

Cougar Volleyball 2008: Game to one

There is a tremendous amount of anticipation and excitement surrounding the 2008 Washington State volleyball season. This elevated level of energy comes not only from the new coaching staff and the return of several fan-favorite veteran players, but also from the influx of outstanding new players and a promising new offense that will keep Cougar fans on their feet cheering throughout the season.

At the forefront of the excitement is the new coaching staff led by head coach Andrew Palileo. Palileo, the 11th head coach in WSU history, brings a wealth of experience and a resume filled with success in building winning programs including the program at South Dakota State. The day he arrived in Pullman he brought his staff of Associate Head Coach Brian Lamppa and Assistant Coach TeAna Tramel with him and they hit the ground running. After meeting the returning Cougar team, they conducted a few practices and then took to the road to meet and watch the incoming freshmen play. They also began their endless travel all over the country to evaluate the talent for future Cougar recruiting classes.

"Andrew Palileo is focused, ethical, passionate, experienced and goal-oriented. Andrew has proven to be a successful head coach and has demonstrated his ability to elevate programs to be nationally competitive. He will strive for excellence on and off the court while keeping a strong commitment to the wellbeing of the student-athletes. I am confident that Andrew will make every effort to provide our Cougar women with the best student-athlete experience in the country. He is a great fit for WSU Athletics and the Pullman community."

WSU Director of Athletics Jim Sterk

Familiar faces such as returning starters senior outside hitter Brittany Johnson and junior libero Kelly Hyder will join new faces including senior middle blocker Emily Rooney, a transfer from South Dakota State, and freshman setter Breann Nesselhuf to comprise the 2008 Cougar squad.

Palileo promises a style of play that will be a change from previous WSU teams; one that is built on speed and built on finesse but not necessarily built on power.

"What will change is the speed at which our offense is run. It is not a slow game," Palileo said. "It will be a different system than what the majority of Pac-10 teams are used to from WSU. In time, a lot of great teams and great players and great coaches will make adjustments to what we are doing so we have to be ready to make

adjustments to what our opponents are doing."

The motto for the 2008 WSU volleyball team is, "Game to one."

"One of the things I want to improve on this team is to be competitive on every point. We will play as if it is game point every time," Palileo said. "This is different from every point counts. We are not going to worry about scoring in fall camp and we are not going to worry about playing the game to 25 points. What we will concentrate on is how we are going to compete for every point. That is what I will try and instill in the team."

Additional new items of note for the 2008 season include the winning score dropping from 30 points to 25 points, keeping collegiate volleyball on par with international rules. Also, games will now be called sets, and a team will need to win three sets, with the fifth set, if needed, still being played to 15 points for the match win.

"The top teams were scared about mediocre teams being more able to compete," Palileo said in reference to the drop to 25 points. "A shortened set allows us to stay in the game a little longer and might give us the opportunity to steal a couple matches we don't have any business winning right now. This season we will concentrate the most on what we need to do on the court. It will be fun."

So turn on the Bohler Gym lights, pull out the bleachers, set up the net, bring out the balls and get ready for the action-packed 2008 season of Cougar volleyball.

The Setters

The setter position will be a question mark for the Cougars this season. Incoming freshman Breann Nesselhuf is inexperienced at the collegiate level and her early success will come from her ability to adapt to the up-tempo collegiate game.

"Breann she has played in a high-level club team in Colorado so she comes from a really good background. The speed at which she is playing at now could really help her in making the transition into the Pac-10," Palileo said.

Junior college transfer Renee Bordelon (North Idaho College) will provide a little more experience for WSU but without the NCAA Division I background she will also be a question mark for the Cougs.

Palileo plans to train both setters slowly during the fall camp and extend into the preseason matches, keeping the learning curve simple so Breann and Renee can

understand and achieve the necessary timing and spacing by the time the Pac-10 season comes around.

"Our offense will be generated and run at a quicker tempo so it takes precision to run this system," Palileo said. "The passes have to be a little bit more on target and can't be around the 10-foot line, they have to be anywhere between the 3- to 4-foot line consistently in order to be effective with the slides and quicker transitions in the back. In this system the setters really need to be able learn the progressions of what we try to establish first, and then the opponent's blocking scheme determines what our next progression is. Hopefully during the fall camp and the preseason portion of our schedule we will be able to teach the setters some of those things."

Palileo is familiar with Pac-10 volleyball programs, having played several while coaching at South Dakota State (including WSU) and through watching the tapes of past WSU matches. He observed Oregon and Arizona plays at a quicker tempo while the rest of the Pac-10 teams are bigger, more physical teams, who rely heavily on their outside hitters' play more than their middles.

"The middles set up everything for their outsides but they don't have to have a perfect pass in order to score points. In our system you have to have a pretty consistent passing lane to the setter in order for us to consistently run the offense we want to run," Palileo said.

The Passers

Improving ball control will be the main goal for the Cougar defensive specialists and liberos.

Returning starting libero, junior Kelly Hyder, is the school record-holder for single-season digs, having tallied 565 digs as a freshman and 524 digs last season. Her 1,089 career digs is sixth on the WSU all-time list and her 4.90 digs per game average was fourth-best in the conference in 2007. Also returning are senior letterwinners Stephanie Weishaar and Amy Small, and sophomore Faith Hutcherson. Freshman Bree Flach joins the squad as one of Palileo's first recruits.

"I felt I needed to bring in one more defensive player/libero-type athlete who could come in and help with our ball control situation," Palileo said. "If there is one thing that you need when you run a quicker-tempo offense it is better passers and better ball control. I look for Bree Flach to bring us some of that help and depth at the defensive specialist position. Kelly Hyder will continue to get better and she will be the one that has to lead us again like she has the previous two years. Hopefully we have created enough depth and we will be able to handle the ball a little bit more so we can run our offense."

The Outside Hitters

The Cougar outside hitters are going to play a bigger role this year in comparison to the past. Palileo said when WSU is running the system correctly, with the passers providing spot-on passes and the progressions being read



correctly by the setter, more one-on-one opportunities will be created between the outsides and the blockers.

Senior Brittany Johnson and junior Jackie Albright return as the hitting leaders for WSU and combined for a total of nearly six kills per game and seven points per game last season.

"Our number one goal is to help Brittany and Jackie by creating that one-on-one situation so they are not hitting against double and triple blocks," Palileo said. "Our offensive system will work if those situations are being created for the outside position. I think Jackie, Britt and Kelly Hyder will help a lot and be in our passing lanes quite a bit. Their play is going to be crucial. We are counting on them to play good all-around and have a great year. We look to improve their hitting percentage quite a bit and their ball control has to consistently be better. They have to be able to score points and we have to create those situations for them."

A pair of 6-foot, 3 inch players will join the team as freshman Meagan Ganzer and South Dakota State sophomore transfer Annie Adams put on the crimson and gray uniforms. Freshman Tangerine Wiggs, redshirt freshman Kimika Rozier, and Catie Schuetzle, a junior joining the team after three seasons on the WSU track and field team, will provide depth but not experience at the outside hitter spot.

Palileo will rely on Ganzer and Rozier to learn the offensive system and allow him to use their depth to spell Johnson and Albright for a couple of points and words of strategy on the sideline. Rozier's athleticism will be a motivating factor in finding a place for her on the court. Palileo looks to move her around on the right side or outside, be creative with her approaches, and create that one-on-one off the crossing plays to use Rozier's speed to her advantage. Adams will be able to provide experience and depth in practice but not play during the 2008 season because of her transfer. Schuetzle, a triple jumper, will take the fall and the spring to get back into volleyball shape with plans to play for two more years.

The Middle Blockers

Three players will carry the responsibilities of the middle blocking position this season for WSU. Senior transfer Emily Rooney will join junior Cassie Robbins and sophomore Brittany Tillman as the Cougar middles in 2008.

Palileo considers the middles the key to the first tempo, second tempo system WSU will run this season. Their goal is to always make themselves available to the setter

on every play which is different from other schemes where the middles go to a certain play and if it wasn't set to them, they would be done. Robbins and Tillman were introduced to the system during the five practices with the new coaching staff last spring and while they struggled with it the first couple days, the entire team saw the positive changes as they grasped the idea. Rooney's three years experience as a starting middle for Palileo at South Dakota State should help shorten the learning curve.

"Emily will be a great asset especially during the preseason as we are trying to teach Brittany and Cassie how to run it as quick as I want to. Emily will give them the opportunity to learn with a little bigger margin of error during the preseason," Palileo said. "The number one goal for them is to be available to the setter every single opportunity they get and to help freeze the block on the other side, really helping out the outsides. That is going to be a big adjustment for our middles because they are not used to it. But that is what fall camp and the preseason schedule is for; to get them into that situation and create situations to be able to do that. That is one of the hardest things we'll have to do this fall camp."

The Schedule

While Palileo inherited the Cougars 2008 schedule, he is pleased with the pre-conference schedule and sees it as allowing the coaches time to prepare the team and the team time to progress before the Pac-10 play begins.

"I think there are three key teams that will really test us for the Pac-10: Notre Dame, Wichita State and Northwestern. I am familiar with all three teams and those will be three great challenges to prepare us for the conference schedule," Palileo said. "In my mind those three teams really stick out, but yet, at the same time, with the changes the players are going through with a new coaching staff, several new players and a new system, I think it will be interesting to see how the season progresses. At the stage that we're in, and me being in my first year, it is really tough for me to look past any of the teams we are playing."

"I'm excited. I have confidence in the players that are here and they have made quick adjustments in the five practices that we've had," Palileo continued. "We are still a Pac-10 team and other teams really look at us with admiration because we are a Pac-10 team. We have that going for us so we have to take advantage of that."