

Lady Tigers Volleyball Team Is Deep, Versatile and Talented

Written by Staff Writer

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COLUMBIA, S.C. - The Benedict College Lady Tigers volleyball team will not be a one-woman show for the 2013 season.

"The team overall, I feel, is better this year," said Benedict coach Gwendolyn Rouse. "There are more setters on the team, and everyone understands their role. So overall, as a team, I think we'll be a whole lot better."

The Lady Tigers went 17-11 last season and went deep into the SIAC volleyball championship tournament. Leading the way for Benedict the last two seasons was outside hitter LaTayvia Mack, the SIAC Player of the Year in 2012 and Offensive Player of the Year in 2011. For the last two years, much of Benedict's team strategy was to set the ball to Mack. With no one dominate player on the roster now, Rouse sees a more balanced team and opponents won't be able to focus on stopping one player.

"Even though we have just 10 players, the key is they can play more than one position, and we're not relying on one or two people to carry the offense for us," Rouse said. "Everybody understands their role. In their mind, all of them expect to get the ball."

Leading the offense will be senior setter Ashley Jackson, who averaged more than seven assists per set last season. She will have some help in running the offense in sophomore transfer Jennifer Anderson. But Rouse also has other players who can set the ball.

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"So, honestly, we always have at least four setters on the floor," Rouse said. "If Ashley has to take the first ball, it's not a case where we're struggling because the young ladies know who has to take the second ball if Ashley has to take the first one. So it makes a difference. We didn't have that last year."

The Lady Tigers have a lot of hitters ready to step in and take the primary attack role. Juniors Terae Sweeting, Lorena Leao and Tatyana Robinson will share the hitting positions. Leao has been the second on the team in kills the last two years. She is a versatile player, who excels at serving and led the team in digs last year, and was third in assists. A team captain for this year, Rouse is looking for Leao to step up and be a leader on the floor.

"We're trying to get Lorena to be more vocal to throw the defense off," Rouse said. "We are working on her calling for the set, but knowing the play is going somewhere else. Playing wise, she's fine. We're just trying to get her to be a vocal person on the floor."

In the middle, the Lady Tigers return senior Asia Bailey, who is strong and healthy after struggling with injuries the last two years. Local product Jocolby Brown redshirted last year and is ready to contribute.

"I think she'll be a surprise in the conference," Rouse said of Brown. "And Asia has gotten a whole lot stronger."

Another hitter the Lady Tigers will be counting on this year is sophomore Liyah Davis, who played sparingly as a freshman.

"She really worked hard this summer," Rouse said.

Defensively, sophomore Je'Nae Saunders and junior Kelsey Green will handle the libero position, although Anderson can help there as well.

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"I think the best part of this team is everyone can play more than one position," Rouse said. "Everyone, with the exception of the two middles, can pass. And if they have to set, they can set, and they can hit. Everyone on the team can hit. They've all gotten stronger. It's not going to be where the opponents can key on a one player where the hit is coming from. That's a plus."

The Lady Tigers will also utilize their strong serving to score points. Last year, Benedict led NCAA Division II with 2.86 service aces per set, after ranking eighth in the country in 2011. Leao ranked sixth in the nation in aces last season. In Benedict's season-opener at Miles, the Lady Tigers recorded 19 aces.

"With the capability of the people who can serve on this team, I said we could get most of our points off the serve," Rouse said.

The Lady Tigers open their home schedule on Thursday against Paine in a tough SIAC East Division contest. Rouse said the East Division is the toughest in the SIAC, with defending champion Clark Atlanta and preseason favorite Albany State. Claflin and Paine also have strong programs.

But with a deep and versatile team, Rouse thinks the Lady Tigers could challenge for the SIAC title.