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Youth is Served at Seward

Youth will be the name of the game for the Seward County Lady Saints Volleyball team in 2013. Seward returns just two players from last year's 2nd place Jayhawk West finishers to go along with nine new faces for the gals in green. Despite working with his team for nearly three weeks, Head Coach Bert Luallen still seemed surprised when he said in a recent interview "I looked out on the court at the start of the match and it hit me that we had five freshman out there starting for us" as he talked about the Lady Saints opening scrimmage of the year against Oklahoma Panhandle State University. Seward will certainly have their growing pains at times this season, but with a revamped offensive system and a quick and dynamic roster, the Lady Saints should once again be in contention for the Jayhawk West crown in 2013.

The Lady Saints will be led by sophomores Annelise Sanchez (Brighton, Colorado) and Morgan Riley (Levelland, Texas) this season. Sanchez, an outside hitter, was an Honorable Mention All-Jayhawk West pick for Seward last year as a freshman, averaging 2.29 kills and 1.04 digs per set for the Lady Saints. She will be forced to elevate her game even another notch up this season on the outside as Seward will be without the services of 1st Team All-Conference performer Thayna Silva (Sao Paulo, Brazil) who was lost for the year in spring workouts with a knee injury. Riley will look to anchor the Seward offense from her middle hitter position. She was the only Lady Saint to play in all 141 sets in 2012 and put up a nice stat line with 1.60 kills and 0.90 blocks per set on the season. Riley joined Seward's preseason camp late, but has made an immediate impact upon her arrival and should be one of the top two way threats in the middle in the Jayhawk Conference this season.

Quarterbacking the Seward offense this season will be freshman setter Nacole Miller (Canon City, Colorado). Miller is the only setter on the Lady Saints roster this season and will be asked to transition the program into a 5-1 offense, one that Seward has rarely used in recent years. "Nacole comes in with a lot of high-level high school experience, running a quick, multiple-hitter offense. She has the right mental disposition we're looking for out of the setter position" Luallen said about his first year setter.

Joining Sanchez on the outside will be freshmen Carolina Gasparini (Sao Paulo, Brazil) and Sheree Ryan (Kismet, Kansas). A highly touted recruit, Gasparini was a late add to the Seward roster, but has burst onto the seen in her limited time with the team and has already made herself a go-to player in the Lady Saints offense. She checks in at just 5'9, but is an explosive jumper and has a big arm swing which will draw the attention of opposing defenses this season. Coach Luallen has lofty expectations for Gasparini saying "images of Gabi Carbone and Luana Cavalcante come to mind when you watch her" speaking of a pair of Lady Saint greats who also hailed from Brazil. Ryan makes the jump from the basketball court to the volleyball court to play for the Lady Saints this season. She is the tallest player on the Seward roster at 5'11 and has transitioned well to volleyball after a season away from the game. "Sheree is a tall, strong hitter, who can also put up a good block" Coach Luallen said about his freshman outside hitter.

The middle hitter position is certainly the deepest for Seward County this season. The Lady Saints have four players who will see time in the middle of the net including Riley and three new faces. Freshman Carolina Freitas (Sao Paulo, Brazil) joins Ryan as the tallest Lady Saints on the roster this season at 5'11. Long and lean, Freitas will give Seward some flexibility as far as positioning and should contribute on both sides of the net. "(Carolina) is quick and explosive" Luallen said. "We look for her to step in quickly and make an impact at the middle position." The only two sport athlete at Seward County in 2013-2014 Tiari Walker (Waipahu, Hawaii) will also

figure into the mix in the middle in her first season with the Lady Saints Volleyball team. Walker, who will also suit up for the Seward Softball team in the spring, is undersized for the middle position, but makes up for the lack of size with her athleticism. "Tiari will complement our system and she's got the versatility of potentially playing other positions as well" Luallen said of her. The fourth middle hitter on the roster this season is freshman Erika Gilbert (Everman, Texas). The Seward coaching staff likes Gilbert's athleticism and upside and she could see time at multiple positions throughout the fall. "Erika is very athletic and quick with some leaping ability. Those are characteristics we can work with and will want to plug into our system" Luallen commented.

Penciled in at the right-side hitter position is freshman Kristen Anderson (Holiday, Texas). Anderson, a southpaw, gives Seward a different look than they have had in a number of years from the right-side. "With Kristen being left handed, it opens up all kinds of possibilities in our offense. I'm excited to see how that comes together" Luallen said. Anderson will also have competition on the right side from Freitas, Gilbert, and Ryan who all have worked there in the preseason.

Two new faces come in to take on the workload at the defensive specialist position for the Lady Saints. Kari Anderson (Colorado Springs, Colorado) and Kelci Bedingfield (Holiday, Texas) have been in a highly contested battle for the starting libero spot since camp broke and should both see plenty of court time this season. Anderson is the smallest player on the Lady Saints roster but certainly not the quietest. A vocal player from the back row, Anderson has caught Luallen's eye this preseason. "Kari is a very intelligent player with a lot of quickness; two characteristics of a great defensive player" he said. Bedingfield joins her high school teammate Anderson with the Lady Saints this year. A taller than average player for the position, Bedingfield gives Seward not only a boost as a defensive player, but also gives them flexibility if needed with her size and ability to play the front row. Luallen said of Bedingfield "Kelci has good quickness and good court knowledge" which should translate into a key role in the Seward defense this season.

Seward will look to bounce back from a subpar 20-19 overall record from last season which saw them get bounced in the first round of the Region VI Tournament by 7th seeded Dodge City. If the preseason is any indication, the Lady Saints are poised for a rebound season as they won all four preseason scrimmages, dropping just one set in the process.

The Lady Saints will open their 2013 campaign on Friday when they travel to Lamar, Colorado for the Little Caesars Classic. Seward will open up play at 10:00 against the host team Lamar, followed by a 2:00 battle with another Region IX foe in Otero. Saturday the Lady Saints will take on Trinidad State at 11:00 and will wrap up the tournament with a 3:00 match against Laramie County.

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