

Sports

Digging For Gold

Women's volleyball aims for national championship

For a head coach in the middle of the most highly anticipated volleyball match of his young career, the Fighting Illini's Kevin Hambly '06 AHS looks surprisingly calm.

It's the last Friday in September, and Illinois is opening the Big Ten season at home in Huff Hall against Penn State. The Nittany Lions, winners of three straight NCAA championships and seven consecutive Big Ten titles, are ranked No. 2 in the country and haven't lost a conference match in nearly four years. A standing-room-only crowd of 4,141 raucous fans, clad overwhelmingly in orange, is hoping tonight's match – dubbed "History at Huff" – lives up to its name.

After the first set, though, it appears perhaps the only history that will be made is another win in Penn State's astounding streak. The Illini, then ranked No. 9 nationally, come out playing tight and drop the opening set 25-17.

But Hambly, in his second year at the helm after five years as an assistant to now-retired coach Don Hardin '84 AHS, knows that a match is bigger than one set and that a season is bigger than one match, even one against a powerhouse opponent. Hambly stands near the bench with his arms folded across his chest, embodying the even-keeled intensity he tries to instill in his players.

"We're not a team that's going to get real high and get real low," Hambly says. "We're just going to kind of stay steady the whole time."

"And we choose to be that way because we feel like, in the Big Ten, you have to be because it's such a tough conference that if you get real fired up for Penn State this weekend, then you lose to Ohio State [tomorrow] because you're on the bottom end of that curve, and it's not going to get you very far in the Big Ten."



Hillary Haen, center, jumps for joy during the Fighting Illini's Oct. 2 volleyball match against Northwestern. The team, including, from left, Colleen Ward, Johannah Bangert, Jennifer Bonilla and Laura DeBruler, is aiming for nothing less than a shot at the national title.

'We want to win the entire thing'

The Illini, led by first-team All-American Laura DeBruler and fellow seniors Johannah Bangert, Hillary Haen and Nicole Kump, have every intention of going far. Their goals: Win the Big Ten. Reach the Final Four for the first time since 1988. Win the school's first national championship.

These are goals this year's seniors, who were the No. 6 recruiting class in the country as incoming freshmen, have been building toward for four years.

"We came in here knowing where the program was but knowing the hard work and dedication that we'd have to put in in order to change that, and just really fulfilling that every single day in practice," says DeBruler. "It's something that has slowly progressed."

When they were freshmen in

2007, the team ended the season 16-14 overall and 8-12 in the Big Ten, finishing eighth in the conference. They won only two of their 10 home conference matches.

Things have been looking up since then. The squad finished third in the Big Ten the following year and second in 2009 en route to back-to-back Sweet 16 appearances. Those tastes of success have made them hungry for more.

"We want to win the entire thing," DeBruler says. "And I think the great thing is that we have the talent and the determination to do that."

But before they can think about national championships or even Big Ten titles, they have to take care of the business at hand: beating Penn State for the first time since 2003 and just the seventh time in 41 matches.

The Daily Illini/JD Maloney Photo

The Illini claim the second and third sets 25-14 and 25-19. The fans cheer more loudly with each successive Illinois point and rumble the stands during Penn State's serves. The Nittany Lions answer with a 25-14 win in the fourth. After trailing 14-13 in the deciding set, the Illini rally to a 17-15 victory.

The sellout crowd – the first at Huff Hall since 1992 – has witnessed history. But after singing “Hail to the Orange” with the fans who have surrounded them on the court and taking some time to enjoy the win, the team has to focus on what lies ahead.

“It was definitely a great win, but it’s time to move on,” freshman Jennifer Bonilla says later. “We can’t just dwell on that one match. So we know we have to keep on working hard.”

Filling a big pair of shoes

Following the victory over Penn State, the squad will reel off four straight wins and surge into first place in the Big Ten. Along the way, DeBruler and Bangert pass Illini volleyball legend **Mary Eggers Tandler '91 BUS** as the school's all-time leaders in kills and blocks, respectively.

Just when the road to success seems smooth, the team hits a major speed bump on a Saturday night in early October during its match against Michigan in Ann Arbor. The Wolverines defeat Illinois in four sets, but the more devastating loss comes in the third set.

On a play that results in her 12th kill of the night, DeBruler collides with the official's table and sits out the rest of the match. A few days later, an MRI confirms she has torn her anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), thus ending her college playing career.

“She’s still our leader, and so she’s going to have to lead in a different way with us,” Hambly says. “She doesn’t just lead on the floor. She also leads in the team room and the locker room, and so we’re going to need that from her.”

DeBruler can also take comfort in the fact that her playing career doesn't have to end if she doesn't want it to, he says.

“With Laura, the message is: This isn't the end of your career; you could have a long pro career if you choose to,” Hambly says.

For the rest of the team, the loss of DeBruler doesn't change the goals for the season, says Haen, DeBruler's roommate and fellow senior.

“As her friend and teammate, it's extremely sad,” Haen says. “But from the team standpoint, and I think from Laura's also, ... we feel like the team's going to be very successful still. She is a great player, but we have other great players that can step in and fill her shoes.”

And they have. Several team members will receive Big Ten Player of the Week honors, and in the next 10 matches, they'll fall only to Northwestern – and Penn State. At press time in mid-November, the Fighting Illini shared the No. 1 spot in the Big Ten

with the Nittany Lions and were holding nationally at ninth place.

Press for success

Whether or not the Illini realize their Big Ten and national title aspirations (the first round of the NCAA tournament begins Dec. 3), Hambly says the team has other ways of judging its season.

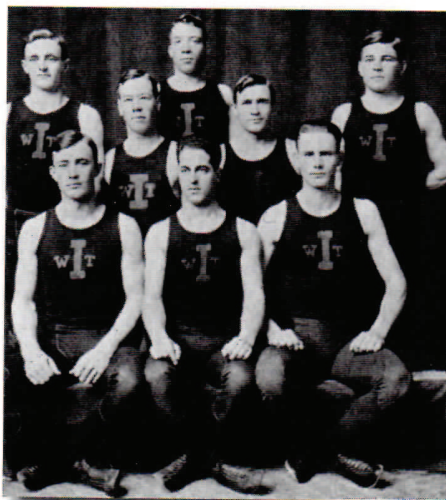
“That's how we'll objectively define success, but I think, for us, success is defined more as just ... trying to maximize our potential and become the best people and students and volleyball players we can be,” he says.

But for now, the Fighting Illini remain determined to do whatever they can in each practice and match to get closer to hanging an NCAA championship banner from the rafters of Huff Hall.

– Dan Petrella

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Wrestling With Longevity



October marked the 100th anniversary of Homecoming at the University of Illinois as well as a milestone of another sort – a century of Illini wrestling. “The 100 Years of Wrestling Celebration” welcomed back to campus 102 former wrestlers, managers and coaches from teams ranging from 1951 to 2011. The ensuing years produced 70 individual Big Ten champions, 17 Big Ten team championships, two Olympians, 20 individual NCAA champions, 105 All-Americans and a National Coach of the Year.

– Beatrice Pavia