

Script Flipped

Women's Volleyball's season ends despite setting up a storybook finish

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The NCAA has been serving up a plethora of moments that seem to be tailor-made for the silver screen. Villanova's last-second three-pointer to stun #2 Kansas and Chris Davis' 109-yard missed field goal return to clinch the Iron Bowl for Auburn both come to mind.

Loyola Women's Volleyball almost had its own Hollywood moment. Almost.

The Ramblers swept the Drake Bulldogs in straight sets on November 22nd to put their Missouri Valley Conference tournament hopes in their own hands. A win the following night on the road against the second-seeded University of Northern Iowa Panthers would clinch Loyola's spot as the sixth and final seed to qualify.

After missing 14 straight matches, freshman outside hitter Morgan Reardon returned to provide an instant spark. She racked up 13 kills versus the Bulldogs, and her 15 kills against the Panthers helped Loyola battle to a decisive fifth set.

Junior setter Vicki Wrobel collected a kill and an ace on back to back plays to set up a match point for the Ramblers at 14-13.

But instead of writing a fairytale ending to the script, Loyola wrote their way into a nightmare. The Ramblers accounted for the final six points of the match; the only problem was that the last three points went to the Panthers.

A service error by Wrobel gave serve to the Panthers. Attack errors by sophomores Kathleen Vogel and Brittany Brown, who recorded her fourth triple-double of the season, sealed the victory for UNI.

It was a high-pressure situation, but sophomore libero Stephanie Kinane, who tallied a school-record 39 digs in the match, actually felt the adrenaline of crunch time was a positive for the team.

"I don't think it was pressure, I think it was more excitement," Kinane said. "We were right there and we were ready to win. We almost had it and next year I think we're going to have it."

The Ramblers finished the season with a 13-18 record and on the outside looking in, but head coach Chris Muscat said nobody is hanging their head considering the effort they put forth.

“Certainly it’s not the result we’re looking for, but it certainly was the mentality we were looking for going forward,” Muscat said. “Toward the end of the year, we were probably one of the best in the Missouri Valley. Now we have to prepare ourselves mentally and physically to play that type of volleyball every single night.”

Reardon felt that the entire team adopted that killer instinct late in the season. With the raw talent and mentality firmly in place, the offseason will be spent filling in the gaps.

“We need to get completely healthy, and then get stronger, get faster,” Reardon said. “We need to do everything we can off the court so that we can see a change on the court.”

The team knows that patience and consistency will be the key to building a perennial powerhouse. With all 14 players set to return next season, and with the addition of highly touted setter Caroline Holt, Coach Muscat believes the sky is the limit.

“We’ve come a long way in such a short period of time,” Muscat said. “The girls we have in the program right now are very talented and they’ve gained an incredible amount of experience on the floor. We just have to continue to move forward because this group, when they get it, they’re going to be incredible.”

By NCAA rule, the Ramblers will have a restricted number of hours per week that they can dedicate to practice until the competitive spring season begins. Tentatively, the Ramblers will take part in four tournaments and likely play host to one of them. Next semester will be a very meaningful measuring stick for the team.

“We see the most development and growth in our players because we’re able to break down skill sets and train versus championship season where we really just prepare for opponents.” Muscat said. “Your systems get better in the fall, but your players get better in the spring.”

In the meantime, a few Ramblers have been earning accolades for their work on the court and in the classroom this season. Sophomores Kelly Feigh and Kathleen Vogel were both named to the Missouri Valley Volleyball Scholar-Athlete First Team, while junior Laura Purcell was named to the All-Missouri Valley Second Team.

Purcell was on fire during the month of November, leading the team in kills in five of their last seven matches. She tallied an even 100 kills during that span, more than doubling her previous total.

But while last season was certainly a vital period of growth, the team is already counting down the days until next season.

“273 days,” Muscat said with a smile. “We certainly have a lot of work in front of us.”