

2004 UCLA Men's Volleyball Outlook

After suffering through his most challenging season in 41 years, Head Coach Al Scates happily reports that the Bruins have “worked harder [in fall practice] than any team I’ve coached. I saw a lot of improvement and the players reported in very good physical condition, so we were able to work hard from the beginning.”

In addition, the Bruins signed the nation’s top-ranked recruiting class, as rated by Volleyball Magazine, and accepted the transfer papers from a promising young setter.

“It’s very competitive on the first court,” said Scates, the all-time leader with 1,059 career victories and 18 NCAA titles. “Nobody can relax. It’s the kind of practice environment that I like. The team is improving every day.”

To that end, Scates has the type of depth chart every coach envies—talent options and fierce competition at every position.

“We’ll be a much better team,” he said. “At the end of the year, we’ll be back where we belong.”

Following are capsule summaries of the Bruins’ personnel at each position.

SETTER

Four-year letterman Rich Nelson has completed his eligibility, leaving just two returning setters in the program. In addition, the Bruins signed one setter (who will probably redshirt the season) and acquired another who transferred into the program.

Sophomores **Dennis Gonzalez** and **Beau Peters** are currently battling for the starting job, with Gonzalez holding a slight edge.

“Dennis is the surprise of the pre-season,” said Scates. “He has improved his setting and his attitude greatly. The technical training Mike Sealy gave him [last year] on the second court has kicked in.

“He showed up in great physical condition and he’s getting to the ball quicker,” Scates continued.

Gonzalez, entering his third year in the program, played in just five matches last season, recording a career-high of 61 set assists against Lewis on March 5.

Sophomore transfer Beau Peters came to UCLA after spending one season at Long Beach State. Ironically, he set the 49ers to a five-game victory over the Bruins in Pauley Pavilion on Jan. 23, before losing his starting job. In two starts, he averaged 15.4 assists per game.

“Beau is a great competitor, who manages the court well,” said Scates. “He has good court sense. He is capable of starting. I’m comfortable with both setters running the offense.”

In pre-season matches, Gonzalez and Peters boasted similar statistics.

Redshirt sophomore **Aaron Dodd**, who had beat out Gonzalez last spring, has been moved behind Peters. True freshman **Julio “Gaby” Acevedo**, a talented young setter and future starter, will probably redshirt in 2004.

OUTSIDE HITTERS

Fourth-year junior **Jonathan Acosta** enters his second season as the starter at the H-1 position. Last year he enjoyed an injury-free campaign that saw him record 371 kills, hit for a .309 attack percentage, and average 3.8 kpg.

“Jonathan has a history of playing his best in tough matches,” said Scates. “He is a capable leader. That’s why he’s our captain this year.”

Acosta, who led the team with 21 double-digit kill matches, earned All-MPSF honors as a sophomore.

At the H-2 position is junior **Kris Kraushaar**, a left-hander who played in 18 matches last season. He recorded a career-high of 10 kills against UOP last year.

“Kris has improved his hitting and passing,” said Scates. “He is maturing into a fine hitter and he will pass half the court. He’s improved every year he’s been in our program.”

Backing up both positions are redshirt freshman **Paul George** and third-year sophomore **Damien Scott**. George, who originally signed with UCLA as a setter, can also play opposite, and Scott was a member of the 2000 Junior Olympics gold medal team.

“Paul George can pass half the court. He’s one of our primary passers,” said Scates. “On the few days this Fall that he could practice, Damien Scott was one of the best players on the court. He can play all five hitting positions.”

George redshirted last season. He was a member of the 2002 Chatsworth HS team that won the L.A. City title.

Scott split time with the football team in the Fall, earning a roster spot as a receiver on the scout team. Last year in volleyball, he played in just one match without recording any statistics.

“They are both good passers and each can back up Acosta and Kraushaar,” said Scates.

Senior **J.T. Wenger** is a streaky, hot hitter who has a chance to break into the starting lineup or help off the bench.

Also listed at this position are second-year freshman **Matthew Acosta** (Jonathan’s brother), an explosive jumper, who brings plenty of heat to his shots, and third-year sophomore **Saul Zemaitaitis**, a solid defensive player.

Last year’s most experienced player, junior **Gray Garrett**, is recovering from a wrist injury and was unavailable to practice in the Fall.

QUICK HITTERS

Despite the loss of All-American Scott Morrow, the Bruins in 2004 will feature one of the country’s most explosive offensive weapons at this position and a converted opposite who has responded well to a position change.

Fifth-year senior **Chris Peña** has established himself as one of the country’s most exciting net players, ranking among the national leaders in hitting percentage last season. As a junior, he improved in every offensive category, most notably blocking, where he led the team with 15 solo blocks and ranked second at 1.1 bpg.

“Chris is serving, hitting, and blocking better than last year,” said Scates. “He’s also running his routes much better than last year.”

Peña established a career-high of 21 kills vs. UC San Diego and matched a career-best by serving four aces against Stanford. He earned All-MPSF honors and enters this season ranked among the Top 10 on several UCLA charts.

At the other quick hitter’s spot is junior **Allan Vince**, whose breakout 27-kill performance against Pepperdine last season confirmed his talent. As a backup opposite, he averaged 3.3 kpg and hit .262 in 14 matches. In the pre-season, he proved to be the Bruins’ most effective hitter and blocker, recording a .548 hitting percentage and 11 total blocks, including four solos.

“Allan successfully made the switch from opposite to quick hitter in the Fall,” said Scates. “He was one of our best blockers and hitters.”

Expected to battle for playing time at this position are two-year letterman **Paul Johnson**, third-year sophomore **Nick Scheftic** and senior **Matt Shubin**.

Johnson started the majority of matches last season, tying a career-high of 14 kills against UCSD and serving a career-best four aces against UOP.

“Johnson showed up ready to play,” said Scates. “He was a player who missed a lot of practice time last season because of injuries. He didn’t miss any practice this Fall. He will continue to improve if he continues to work hard.”

Scheftic played four matches last season and averaged more than 1.0 bpg. He came on strong late in the Fall after recording 19 kills and hitting .388 in seven pre-season games.

“If Scheftic can improve his blocking, he would be the starter,” said Scates.

Shubin, who transferred from Pierce College after spending a year at Loyola Marymount, played in seven matches last season and averaged nearly 1.0 bpg. But a virus kept him out of most of Fall camp.

“When he’s in shape, he has the ability and experience to start,” said Scates.

Redshirt freshman **Patrick Nihipali** missed almost all of practice last season due to illness and more than three weeks of the six-week fall practice. He is currently at the bottom of the depth chart.

OPPOSITE

The opposite position could end up being a season-long battle between a true freshman and a fifth-year player. Heralded recruit **Steve Klosterman** will engage in a dogfight with senior **Marcin Jagoda**.

Jagoda entered camp in the best shape of his career only to be eclipsed by Klosterman, a three-time gold medalist in the Jr. National Team program.

Klosterman took 103 swings in Fall matches; Jagoda 35. Both need to improve their rate of success.

“Klosterman is the only freshman who will make an impact for us this year,” said Scates. “He’s a hard worker, he’s big, he can hit out of the back row, he’s a good server, passer, and blocker, and he can dig. He will play a lot for us his freshman year.”

In five pre-season matches, Klosterman averaged 3.4 kpg and recorded 11 digs, 10 total blocks and three aces.

“Marcin is one of the hardest workers in practice,” said Scates. “He’s contending for a starting spot. He hits the ball hard and has good leaping ability.”

Jagoda was expected to start last season until an ankle injury derailed his season. He played in two matches last season and managed to record a career-high of 21 kills in one of them.

Fourth-year junior **Brennan Prahler** is listed as the third opposite. He played in nine matches last season and spiked a career-high of 18 kills against Lewis.

LIBERO

Senior **Adam Shrader** is a three-year starter at this position and once again will be the Bruins’ primary passer. Last season, he passed more than 97% of his attempts successfully. He also ranks second on the career digs charts and among the Top 5 on the single season charts.

“Adam is one of the best liberos in the game,” said Scates. “His work ethic is great: he stays after practice and takes a lot of extra reps.”

Last season, Shrader earned All-MPSF honors for the third straight season, leading the team with 263 digs and 2.5 dpg. An excellent student, he earned All-MPSF academic honors in 2003.

Third-year sophomore **Aaron Wexler** is the backup at this position. “He has performed well in practice and also is a fine libero,” said Scates