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# Young Blaine team has big shoes to fill

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Blaine's varsity volleyball team this year is shaping up to be a different squad than the 2006 team that won the Section 4AAA title and placed third at State.

With just one returning varsity senior, head coach Celeste Gorman would still like her team to repeat as section champions and return to the state tournament.

"We have our work cut out for us," Gorman said. "We're going to have to work hard."

The Bengals were a more experienced team last year with 10 seniors. They carried a solid season and a 26-3 record into State where they had both success and disappointment.

"It was a goal all season long to get to State," Gorman said. "It was a pretty amazing experience for all of them. They saw their hard work pay off."

After sweeping the Hibbing Bluejackets, three games to zero, in the first round at State, Blaine lost a heartbreaking semifinal 3-2 up against Lakeville North. The Bengals had held a two-games-to-none lead in the semifinal before their offense and passing fell apart.

"Our passing broke down," Gorman said. "We just didn't seal the deal."

The next day, the Bengals earned a bittersweet victory over Eagan, 3-1, to claim the Class AAA third-place trophy. They were disappointed over the loss to Lakeville North and it was hard for them to even get up and play a new match, Gorman said.

"[The next day] we realized we should've been in the championship game," Gorman said. "We wouldn't have settled for less than third place at that point."

Team captain Jessica Granquist is the only returning senior this fall with any varsity playing experience. She contributed to the team's outstanding season last year, and was very happy to be a part of the 2006 state tournament.

"I was happy just to be there," Granquist said. "I thought it was so much fun, and I just really, really liked it."

Now the squad will go from having 10 seniors last season to bringing back only two players with varsity game experience for the upcoming season. The team will have a couple seniors and sophomores, and a balance of juniors to try and bring Blaine back to State. Bengal junior Ari Newhorter, one of the team's "biggest offensive weapons," according to Gorman, will most likely be sitting out most of the regular season. Newhorter tore her ACL during volleyball club play in May.

Granquist hopes to bring the rest of the team together to perform well in the conference and "hopefully to be above .500."

"We're just going to have to step it up this year," she said.

Granquist has been a three-year varsity starter for Blaine and a three-year all-conference player. She hopes to get back to the state tournament, but won't be too disappointed if it doesn't happen, she said. By focusing on moving the ball around the court and being a smarter team, Granquist said that will help the Bengals to become better.

One of the team's major rivals has come from Andover, which won the section title in 2005. Andover defeated Blaine in five games in the 2005 section final to earn a trip to State. Blaine returned the favor by beating the Andover in another five-game duel in 2006. The section championship earned Blaine its first trip to the state tournament since 1997, and only the fourth in school history.

The Bengals will still try to compete strong against conference rivals such as Anoka, Champlin Park and Andover, but this year Blaine won't have to play against Andover for a third straight time in the section finals because Andover, along with Anoka, has been moved to Section 7AAA. Blaine and other Northwest Suburban Conference teams will be competing in Section 5AAA this season.

"We have a really tough conference," Gorman said.

Practices began the week of Aug. 13 and the Bengals have been working hard as well as scrimmaging. They travel to open their season with matches Aug. 28 at Woodbury and Aug. 30 at Park Center. They play at Andover Sept. 13 before hosting Duluth East on Sept. 17.

The Bengals have the talent, it's just a matter of which players will step up this season, Gorman says. Drive, determination and giving 100 percent at each practice will help the team reach its goals for the season.

While Gorman would like to see her team repeat the 2006 success, she knows her team is inexperienced.

"We have a really tough schedule this year," Gorman said. "Our goal is going to be to stay focused on a constant improvement. I don't know what to expect."

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