

2009 Volleyball Season Preview - Despite Key Losses, Blugolds Still Experience

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Posted: Wednesday, August 26, 2009 at 12:52 PM

EAU CLAIRE, Wis. (UWECBlugolds.com) - If the UW-Eau Claire volleyball team returns to the NCAA Division III post-season for a third consecutive year in 2009 under third-year coach Kim Wudi, it will be with some less well-known names and faces. Despite the loss of four key starters from last year, Wudi says the talent is definitely available to defend the Blugolds' Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference co-championship and make a return trip to the NCAA tourney. The Blugolds have gone 22-11 and 24-12 in Wudi's first two seasons since replacing long-time Blugold coach Lisa Herb. During those two years, the Blugolds have fashioned a 13-3 record in WIAC regular season play, tying for second her first year and sharing the conference title with UW-Oshkosh last year. Wudi's challenge is to replace conference player of the year and second team AVCA All-American Abby Freiborg, a leftside hitter, as well as All-Conference setter Emily Haese. Also gone is Katie Fox, a two-time honorable mention All-Conference middle hitter along with Blugold Award winner Jenna Weber. The previous year, Wudi had to fill the holes left by the departure of All-Conference middle hitter Nikki Peterson and All-Defensive player Heather Harnell. The lone holdover from two years ago becomes Lindsey Smith, a conference All-Defensive pick last season. She is one of three seniors on the team this year, all of whom will serve as team captains. The other two are defensive specialist Cassie Hunt and rightside hitter Kristen Moore, who returns from a medical redshirt after suffering a knee injury on the opening weekend of last season. Moore is one of four six-footers on the roster this year. The other three, all freshman, are Amy Bomgren from Woodbury, Minnesota; Sadie Schradle from Clayton and Serena Wagner from Eau Claire North. With 11 returning letterwinners on a 19-player roster, the Blugolds still have plenty of experience. Besides the three seniors, there are Danielle Lucia and Rachel Ver Voort, the team's newcomers of the year in 2007 and Emily Zupon, the newcomer of the year last season. Other returners looking to break into the lineup include Liz Amici, Katie Wall, Steph Peterson, Jackie Tucker and Amanda Lessner. Lessner is the heir apparent to replace Haese as the setter but will be pushed by freshmen Emily Neave and Sarah Younger. Junior Blair Murphy is a transfer from Concordia-St. Paul, the two-time defending NCAA Division II national champs, and will challenge as an outside hitter. The junior class is the largest on the roster with seven while six are freshmen. The sophomore and senior classes show just three players each. Wudi sees depth and speed, both offensively and defensively, as the team strengths. She will be looking for new players to step up as the team leaders on the court, in the classroom and in the community. Wudi and the Blugolds do have the respect of other coaches as they have been tabbed for third in the conference and No. 20 in the American Volleyball Coaches Association preseason poll. The Blugolds will face at least five or six of the preseason ranked teams, some several teams. They include UW-Oshkosh (No. 4), St. Benedict (No. 10 tie), UW-Whitewater (No. 15), Gustavus (No. 21), UW-La Crosse (No. 32) and possibly St. Thomas (No. 10 tie).

The Blugolds will not be able to ease into the 2009 campaign as they will face conference rivals UW-Stevens Point and UW-Whitewater in non-conference matches at Stevens Point September 1. The Blugolds return home to host their Labor Day Classic Sept. 4-5, facing St. Scholastica, Judson, UW-Stout and Gustavus Adolphus.