

VOLLEYBALL: Season over, work just starting for Redbirds

After 20-loss campaign, Alton takes on task of program building

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Stacey Ferguson's first season as head coach for Alton Redbirds volleyball ended Thursday with a regional semifinal loss to Collinsville and a 14-20 record.

While labeling its success depends on point of view, Ferguson defines it first as a start down what appears to be a long road to improvement in the Southwestern Conference.

"I feel like next year we'll be just as good, if not better, and we'll continue push forward," Ferguson said.

The Redbirds will lose six seniors, including four introduced as starters in the regional at Edwardsville. Juniors Jordan Sasek, Maggie Emons, Carley Schmidt, Jasmine Davis, Lauren Meeks and Amy Zahner completed a varsity roster that listed no sophomores or freshmen.

But much of Ferguson's rebuilding effort will focus on players not yet in high school. Ferguson was a Redbirds assistant coach for seven seasons before replacing Dan Carter this year. Ferguson also spent the last three years as the volleyball coach for Alton Middle School and she returns to that post this winter.

And the foundation for building Redbirds volleyball into more of a factor in the SWC begins there.

"We're going to change some things down there to make it more adaptable for the transition up to the high school," Ferguson said. "And, hopefully, start picking up some tougher competition at the middle school. We're also trying to get our girls in a local club."

The Alton-based Bluff City Athletic Club, which already fields youth programs in baseball, softball and basketball, is adding volleyball. Tryouts for high school players will be later this month, with the middle school program beginning in the spring.

Emons and Davis already play club volleyball for a team based in St. Louis, but Ferguson sees increased dedication to off-season participation and training crucial to the Redbirds' future success.

"Every team in our conference, the majority of their girls play club volleyball," Ferguson said. "And you can tell because their team unity is so much greater than what we have. We start to figure it out by the end of the season, but it's too late then."

Alton finished seventh in the eight-team SWC, placing ahead of only Granite City. Even last season with a 24-9 record that set a school-record for victories, the Redbirds could do no better than a tie for fifth with a 2-5 mark in the SWC.

Alton's victory totals have been inflated by a schedule considered weak by SWC standards. But until they can stock a lineup with more size and hitting power like conference front-runners Edwardsville, Belleville West and O'Fallon can put on the court, the Redbirds will try to develop better weapons before seeking bigger battles.

"I feel like the tough matches we've had," said Ferguson, citing as example a 25-16, 25-22 loss to SWC co-champ West, "if we would have had even one of their two hitters, that would have made a huge difference for our team. That's one goal, to find that type of athlete in our schools."

So, the task is two-fold for Ferguson. Make the players already in the program better with off-season conditioning and find better players for the program by targeting prospects at the middle-school level.

"Starting with club, we have to get our girls more postseason training and competition," Ferguson said. "We also have to get the girls out. We have to get the athletes out there. We struggle, we don't have the height, we don't have the big hitters that other teams have.

"That's going to take some recruiting on my part. I don't know if I have to walk through the halls of the sixth grade and find them from there, but that's what it's going to take, I think."