

Men's Volleyball Moves to No. 2 in NCAA

Nationally ranked Men's Volleyball hopes to turn better start to season into better finish

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At the start of 2013, Loyola Men's Volleyball players were just as concerned with battling a team-wide illness as they were with their opponents. After dropping its first three matches, the team regained its health and its winning ways, wrapping up the season with the program's first ever appearance in the Final Four.

In 2014, Loyola is making other teams sick to their stomachs.

The Ramblers opened the season at home with a huge revenge victory over No. 1 UC Irvine, the team that knocked them out of the Final Four. They toppled No. 3 BYU in straight sets before dropping their next match to No. 11 USC.

Their strong start against three nationally ranked opponents earned the team a No. 2 ranking of their own, a ranking that they've defended twice already with straight-set victories over Erskine and Mt. Olive.

But a clean bill of health isn't the only reason for the team's early success.

"I think being at home is huge," opposite hitter Joe Smalzer said. "We're not away to start the season for the first time in a while, and we went to the Final Four last year. We've kind of 'been there.' We aren't necessarily new at playing ranked teams... We have a little more confidence."

Much like the previous three years, Smalzer, a red-shirt senior, has been vital to the team's performance. The reigning MIVA Player of the Year is pacing the team with 57 kills and 80 points, earning him MIVA Offensive Player of the Week honors for the opening week of the season.

But the Ramblers don't need to lean on Smalzer every night. One of the biggest differences between last year's team and this year's is the trust between players on the court to pick each other up.

"Against Irvine, Joe was our guy and against BYU, Thomas [Jaeschke] was our guy," Head Coach Shane Davis said. "We're pretty well balanced and good at getting each other's back and taking on more of a load. We're definitely talented enough were it could be a different guy on any night."

Jaeschke, a sophomore outside hitter, is following up his MIVA Freshman of the Year campaign in 2013 with a hot start of his own. He led the team with 18 kills against No. 3 BYU and trails Smalzer by 10 kills for the team lead.

So will there be a friendly competition between him and Smalzer to see who can tally the most kills?

“I don’t really look at stats and all that stuff,” Jaeschke said. “When the W gets put in the column, that’s all I care about.”

Jaeschke doesn’t waste time focusing on much else but winning. He said the No. 2 ranking doesn’t put any more pressure on the team because no one pays attention to it.

The ability to block out everything else and take one step at a time is a trait that Coach Davis has engrained in the program for the past decade.

“We’re so good at looking on to the next play and on to the next match,” Davis said. “It’s about forgetting what happened the previous match. As much as how great those wins are, the guys have already forgotten about it and they’re focused on our next match.”

Another trait the coaching staff has passed along is humility. The team takes pride in being one of the few consistently excellent programs at Loyola, but takes care not to let it affect them negatively.

“I don’t think a lot of us want to come off as ‘that team’ because that pushes people away,” Smalzer said. “If we want to have fans out to the games we can’t come off like we’re better than other people or better than other teams and that we’re ‘that team.’”

As long as the Ramblers keep playing better than others instead of acting like it, Coach Davis thinks there’s no reason to believe this team can’t go all the way.

“Absolutely,” Davis said when asked if an NCAA championship run was a fair expectation. “But we have to buckle down and take care of the matches we’ve got to take care of.”

The next match they need to take care of will be against Sacred Heart on January 24th. It will be the team’s first match away from Gentile Arena, a place where they’ve won 12 of their last 13 matches and hold a unique advantage.

“I think the lighting is a huge thing,” Jaeschke said. “We know where all the lights are and we know where we serve is where we’re super comfortable for all of us.”

Gentile Arena will play host to the Final Four for the first time this May. If the Ramblers stay on the torrid pace they’ve set, they’ll be able to exploit their home court advantage when it matters most.