

VOLLEYBALL: Alton continues to build, looks to compete in SWC

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GODFREY — The No. 1 goal for Stacey Ferguson's first season as Alton volleyball coach was to be competitive in the Southwestern Conference.

Upgrading to contending in the SWC will remain on the wish list. For Ferguson's second season as head coach, after seven as a Redbirds assistant, the priority is still competing.

"We're still at that point," Ferguson said after Tuesday's season-opening win over Bunker Hill. "But if we can sneak a couple more wins in there, I'm not going to complain."

Wins in the SWC have been difficult to achieve for the Redbirds. Even in 2008 when Alton set a single-season mark for victories in a 24-9 season, the SWC record was 2-5 with wins over Granite City and Collinsville.

The last five years have produced a 5-30 record in SWC play. And four of those came against a Granite City program with a 1-34 record with a 30-match league losing streak since beating Alton on Oct. 4, 2005.

The Redbirds finished 14-20 last year while having to replace seven of their top nine players from the 2008 squad. And though the 2009 edition graduated another four starters from six seniors, Ferguson sees Alton as better positioned to start its ascension in the SWC and improve on last season's win total of 14.

"I really do feel good," Ferguson said. "I feel confident that we're going to be better this season. I think the girls feel that way, as well. We have more to bring this back this year."

Seniors Maggie Emons, Jasmine Davis and Carley Schmidt head the list of returning starters. Emons anchors the back row at libero, with Schmidt and junior Lindsey Snyder handling the setting duties.

The 5-foot-8 Davis has shifted from middle blocker to outside hitter, with 5-10 senior Lauren Meeks at right side and seniors Shakeya Brooks (5-11) and Amy Zahner (6-2) as middles.

"We're still kind of loaded senior-wise," Ferguson said of a roster that includes seven seniors.

The Redbirds will count on a sophomore to contribute in Emily Russell, an undersized outside hitter at 5-4.

"But," Ferguson said, with a laugh, "she has some hops. She can get the job done."

A full summer to spend with her team - she got the job in mid-July last year - has increased the comfort level for Ferguson. So has an added commitment from players training year-round.

Aiding in the program building at Alton is the addition of volleyball to the club menu offered by the Alton-based Bluff City Athletic Club. Also, Meeks and Davis play for club teams out of St. Louis, while Russell was with the Southern Heat club.

"The majority of them played, whether it was Bluff City and a couple out of St. Louis and one with Southern Heat," Ferguson said. "We had a high number of girls playing club and that's a good sign."

There were good signs from 2009 that were not always produced in victory.

Co-champs Edwardsville and Belleville West, along with Class 4A sectional finalist O'Fallon, separated themselves from the SWC pack last season. But Ferguson points to competitive matches with Collinsville, Belleville East and East St. Louis as cause for optimism in 2010.

"We were right there with those three other teams in the regular season," Ferguson said. "Within two, three points, three-game matches, so I do think we'll be right there this year. The girls are looking forward to showing that, too."

The Redbirds have an opportunity to show improvement in the Redbird Classic on Friday and Saturday at AHS. Alton finished 1-4 last season in the six-team round robin, which will include Southwestern, Gillespie, Granite City, Jacksonville Routt and Orchard Farm (Mo.). Routt is the defending champion.

Alton prepped with Tuesday's win over the Minutemaids.

"The Bunker Hill match was a good ice-breaker to see what else we need to work on for the weekend," Ferguson said.