

And Then, There Was One

No. 1 Ramblers to wrap up regular season at arch rival Ohio State

By Joe Flaherty

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Beat Ohio State. At Ohio State.

It's something Loyola Men's Volleyball hasn't been able to do since they swept the Buckeyes in straight sets on March 31st, 2006. So it's only fitting that this regular season, already chock-full of storylines and 'firsts since,' will end with a chance for the Ramblers to exact some revenge down in Columbus, Ohio.

The past failures are fresh in the mind of red-shirt senior Peter Jasaitis.

"I actually talk to Torey Darin about it all the time," Jasaitis said. "That's the final place that we've never won. We've won away and at home against every team in the MIVA, except at Ohio State. Over my career we've played there six times. Last year was the closest. We came within 13 to 13 in the fifth game but we lost 15 to 13. So there's some bad blood going into that match."

That loss came during a rough patch in the season for the Ramblers, marking their third loss in four matches. Down two sets to zero, Head Coach Shane Davis nearly sparked a comeback by shaking up the lineup.

"We weren't really playing that great, so we were kind of fiddling with the lineup," Davis said. "I think this was maybe [Peter] Hutz's second match setting and we tried Cody [Caldwell] at libero for a bit because Jasaitis was struggling. We were trying to find our own. But [Ohio State] played really well... we definitely want to get back in there and beat those guys on their home court."

The Ramblers were able to get their season back on track afterwards, winning 12 of the following 14 matches to end the season. But that match marked yet another time where the team couldn't put it all together on Ohio State's home floor.

Junior outside hitter Cody Caldwell says there's just something about St. John Arena that gets the Buckeyes going.

"It's the atmosphere; their team always steps up in their home gym," Caldwell said. "Everyone on this team wants to win there really bad. I don't think there's a single player here that's won in that gym. We take every match seriously, but that's one that we're really going to get after and try and get a good spanking there."

Loyola has a good model of what a spanking of Ohio State looks like. It took little more than an hour for the team to dismantle the Buckeyes in straight sets in front of nearly 2,000 fans at Gentile Arena earlier this season.

Ohio State was ranked 15th in the nation at the time, but they've since fallen out of the top 25. At 11-14 overall, the Buckeyes risk finishing below .500 for the first time since 1992.

They're trending in the opposite direction of the Ramblers, who now sit at 22-1 overall and continue to hold the nation's top rank. But Coach Davis says there's another advantage working in Loyola's favor to end the drought.

"We used to have Alumni Gym, which was a very small court and the sight lines were different," Davis said. "Every time we'd go play at Ohio State, we'd always struggle because the ball looks like it gets lost up there, so we were always out of rhythm no matter how much we tried to prepare for it. Now, with us being in our new arena, it makes us a better road team. It's a bigger arena, so it's not such a huge, eye-opening difference."

Though there's a lot of pride riding on this rivalry match, Jasaitis knows it's only a piece of the puzzle the team has been working to build.

"Our goals at the beginning of the year were to win the MIVA and to make it to the Final Four," Jasaitis said. "We're coming into what we've been working for all year."

Those goals will be easier to reach if the Ramblers continue to get the same kind of production they've been receiving from Caldwell lately. The recent MIVA Offensive Player of the Week has smoked an even 100 kills in the past seven matches. He credits a change to the offense and a better connection with setter Peter Hutz for his recent surge.

Heading into the MIVA Tournament, he knows Loyola can't afford to overlook anyone in the field.

"All the teams are playing really well right now," Caldwell said. "They're all kind of beating up on each other. We've handled everyone this season, but on any given night they can all step up and play a great match. It doesn't really matter who comes into our gym, it's all up to what we can do on our side of the net."

As the top seed in the conference, Loyola has earned the right to host each match they play in the tournament. Following their Friday tilt at Ohio State, the Ramblers will invite Quincy, the team they swept at home on Senior Night, back into Gentile Arena for the MIVA Quarterfinals on April 18th.