

# 'Sky's the limit with this team'

**Six seniors return to volleyball team after 36-6 2007 campaign**

**BRENT FOSTER**  
Staff Reporter

Finding motivation should not be a problem for the volleyball team this season.

Coming off back-to-back early exits in the NCAA Tournament, the Bulldogs return six seniors and a slew of underclassmen from last season's 36-6 squad and find themselves poised for a run into December.

Senior outside hitter Eli Medina said the team seems more ready than ever for a deep postseason run.

"I'd say there is definitely a lot of pressure, but I think this year, at least for myself, I feel like our team is more prepared coming into the season," Medina said Monday. "We've only been here for one day, and I can tell you that we are more prepared than any other year that I've been here."

Besides Medina, the Bulldogs return All-Americans in senior middle blocker Allie Cherven and senior right side hitter Melissa Keck. With all of the returning seniors and

experience, the Bulldogs, who have lost one MIAA regular season game since 2005, are once again the favorites in the conference coach's poll.

Truman received five of 10 first-place votes and 93 total points. Washburn University received two first-place votes and 88 points to come in second. It is the fifth time in the last six seasons the Bulldogs have been picked to win the MIAA. Last season the 'Dogs finished 12-1 in the MIAA and won the conference tournament.

The conference appears to be just as good as last season, when five teams advanced to the NCAA Tournament. Washburn, having ended last season ranked third in the country, boasts two returning All-Americans and 6-foot-5 Div. I Texas A&M transfer Breanna Lewis.

Truman's non-conference schedule is just as daunting as the MIAA portion. The Bulldogs will take on several squads early in the season that are likely to be nationally ranked, including a match against defending national champion Concordia University-St. Paul (Minn.).

The tough schedule will provide a quick challenge for the younger Bulldog players. Skoch

said he hopes junior outside hitter Jenna Novelli, a junior college transfer, can take some of the pressure off Medina. Novelli was all-conference last season playing at L.A. Pierce Community College (Calif.).

Cherven said that having Novelli not only gives the 'Dogs another weapon at outside hitter, but will take a huge load off Medina.

"When Jenna came in it was a refreshing moment for us," Cherven said. "Eli works hard all the time and to have somebody that can even it out is good. Jenna can take over some of the games, and that will definitely be helpful."

Skoch added that having Novelli would allow Medina to step into a leadership role.

"Eli can be more of a supporting cast like she was in 2006," Skoch said. "I think Eli will become the leader and score a lot. I think she is ready for that. But we can put her with other people where she does not have to carry the load as much, and that is where it is good to help."

Skoch is entering his fourth season with the Bulldogs and has a record of 104-14 and three straight trips to the NCAA Tournament. But the team has not reached the Elite



**Junior outside hitter Jenna Novelli digs a ball during practice Wednesday at the Student Recreation Center as junior right side hitter Erin Hattey looks on. Novelli, a junior college transfer, is expected to provide a boost to the Bulldogs' offense this season.**

Eight since 2005. Even with all the success in the regular season, Skoch said he feels pressure as a coach to make sure this senior-laden team is able to reach its goals.

"I feel a little bit of pressure because I want them to go out on top and as winners because they really deserve it," Skoch said. "That's the kind of pressure I feel. I just feel we should send them off in a good way."

Skoch also said that if the team shows strong leadership skills from the beginning, good things will happen this season.

"If the girls take hold of it and take ownership of this team and motivate themselves and not make me motivate them, we'll be good," he said. "The sky's the limit with this team. It's going to be a great season."

The Bulldogs will open the season Aug. 29 in the Mis-

souri University of Science and Technology tournament in Rolla, Mo., against the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The 'Dogs will play their first three home matches at Kirksville High School while crews work to replace the floor at Pershing Arena that was damaged by flooding in July (See story pages one and 15). The first home match is a scheduled for Sept. 19 against Washburn.

## Petak set to handle primary setting duties



**Sophomore setter Ashley Petak serves during Wednesday's practice. Petak averaged 6.49 assists per game last season and was second on the team with 36 aces.**

**With Holliday departed, team turns to sophomore**

**BRENT FOSTER**  
Staff Reporter

The Bulldogs lost just one senior from last season's squad, setter Amanda Holliday. But the 'Dogs aren't expecting to miss a beat as sophomore Ashley Petak and a host of other Bulldogs look to fill the void left by Holliday.

Head coach Jason Skoch said there are areas in which the setter position will be stronger this season and areas that it will need improvement.

"With all respect to Amanda, Ashley is a great setter and runs the court a little bit different," Skoch said. "The setter that replaces Amanda, what we are losing is great defense. The setting was okay, but the defense was awesome. The two kids that are fighting for that other spot need to have that kind of tenacity. Right now they don't have it because they don't have a lot of experience."

Skoch said it will take work during practice to get the setters to commit to defense.

"Amanda put a lot of pride in her defense," Skoch said. "These girls haven't gotten to that yet. They put a lot of pride in their setting and not their defense. That's what we are working a lot on in prac-

tice already."

To illustrate the importance of setting, the five teams from the MIAA that qualified for the NCAA tournament in 2007 also finished in the top five in the conference in assists.

Petak was solid offensively last season seeing time in all 42 matches and recording 943 assists, three more than Holliday.

However, Holliday averaged nearly 0.5 more digs per game than Petak.

Holliday, who did not see much action until her senior season, finished ninth on Truman's all-time career assist list with more than 1,100.

Even with solid seasons from Holliday and Petak, the Bulldogs finished fourth in assists and seventh in digs in the MIAA.

Despite the middle-of-the-pack finish in those statistics and the loss of Holliday, Petak said she thinks the team will be fine at setter.

Junior Krysta Tholen will vie for time at setter this season after playing in 10 matches last season. Also contending for playing time at setter is incoming freshman Kylie Easlon. She had nearly 3,000 assists and 275 service aces during her high school career.

Skoch said Easlon will play this year at setter and has a good shot at taking Holliday's place in the lineup.

"I think we are really

strong right now because we have Krysta back and then Kylie coming in, and she is strong too," Petak said. "I think setting-wise we will have a really strong rotation because there is a lot of depth."

Petak said the only difference between this season and last season is that there will be someone besides Holliday sharing the setting duties with her.

"There will still be two setters on the court, but it will be different because there will be a new setter out there with me," Petak said. "But I still think we will have a really strong lineup."

The setters' main job will be getting the ball to senior middle blocker Allie Cherven and senior right side hitter Melissa Keck.

Solid setting behind Keck and Cherven helped propel both players to the top 10 in the MIAA in hitting percentage and All-American status last season.

Cherven said she won't notice much of a change from Holliday to Petak.

"I don't really prefer one or the other," Cherven said.

"They are both very good and really quick with their hands and everything. I think Ashley is going to have to step up a little as far as leadership goes, but as far as setting goes I think they were about equal."

With the added pressure of playing without Holliday, Petak is not getting ahead of herself. She said she is taking everything one step at a time.

"Everyone's final goal for the end of the season is to win nationals," Petak said.

"But we are just going to take it one game at a time and make sure that we're on the right track."

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