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## Digging deep: Volleyball team enjoys record-setting season

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## Digging deep: Volleyball team enjoys record-setting season

While women's volleyball might not be the highest profile sport at Furman, you would be hard pressed to find a more successful one these days.

In just the past three years, the Lady Paladins have produced 67 wins, posted victories over Clemson, Wake Forest and Colorado, and established themselves as one of the top programs in the Southern Conference.

And if the 2009 season was any indication, the program may just be warming up. With only two seniors contributing regularly and four freshmen and three sophomores seeing significant playing time, Furman finished 26-4, went undefeated (16-0) in regular-season league play and finished the year among the nation's top 50 teams.

The only disappointment came in the conference tournament, which Furman hosted. The Lady Paladins defeated Appalachian State in the semifinal round, but lost to the College of Charleston in the championship match. True to form, only the conference tournament champion received an invitation to the NCAA tournament.

"It was tough losing in the conference tournament," says Furman coach Michelle Young. "It was almost like the players didn't feel they were conference champions. But while it's always exciting to go to the NCAA tournament, we had to remember that we went undefeated in the conference and won the regular-season title. We had a great year no matter how you look at it."

There is no arguing with Young there. The regular-season championship was Furman's first since 1993 — the Lady Paladins won the tournament title in 2008 — and the team's 87 percent winning percentage was the best in program history. A 19-match winning streak that covered the better part of 10 weeks was also the longest ever.

There were plenty of individual honors, too, as the Lady Paladins produced the conference Freshman of the Year (Caroline Adams), Player of the Year (Kelsey Salava) and Coach of the Year. Adams and Salava, a senior, were also first-team all-conference, and two other freshmen — Chandler Ambrester and Natalie Braun — were named to the All-Freshman team. Sophomores Kelly Kirby and Alexis Shaffer were named to the all-league second team.

"I knew this team had a lot of talent and would be pretty good," Young says. "But you don't know how a team is going to respond until you start playing. I could tell right away that it was a very competitive group, and they played a lot of five-game matches that they won. It turned out to be a clutch team."

The Lady Paladins are also getting some clutch coaching from Young, who has been quietly and steadily building the program since becoming head coach in 2000. Eight of her 10 seasons have been winning ones, and her 188-129 career record makes her the most successful volleyball coach in Furman history.

Young, a two-time Southern Conference Coach of the Year, also created a dynamic home court atmosphere for the Lady Paladins by abandoning the larger and less intimate confines of Timmons Arena in 2005 and moving the team's games into the cozy surroundings of Alley Gymnasium (Old Gym), where the fans sit right by the court. A steadily rising level of interest in the program, especially from students, has forced Young to add seating each year, and this year's conference tournament at Furman was completely sold out.

"I had people coming to my office trying to get tickets," she says. "It was amazing."

You can count Salava, a senior setter from Clearwater, Fla., among Young's fans. "I couldn't have asked for a better coach during my four years at Furman," she says. "Coach Young cares about more than just her players' success on the court. She listens to our input and strives to understand where every player is coming from. She is always there for her players."

If you haven't checked out the volleyball program yet, you may want to add a few games to your schedule in 2010. Most of the record-setting roster returns, and Young has signed three high-level recruits — Christina Dorismond of Cary, N.C., Amanda Komisarow of Atlanta, Ga., and Sarah McCarthy of Villa Park, Ill.

"We have a lot of talented players coming back, and the three high school seniors we have signed should be able to come in and help us right away," Young says. "We're excited about the direction of the program."

— VINCE MOORE

