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Prep volleyball: Big things are in store

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The high school volleyball season is upon us. Some teams have several matches under their belt already, while others have yet to get started.

For some reason, this season is full of high expectations. There are some new coaches around the area and there are programs that are firmly entrenched as some of the better ones in the area, if not the state.

The second full week of matches is beginning for many teams. Here is some of what has gone on and what could happen this season.

- **Danville will be the surprise team this season.** It's already showing. Give new coach Jackie Lerdal 30 to 35 games, and the Bears will be downright scary. They've started the season 7-1, with the only loss to No. 5 (2A) Mediapolis in the Bears' tournament. Danville gave the Bullettes all they wanted. The Bears have everything the really good teams have — great hitters, a balanced attack, solid defense and coaching. Did I mention coaching? If there was a free-agent marketplace for volleyball coaches in the offseason, Danville made the home-run hire. Lerdal, who played for New London coach Maureen Heath and played on a state tournament team, brings a fiery yet "easygoing" personality. When it calls for, she is not afraid to tear into her team. I saw them for two matches, and this teams looks like it's having more fun on the floor than last year. Even though she inherited really good talent, I think Lerdal gets a lot of credit for the mental aspect of it.

- **Mediapolis coach Dennis Jandrey will get to 700 career wins.** He needed 36 going into the season, and now needs 30. Even though the Bullettes lost their top setter, right-side hitter and libero, they will still be a force. Last year, the Bullettes did not lose a game in SEI Superconference North Division play. They were simply a loaded team. Great players always graduate, but Mediapolis never loses. Jandrey will get the milestone late in the season, right around the beginning of the postseason.

- **Burlington will struggle.** The Grayhounds lost all their best players from last year's team — outside hitters, middle hitters and both setters. Their hitters made a difference last year, but the Hounds just weren't consistent over the course of a match. Without a standout hitter, the Grayhounds will have to rely on defense. They'll have to grind out wins more than they have in recent seasons.

- **Holy Trinity's Mikaela Foecke may be the next "big thing."** I've heard a lot about the 6-foot-1 freshman, and we'll see if she can continue the great play she has delivered to this point of her young career. The resume is impressive: she's played in the USA Volleyball High Performance Championships in Tucson, Ariz., this summer, as well as the USA Junior Nationals in Atlanta. At 6-1, she has game-changing height. The front row for the Crusaders, with Foecke, Lindsey Reinhardt and Emily Lewis is going to be a handful.
- **Maureen Heath will once again coach up New London.** There may not be a better coach when it comes to getting the most out of a volleyball team. Last year, the Tigers won 26 matches with no star players. The Lerdals and Noels were gone, and inexperienced players had to step in. Again, new players will have to step up for the Tigers, but doubting the Tigers is foolish. They find ways to have strong seasons.
- **The SEI Superconference South Division may be as balanced as it's ever been.** Holy Trinity, which is ranked No. 3 in Class 1A, is still the top team, but the gap is closing. Danville will challenge this year, as will West Burlington, which has won more than 50 matches over the last two seasons, but lost its setter and best outside hitter. New London is just a notch below that trio.
- **Look for Wapello to take another forward step.** The Arrows return basically everyone from last year's 22-win team that started last season red-hot with a win over Holy Trinity. They have power up front and good size with Rachel Bates. Wapello makes mistakes, but it also can scrap with the best teams.

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