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## SMC Sweeps Home Openers, Poised for Strong Season

By Michael Sakoda



Natalie Loos (above), Rachael Gillcrist and Madelyn Huston combined to record 25 kills in a win over Air Force. Photos Tod Fierner

Graven had 12 kills and 11 digs in the win over Colorado and paces the team with 49 kills this season.

"We lost three starters, but I think we're at least as good as last year, perhaps even better," said Browning.

The core of the offense, Jordan Shaw, Samantha Tinsley and Sarah Reams, returns.

Shaw had 14 kills in win on the road and is tied with Graven for 49 this season.

Additionally, SMC's depth has grown with the addition of Madelyn Hutson, a 6'5" transfer from the University of Texas. Hutson was key in the 3-0 sweep of Air Force on Sept. 7. She notched nine kills and three blocks.

The return of veteran players who redshirted last year with injuries further boosts the Gaels roster.

"Danica Mendivil and Natalie Loos are strong players...they'll be contributing," said Browning, who said to also keep an eye on redshirt junior Rachel Gillcrist. "Her role has expanded more than anyone's," he explained.

The returners have already made an impact. Gillcrist and Loos combined with Hutson to record 25 kills against Air Force.

The opening games have already shown the Gaels are ready to meet expectations. "There's some really good teams in our league, but I think we're one of them," Browning added, "If we play the way we expect to play, we'll have a very good shot of going to the tournament again."

The Gaels take on Portland Sept. 19 at 7 p.m. in the WCC opener.



The Gaels are off to an early 3-1 start behind a strong offense.

Saint Mary's College's volleyball team has been a consistently strong program, and the Gaels are back in action and hoping to build on last season's success. With a 3-1 start to the season, including a defeat of the Pac-12's Colorado, the Gaels are looking as good as ever.

"Last year was our fifth really strong season in a row," said head coach Rob Browning.

The Gaels finished with a 17-10 record, going 12-4 in conference play. They finished third overall in the WCC, but earned an at-large bid to the NCAA tournament, where they defeated San Diego State in the first round before falling to No. 4 USC in the second round.

Browning predicts another strong campaign. "I think we'll be as good as we were last year," he said. "We will be contending for the WCC Championship."

The team will be tested in the pre-season against ranked opponents, No. 2 Stanford, No. 11 Iowa State and No. 13 Nebraska. League play isn't much easier. The WCC boasts No. 14 San Diego and No. 25 BYU.

While the Gaels did lose some key players, graduating Gabby Jolly, Lauren Corp, and Missy White, they return five starters, including All-WCC performers Kristina Graven and Dalas Dodd.

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