led the MIAC in kills (440) and kills-per-set (4.54), while adding 248 digs, 24 blocks, 19 aces and five assists last season. She also set a school record with 31 kills in a regular season matchup with Bethel last October.

Complete 2017 Preseason Coaches' Poll

Coaches voted for every team in the Conference except their own team. Points were assigned for each vote (11 for first, 10 for second, etc.) Teams are ranked in order of highest point total to lowest with vote totals listed and first-place votes shown in parentheses.

2017 MIAC Volleyball Preseason Coaches' Poll

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Institution</u>	<u>Total</u>
1.	Gustavus Adolphus (8)	115
2.	Bethel (2)	103
3.	Augsburg (1)	101
4.	St. Thomas (1)	97
5.	Saint Mary's	75
6.	Saint Benedict	70
7.	Carleton	59
8.	Concordia	52
9.	St. Catherine	39
10.	Hamline	31
11.	St. Olaf	29
12.	Macalester	21

Around the MIAC

-Carleton middle hitter **Lucy Stevens** is the first and only player in program history to receive multiple AVCA All-Region First Team and AVCA All-America honorable mention recognition. Stevens earned back-to-back All-America nods in 2015 and 2016 and has a chance for an unprecedented three in a row as a senior this season.

-**Brianna Carney** became the first Concordia freshman since 2012 to earn MIAC postseason honors when she garnered All-Conference recognition last fall. Carney led the team in kills and blocks, and ranked second in attack percentage during Conference play in her first season as a Cobber in 2016.

-Saint Benedict returns a pair of All-MIAC performers in **Megan Pekarek** and **Lauren Mathews**. Pekarek, the team's MVP a year ago, earned AVCA All-Central Region honorable mention recognition after totaling 917 assists, 199 digs and 104 kills on the year. Mathews, meanwhile, totaled 71 blocks for the season and set a career-high with 20 kills against Hamline last October.

Can't-Miss #MIACtion

-*Sept. 9, 2017: Northwestern (Minn.) at Augsburg.* A stunning defeat in the MIAC Semifinals last season prevented the Auggies from continuing on to the NCAA Division III National Tournament. Northwestern, meanwhile, finished the 2016 campaign ranked sixth in the nation. The Eagles topped the Auggies, 3-1, in last year's Augsburg Invitational Tournament, a result the defending regular season MIAC champs will aim to remedy in 2017.

-*Sept. 22, 2017: Gustavus at Bethel.* A rematch of last season's MIAC Playoff Championship Game, the late September matchup between the Gusties and Royals is definitely one to circle on the calendar. Each squad returns a pair of players from the 2016 MIAC All-Tournament Team and both programs once again anticipate playing a large role in determining this season's MIAC champion.

-*Sept. 22, 2017: Hamline at Saint Benedict.* These two teams (literally) volleyed back and forth the entire way in a dramatic five-set match in St. Joseph, Minn. last October. One can only hope for more theatrics when the Pipers return – with six seniors – in September for another showdown with Saint Ben's.

2017 MIAC Volleyball Playoffs

The 2017 MIAC Volleyball Playoffs will feature the top six teams in the Conference standings playing in a high-seed-host, single-elimination postseason tournament. The two top seeds will receive a bye to the semifinal round, while the No. 3 seed will host the No. 6 seed, and the No. 4 seed will host the No. 5 seeds during the quarterfinals, which will be held Tuesday, Oct. 31. The No. 3/6 winner will play at the No. 2 seed and the No. 4/5 winner will play at the No. 1 seed during the semifinals, which are scheduled for Thursday, Nov. 2. The championship match is set for Saturday, Nov. 4, with the two semifinal winners meeting on home court of the top remaining seed. All MIAC Volleyball Playoff matches will start at 7 p.m. The winner will receive the MIAC's automatic bid to the 2017 NCAA Division III Volleyball Tournament.

For the Record

-Reigning MIAC Player of the Year **Nora Holtan** collected 507 assists in Conference play for the Gusties last season, the fifth-highest single-season total in MIAC history. The MIAC officially began recording individual Conference statistics for volleyball in 1996. The 2017 MIAC

Volleyball Record Book is available for download [here](#).

Odds and Ends

-Former Macalester standout Sarah Graves is returning to her alma mater as the program's new head coach in 2017. Graves was a four-year starter and three-time captain for the Scots as a setter and right side hitter. She finished her career ranked third on Macalester's all-time list for block assists (218) and services aces (173).

-Longtime Southern Illinois assistant coach Todd Nelson was introduced as the new head coach at St. Catherine University last December. During his time at SIU, the Salukis posted a 101-59 record, including a 62-31 mark in Missouri Valley Conference play. The team also went to five consecutive Conference tournaments and the program's first at-large bid to the NCAA Tournament in 2015.

-Despite a 1-10 finish in Conference play, St. Olaf went 9-6 outside the MIAC in Emily Foster's first season as head coach of the Oles. Foster was a four-time All-Conference selection, three-time All-American and two-time MIAC Player of the Year during her time as a student-athlete at the University of St. Thomas.