

ESG — Volleyball

Western's four teams hoping to retain golden touch

by JASON NADOLINSKI
Reporter

When it comes to volleyball and the Empire State Games, the Western Region might as well have King Midas as its mascot, that's how often at least one — if not more — of the teams is contending for a gold medal.

Of course, as proficient as the other three teams are, none of them can touch the scholastic boys squad, which is gunning for its 12th consecutive first-place finish.

It's going to be an almost entirely new team that will bring home the medal if the Western scholastic boys squad does indeed keep its streak alive when the 30th annual Games commence Thursday in Westchester County, as fourth-year coach Kyle Salisbury of Newark is the only person returning from last summer's team.

"We have a real young team this year, but I like them because they're go-getters," Salisbury said. "We have probably 60 to 70 schools with boys volleyball between Rochester and Buffalo, so it's pretty tough to not have a good team from this area. You get the best of two groups coming together. We have such a large talent pool to draw from to where there's really no weaknesses."

The Buffalo area is well represented on this year's squad, making up half of the 10-player roster. Buffalo's players give Western a great deal of its height, with Lancaster's Ryan Garby (6-foot-6), Amherst's Charlie Gomez (6-5), Cheektowaga's Jeffrey Gutmann (6-4) and Hamburg's Philip Peter-

son (6-7) all standing tall in their respective hitting positions. Orchard Park's Jared Pincoski, meanwhile, is going to be one of the setters serving up perfectly-placed passes for the hitters to slam into the floor with authority.

"We definitely are not small," Salisbury said. "It's nice that we've got a lot of height. I'm hoping that Jeff will produce a lot from the outside for us, and I think Charlie's going to surprise some people. He's got a huge vertical (jump) and big reach, which leads to some big kills. And Ryan is a big kid who can jump pretty well too."

"I just wanted to be known as one of the best from Buffalo and Rochester, and making the team makes me feel like I accomplished what I set out to do," said Gomez, a Games first-timer and an Amherst Central senior-to-be who was an All-ECIC First Team All-Star last season. "I just don't want to be on the team that ends the streak. I've heard that Long Island is pretty strong this year, and they're usually our rival. I think if we pass well and hit well so that we play well as a team, we're good enough to hang with any team."

Both Salisbury and his players understand what's at stake when they kick off this year's competition at 1:30 p.m. Thursday against Adirondack at Pace University — since the inception of the Games in 1978, Western's scholastic team has won the gold medal all but five times. Fans who make the trip downstate can be sure to expect intense action as, like Gomez said, no one wants to be

responsible for the current win streak ending.

"Our biggest thing is just getting the kids time to play together so that the setters can get in synch with the hitters," Salisbury said. "After that, our serve receive and defensive play are going to be keys for us. We've got to play defense before we get to swing."

Open men

The open men's team is championing at the bit to get back into medal contention after failing to bring home at least a bronze for the first time since 1991. Western was the two-time defending champion going into last year's Games, which was won by Hudson Valley.

"Last year's team lost to a team that had two national-team players on it, and that was with the same team that they won with the year before," open men's coach Cal Wickens said. "This team this year should be playing for the championship. Upstate New York has the most talented junior-based volleyball on the East Coast. When you come to play the West, you have to think about there being a sweep on all levels every couple of years."

A few of the players on this summer's team have Games experience, although one — Orchard Park's Andrew Murtha — will be coming back after a bit of a hiatus. Murtha last played in the Games in 2002, before moving to the New York City area after college, but he has remained active in the sport since then and decided to try out again after moving back to his native region this past January.

"(Trying out) was a little nerve wracking because I hadn't been around for five years and I am one of the older guys now, so I wasn't sure if I still had it," said Murtha, who will be playing in his fifth Games. "I probably have the most experience and leadership as far as years played goes, so I'll be doing my best to keep us calm in pressure situations and to keep us focused on what we're going after."

Murtha certainly brings the credentials needed to play at the Games, having finished in the top 10 nationally while setting collegiately for four years at Rutgers University. He was also a two-time All-WNY selection at Orchard Park.

Buffalo's only other representa-

tive on the team, West Seneca native Peter Fabbro, is in the opposite boat of Murtha as far as the Games are concerned. Fabbro, who was a standout at George Mason University, is making his Games debut, but Wickens is certain he'll be a positive factor in Western's charge to the gold.

"Peter works his butt off," Wickens said. "He plays that hardcore, ripping and banging style of volleyball. We may be a bit younger than we usually are and we might be a little bit smaller than teams from the last few years, but I still think we're a very talented, very durable team."

The open men's team kicks off its slate of games at 9 a.m. Thursday against Adirondack at Pace University.

"If we can come in, pass, relax and just play volleyball, then this is a team that should reach the championship round," Wickens said. "Since this team hasn't really ever played together, it's wide open at the moment. But, I think someone will have to outplay this team to beat us. If we work our hardest, we'll be hard to beat."

Open women

After coming up just short against New York City in both 2004 and 2006, the open women's squad is hoping to return to the top form that saw it bring home the gold in both 2002 and 2003. Fortunately for Western, a good chunk of that team is coming back ready to put an end to New York City's three-year winning streak.

"We almost always have a good chance to represent the area well because we always get good people who play well," said open women's coach Todd Kamenash, a Snyder resident. "We've got a good core group of people coming back, and we've got two others making the jump from scholastic to open this year. Bottom line, we're going there to win gold."

Just two players on the squad are from the Rochester area, which leaves the other eight positions filled by players from the Buffalo area. University at Buffalo assistant coach Ladi Iya, Depew resident and Daemen College graduate Katie Schrantz, UB graduate Lindsay Matikosh and Seton Hall player Allie Matters (North Tonawanda) are joined by newcomers Jenna Mape (UB graduate), Katherine Shea (East Aurora native and Youngstown

State player) and Lindsay Schlegel (Lancaster graduate and incoming UB freshman) as players ready to bring the gold back to Buffalo.

"Katherine Shea has a great personality on the court and she's an incredible blocker," Kamenash said. "Katie Schrantz is one of the staples of the team, and she's always positive and very aggressive. Lindsay Schlegel is young compared to the other girls on the open team, but she's already playing at a high level. Ladi Iya brings a lot of experience and knowledge to the team, and she reaches very high. I'm looking for her to be one of our main blockers."

"I think we have a lot of talent and we should be able to hold our own," said Schrantz, a three-time MVP and Wall of Fame inductee at Daemen who is making her fifth appearance on the open team. "It's been a little tough getting together to practice as an entire team, so I think once we play a full day together, everything should fall in to place."

The open women's team kicks off its slate of games at 10:30 a.m. Thursday against Adirondack at Pace University.

"It's going to take us playing together and being aggressive, but we've got the talent it takes to win and I think we can do it," Kamenash said.

Scholastic girls

After the scholastic boys' team, the scholastic girls have the next-longest golden streak among the remaining three squads with first-place finishes in the last five Games. The scholastic girls are just about as proficient over the long haul as their male counterparts, having not earned the gold just eight times since the Games' inception.

Tonawanda resident and Sweet Home High School Kelsey Maving is one of just three returning players from last year's team that defeated the Central squad for the gold, and is the lone Buffalo-area returnee. In fact, Maving is one of just four Buffalo-area players on the squad, with sisters Samantha and Sydney Palka of North Tonawanda, as well as Eden's Heather Henry, comprising the rest of Buffalo's contingent.

The scholastic girls open their slate of games at 9 a.m. Thursday against New York City at Pace University.

e-mail: jnadolinski@beenews.com

Seniors-to-be

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hard work and non-stop effort.

"I think last year we thought the gold would be ours, but then we lost to a team we shouldn't have," said Giamo, a center who had one assist last year. "We need to be more focused and not goof around before the game, because that reflected on the ice a little bit last year. We have to give 100 percent all game and never coast on any shift."

Goalie Kimberly Sass of East Amherst is looking to play as much, if not more, than she did last summer in compiling a 1-1-1 record. Sass stopped 57 of the 62 shots she faced in those contests, and she knows that at least the same effort will be required this time around if she and her teammates want to close out the Games on top.

"We want to finish strong and make up for last year," said Sass. "We have a pretty talented group, so hopefully if we stay focused, everything will click."

The team isn't entirely made up of Games' veterans, however.

Depew resident Brianna Murphy is a newcomer to the Games, making the roster on her second attempt. Murphy is one of the myriad of Bisons players, though, so she's not too worried about trying to learn the ins and outs of new teammates.

"I know most of the girls really well from the Bisons, and they've already told me what to expect at the Games," Murphy said. "I didn't know what to expect, so I'm just happy to make the team. It's still a little nerve wracking to play in a tournament like the Games, even though I've played in national-level tournaments before."

"Brianna's one of the scorers from our Bisons team, so she should make our Games' team that much better," said West Seneca resident Brigitte Cellino, who had a goal and an assist last summer. "It's just nice to finally be one of the older players so I can keep up with the competition better."

Western opens the Games by taking on Adirondack at 2 p.m. Thursday. Western then plays Hudson Valley at 10 a.m. Friday, July 27 before a Saturday doubleheader has Western taking on Central at 8 a.m. and New York City at 5:30 p.m. The Games conclude for Western at 11:30 a.m. Sunday with a contest against Long Island.

"Adirondack and Central are always tough, and Long Island should be in the running too," Steele said. "Hudson Valley should be stronger than it has been in the past as well, but you never know how things will go until you get there and play the games. We are going to have to change our style a little bit because we're playing on a smaller rink. We're going to have to prepare for physical play, so we have to learn pretty quick how to play off of bodies and how to not get knocked off the puck."

e-mail: jnadolinski@beenews.com

ESG — Baseball

Former champion eyes medal stand

by MATT KRUEGER
Reporter

Though not exactly in a drought, the Western Region has gone two years without winning a medal at the Empire State Games. And that has head coach Bob Kowal hoping to get back onto the medal podium this year.

"Last year was weird," Kowal said of his team's 2-3 performance and subsequent loss in the bronze medal game at the 2006 Games in Rochester. "We learned a lesson that it's nice to clear the bench and play everybody, but sometimes you can't do that. We were one run away from being in the gold medal game and one run away from being out of it."

Western won the gold medal from 2002 to 2004, but finished fourth last year and placed last in 2005.

With a strong pitching staff and four returning players, Kowal thinks he has a team that can compete better this year.

"I like our pitching," he said. "I've said that this is the best pitching staff I've had since we won a couple gold medals. We have a lot of depth and we have a lot of lefties. I think that is our strength."

Leading the pitching staff are starters Sebastian Bellitto, who will start in Game One against Adirondack, Andrew Tobias, a lefty who will start Game Two against Central, Matt Jimenez, who will start Game Three against New York City, and Eric Povero, who will start Game Four against Hudson Valley. Bellitto and Tobias, both from Jamestown, provide a solid one-two punch. Jimenez (6-foot-6) was the ace for Iroquois this past spring and Povero (6-foot-5) powered Canandaigua Academy.

The staff also features strong relievers Blake McLimans (6-foot-9) of Hamburg, Michael Bright of Niagara Falls and Tim Szalkowski of Lake Shore.

"Our pitching staff would make a great basketball team," Kowal joked. "We have a lot of height and that's what you want in a pitcher. These guys are all

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