

## Volleyball Faces St. thomas Again, this Time In Playoffs

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EAU CLAIRE, Wis. - With two losses in the conference tourney, first-year UW-Eau Claire volleyball head coach **Kim Wudi** anticipated planning off-season workouts on Monday. Instead, she found out her team was one of five Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WIAC) schools selected to the NCAA Division III National Championships.

"Our conference is so strong," Wudi said, "and I think that the NCAA recognized that this year by selecting five teams. What a tribute to WIAC volleyball."

The 22-10 Blugolds dropped out of the Top 25 in the latest CSTV/AVCA Division III Coaches Poll after taking fourth in the WIAC Tournament. The tourney saw third-seeded Eau Claire win the first match 3-1 over sixth-seeded UW-Superior before losing 3-1 to seventh-seeded UW-Platteville and 3-2 to fourth-seeded UW-La Crosse, ranked 17th in the nation. Now Eau Claire will have to bounce back and face No. 13 St. Thomas (Minn.), which is hosting the regional. Wudi said the Blugolds have not backed down from a challenge yet this season, though.

"They have done everything that I have asked them to do, without complaints," she said. "They believe in each other and in our program. I couldn't have asked for a better group in my first year of coaching." This year, **Abby Freiborg** (Jr.-Sacred Heart, Minn./Renville County West) has been the leader of that group, notching 3.57 kills per game and 76 total service aces, both team highs. She led the conference in aces per game with 0.69. **Nikki Peterson** (Sr.-North St. Paul, Minn./North) has the second most kills per game for Eau Claire with 2.94. **Emily Haese** (Jr.-Mishicot, Wis.) has been setting them up all season, providing 12.51 assists per game. Eau Claire hits .196.

**Heather Harnell** (Sr.-Minnetonka, Minn.) totals the most digs at 4.57 per game, though Freiborg averages **4.18 per game**. **Katie Fox** (Jr.-Chippewa Falls, Wis./Chi-Hi) has knocked down 108.0 to lead in blocks. The Blugolds have faced the Tommies twice this season, going 1-1 and making the all-time record 12-7 in Eau Claire's favor. The first match this year was a 3-0 St. Thomas win with scores of 30-14, 30-24 and 30-27. However, Eau Claire got the match back later in the season with a come-from-behind win that had results of 26-30, 30-28, 12-30, 34-32 and 15-12.

"We fought back to beat St. Thomas the second time we played them," Wudi said, "so we know that if we play our best, we can do it again. St. Thomas is a great team. They are big, athletic, and they are very well coached. It will be a great first-round match." The Tommies are 26-4 this season and have rattled off six straight wins since losing to Eau Claire. Katie McCaffrey leads the offense at 3.92 kills per game. Kristin Storrs is next at an even 3.00 per game. Emily Foster feeds them the ball with her 12.76 assists per game. It all adds up to a .254 hitting percentage.

Defensively, Aly McConnell tallies the most digs per game at 5.18. Katie Kremer is not too far behind at 4.36. The wall up front is headed by McCaffrey and her 163 blocks this season. Eau Claire has gotten into the national playoffs the past two seasons, but UW-Whitewater ended the Blugolds' seasons both years in the third round. If Eau Claire wins over St. Thomas, it will face either Carleton College (Minn.) or Central College (Iowa) in the second round.

The match versus St. Thomas is on Thursday at 8:30 p.m. in St. Paul, Minn. - PH -