

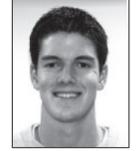
# 2005 could yield NCAA title

Head coach Jason Skoch recently had the players write down their personal goals for this season.

They all had a familiar ring: win conference, win the conference championship, return to nationals, win the national title.

There wasn't any mention of a perfect season, or improving last year's 37-1 record. The main goal is winning the last match of the season, a match that has eluded them two of the past three campaigns.

**Commentary**



**Conor Nicholl**

Winning the title is no small task. This year's version is without four seniors, including All-American outside hitter Jessica Sears and crowd favorite and incredibly successful head coach Qi Wang.

Still, with a host of returning talent and new helmsman Skoch guiding the 'Dogs, they have a great chance of fulfilling all four of their goals and winning a national championship.

The 'Dogs are ranked No. 2 in the preseason NCAA polls, but that may be too low. Sure, it's probably better not to be ranked numero uno in the preseason – they'll play the entire year with a bull's-eye on their backs – but this team is the best in the country.

University of Nebraska-Kearney is the only squad in front of the 'Dogs. Last November, Kearney entered the Final Four 40-0, but were swept 3-0 by the 36-0 Bulldogs.

This year's Lopers' version isn't as strong. They only return two-thirds of their triumvirate of Erins, as they graduated Second Team All-American Erin Arnold, while returning hitters Erin Gudmunson and Erin Brosz.

Gudmunson and Brosz are fine players, but they're not as strong as the Bulldog trio of junior outside hitter Sarah Shearman, a returning Second Team All-American, and senior All-Region middle hitters Tiffany Graham and Micaela Walter.

Defending champs Barry University is ranked No. 3 in the nation, but they have only

one of their top five scoring threats from 2004.

Still, don't expect the Bulldogs to win all of their matches. Like college football, going through a volleyball season undefeated is nearly an insurmountable task. Only one team – the University of Hawaii-Pacific in 2000 – has accomplished the task.

Plus, the purple and white have a brutal nonconference schedule, beginning the season against four teams ranked in the preseason top 12, including No. 4 Minnesota-Duluth and Wang's own No. 11 Northern Michigan.

They'll be hard-pressed to win all four, not just because of the opposing talent, but also because of the learning curve under Skoch's new system. Modifications in the lineups and ball movement might cause initial chinks in the armor.

"I have no idea how we're going to be after the first month," he said. "But I know we're going to be dang good at the end of the season."

This team should progressively get better throughout the year, which should pose trouble for the rest of the conference. The MIAA is a little weaker in 2005, as No. 7 ranked Central Missouri State University, mediocre offensively last year, graduated two of their top three attackers.

Washburn University is another perennial contender in the MIAA but graduated All-American Dani McHenry.

Pittsburg State University lost their only true scoring threat, last year's conference MVP Elizabeth Anyigor-Abitogun.

I wouldn't be surprised if the 'Dogs enter conference play with a loss or two on their ledger before running the table in conference.

It's similar to Southern California in Pac-10 college football this season. There's solid opposition, but the Skoch's crew is just way too strong to suffer a loss.

Regionals should go in the same matter, as the South Central Regional is essentially the MIAA renamed for the playoffs. The usual suspects will be Truman, CMSU, Washburn, Pitt.



Last season, the volleyball returned home from nationals to a Sunday celebration commemorating their 37-1 national runner-up finish. This year, under new coach Jason Skoch, the squad could bring a national title back to Kirksville.

Rank	School	2004 Record	Points
1	Nebraska-Kearney	40 - 1	845
2	Truman	37 - 1	803
3	Barry	34 - 1	767
4	Minnesota - Duluth	27 - 5	746
5	Cal State - San Bernardino	27 - 4	722
6	Concordia - St. Paul	32 - 3	673
7	Central Missouri State	31 - 7	614
8	Hawaii-Pacific	21 - 4	577
9	Tampa	24 - 6	573
10	Fort Hays State	31 - 5	550

Source: NCAA.com      Designed by Lindsay Koski/Index

St. and Northern Alabama, the 2003 champions.

Regionals shouldn't be a problem, though CMSU, because of their natural rivalry (think Mizzou-Kansas basketball) might prove to be a stern task.

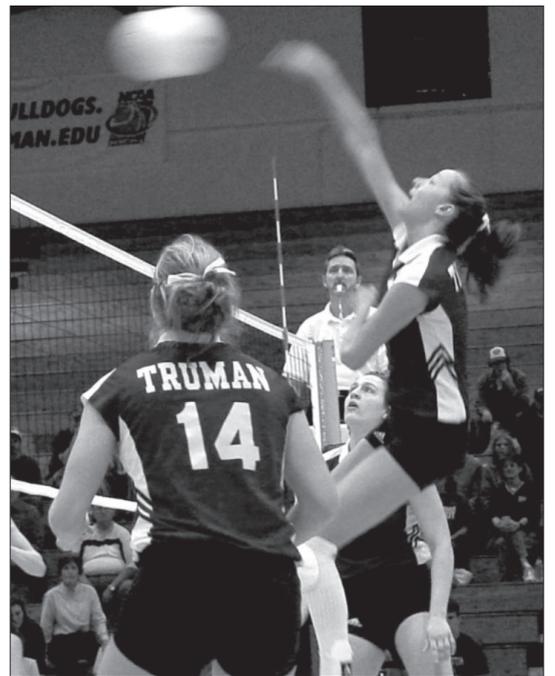
Then, it's on the Elite Eight. Expect the usual suspects involved here – Kearney, Truman,

Barry, Northern Michigan, and/or Cal-State Bernardino or the University of California-San Diego.

It's three wins and a championship from there.

Two of the past three seasons, they've only won two of those matches.

2005 is the year they capture all three.



Senior middle hitter Micaela Walter spikes the ball during one of the Bulldogs' wins against Central Missouri State last year.

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