

# It's Not Over Yet

Women's Volleyball still has tournament hopes despite two straight losses

By Joe Flaherty

Loyola Women's Volleyball still has a chance.

Even after losing three starters to injury, including standout freshman outside hitter Morgan Reardon, for long stretches.

Even after mixing and matching lineups and changing the offensive scheme to compensate the injuries.

Even after two straight losses to stifle a late season winning streak.

The Ramblers still hold their Missouri Valley conference tournament fate in their own hands. Loyola holds a 6-10 conference record, which puts them in a tie for the sixth and final conference tournament spot with the Bradley Braves with two matches left to play.

But no matter how this regular season ends, head coach Chris Muscat believes all of the challenges have given his team a chance to grow more than they would have otherwise.

"Every season has some sort of adversity, and we had a lot of it in the middle of the season," Coach Muscat said. "I certainly don't think we'd be on the growth curve we're on right now had it not happened. This team has grown tremendously in light of it happening."

Aiding that growth is the change of the offensive scheme. With Reardon and fellow outside hitter Emily Carr sidelined with injuries, Coach Muscat switched the scheme from the 5-1 to the 6-2.

A 5-1 scheme features five hitters and one setter, and the setter can set for two hitters if they're playing on the front line or three players if they're playing on the back line.

In a 6-2, an outside hitter is replaced by another setter, and setters can double as hitters. The front line setter can now set to the back three hitters, and vice versa for the back line setter.

This format gives setters many more opportunities to collect kills and assists. In the four weeks since making the switch, sophomore setter/right side Brittany Brown has flourished in her expanded roll.

In the past five matches, Brown has collected 52 kills and digs, and has paced the team with 112 assists. She posted back-to-back triple-doubles against UIC and Bradley and came one kill shy of making it three straight against Wichita State.

She doesn't just lead by example. The young team has been searching for a "vocal leader," and Brown has emerged as a front-runner.

"Brittany changed roles a little bit... I think right now the role that she's in is something she feels very comfortable with," Coach Muscat said. "She competes hard. She brings a ton of energy to the floor and it has been huge for us coming down the stretch. She's excitable and gets everyone excited to be out there."

Brown brings energy to the court no matter the situation.

"When I get excited, I stomp my feet or jump," Brown said. "But that's just a way to get [my teammates] going. I'm like, 'We're winning! Let's do this! Let's go!' We need motivation to keep going, we always want a bigger lead."

Junior right side Laura Purcell might not be stomping her feet, but she has brought plenty of energy to the court as well.

Purcell has led the Ramblers in kills in each of the past five matches, collecting 80 during that span. She posted a career-high 19 kills in a loss to Wichita State. This torrid stretch has nearly doubled her season total to 176, which ranks fourth on the team.

Since Reardon and Carr have both been out for nearly two months, the remaining players are finally getting more comfortable in their new roles. It's no surprise that Purcell cites this familiarity as a reason for her recent outburst.

"I feel like I'm back in the flow of the game," Purcell said. "The team took a big dip when we lost both of our left sides, and it called for everyone to step up. We kind of came to a halt a little bit there, but now we're finally picking up the pieces"

Loyola plays each team in the Missouri Valley twice, and Purcell's adjustments from the first go around seem to be paying dividends.

"We take mental notes going into matches," Purcell said. "Going into it knowing what to expect rather than waiting to adjust; we go in having made the adjustments before we play them."

Back to back losses can definitely leave a sour taste, but the most recent bump in the road hasn't shaken the team's spirit.

"This season has been an uphill battle," Brown said. "It has been a bumpy road with struggles and injuries. But I feel like now we're starting to click again like we were in the beginning of the season. These last couple matches are do-or-die. We're going 100% all the time just to stay alive."

The Ramblers will have their work cut out for them as they finish out the season in Iowa this weekend. They'll square off against the Drake Bulldogs this Saturday in Des Moines

before making the short trek to Cedar Falls to play the University of Northern Iowa Panthers.