

C'ville spikers strong

BY BRAD EMOUS
STAFF WRITER

This could be the year of the big hitter in Oberverland girls volleyball.

State Class A quarterfinalist Livonia Ladywood, 52-7 a year ago and six-time defending Catholic League champion, is already off to a 6-0 start thanks to the efforts of 6-foot-1 junior Jenny Young, who had 44 kills in Saturday's Midland Tournament.

And if that's not enough, Ladywood coach Tom Teeters has left and first-team All-Area selection Sarah Foglia, a 6-1 senior, for some strategic attacking from the setter's position.

Ladywood's stiffest challenge will come from Birmingham Marian, which handed the Blazers their first Central Division defeat in five years during a regular season match.

Marian is led by 6-1 lefty Kristy Kreher.

"Surprisingly the athletes we have are improving, but Marian has gotten a lot tougher," Teeters said. "We lost a lot from last year, but they have their two back."

Another local team which reached the state quarterfinals last year was Livonia Clarenceville (28-13-1). The Trojans won last year's Metro Conference regular season title, but were upset in the playoffs before making a run in the state tourney.

"The Trojans will be led by 6-1 senior middle-hitter Michelle Berry, a first-team All-Oberverland pick who has Division I potential."

"She realized what her weaknesses are and she's worked on them on her own — and that's a big step for someone her age," said Clarenceville coach Aliaha Love, who was named Oberverland Coach of the Year.

Berry's twin sister Melissa, also at 6-1, should give Clarenceville one of the top one-two blocks in the area. Melissa spent last year in Sweden as a foreign exchange student.

For Livonia Stevenson (28-9-4), the top attacker will be

Stephanie Dutz, a 5-11 junior who was called up late last year from the JV squad. She gave Ladywood fans in last year's district final.

If Stevenson can contend in the Western Lakes Activities Association, the Spartans will have to surpass perhaps the area's top returning team — Plymouth Salem (49-6) — led by a trio of powerful hitters — 6-1 Amanda Abraham, 5-10 Angie Sillmon and 6-9 Jenny Trout.

Meanwhile, another Lakes Division team, Westland John Glenn (17-19-7) lost five starters, but will bank on newcomer Noelle Swartz, a 5-10 1/2 sophomore.

In the Western Division of the WLA, Livonia Franklin (19-19-14) figures to have its strongest team in recent memory.

Patriot coach Ann Hutchins, who just returned from officiating the NCAA Division II women's nationals, has a pair of top-line hitters in 5-10 senior captain Brooke Hansen and 6-11 sophomore Tara Morrill.

Livonia Churchill (20-11), guided by the dean of Oberverland coaches — Mike Hughes, now in his 23rd season — will put a scrappy team on the floor.

Hughes, however, can rely on 5-9 senior outside hitter Jessica Sherman and 6-foot junior middle-hitter (from the right side) Lauren Ruprecht for some offensive attacking.

"This could be the most competitive year since I've been coaching," Hughes said. "Canton is the defending champion in our division and has a new coach (Cynthia Montgomery)."

"Franklin has two huge steps up. They have good athletes and good size. Northville also has a tough block at the net."

Wayne Memorial (9-30), under second-year coach Laura Fisher, a former Madonna University setter, is moving down to the Mega Conference's White Division from the Red.

The Zebras will run a 4-2 offensive attack keyed by two junior middle hitters — 5-11 Beth Molitor and 5-10 Kristin Kreher.

See capsule previews.

CAPSULE OUTLOOK ON OBSERVERLAND VOLLEYBALL TEAMS

LIVONIA CHURCHILL

Head coach: Mike Hughes, 23rd season.
League affiliation: Western Lakes Activities Association (Western Division).
Season opener: Dec. 17 at Westland John Glenn.
Last year's overall record: 20-10.

Notable losses to graduation: Megan McGinley (first-team All-Oberverland), Lori Leszczynski (third-team All-Area), Kari Butwicki, Danielle Sokolowsky, Andrea Wit, Amanda Estes.

Leading returnees: Jessica Sherman, 5-9 senior outside-hitter; Jenny Dutz, 5-11 Jr. OH; Lisa Fabelinski, 5-7 Jr. OH; Susan Hill, 5-5 Jr. OH; Jennifer Laidlaw, 5-8 Sr. setter; Beth Rupkowski, 5-10 Sr. middle-hitter.

Promising newcomers: Lauren Ruprecht, 6-0 Jr. OH; Courtney Lim, 5-5 Jr. OH; Luca Siera, 5-6 Jr. OH; Jessica Mackey, 5-7 Jr. setter; Megan Sheehan, 5-3 Soph. OH/defensive specialist; Shannon Munn, 5-9 Soph. MH; Kristin Leszczynski, 5-7 Soph. setter.

Hughes' 1997-98 outlook: "It's going to be a year where we don't have a lot of experience. It will be a learning year. We hope to make steady progress and be there sometime by mid-season. It's going to take awhile."

"We'll play very scrappy defensively, especially the younger kids who are quick. We'll be able to do things defensively that we haven't done the last few years."

"We need someone to step up and put the ball on the floor. We're not that quick up front."

LIVONIA FRANKLIN

Head coach: Ann Hutchins, seventh year.
League affiliation: WLA (Western Division).
Season opener: 9 a.m. Friday, Jan. 2 at Romulus Tournament.

Last year's overall record: 19-19-10.
Notable losses to graduation: Randi Wolfe (second-team All-Area), Cathy Wolfe, Melissa Zewacki, Missy Blanton, Jenine Dosman.

Leading returnees: Brooke Hansen, 5-10 Sr. MH (captain); Danielle Wenning, 5-5 Sr. OH; Sarah Gosh, 5-8 Jr. OH; Melissa Maxwell, 5-7 Jr. OH/def. specialist; Jackie Ziem, 5-5 Sr. def. specialist; Jamie Wenning, 5-7 Sr. OH.

Promising newcomers: Tara Morrill, 6-11 Soph. OH; Lindsay Sopka, 5-9 Soph. setter; Andrea Kmet, 5-9 Soph. MH; Karen Kucsko, 5-6 Jr. OH; Lindsay Duprey, 5-4 Jr. setter; Nicole Boyd, 5-10 Jr. MH; Paula Sanchez, 5-10 Jr. MH/OH.

Hutchins' 1997-98 outlook: "I think we're considerably better than last year, particularly attacking and blocking."

"With Junior Olympics, everyone has more experience. We have talented newcomers at all three positions — setting, outside and attacking. We're better balanced."

"The key is how the groups blend in together."

"Our success depends on how our passing goes and whether we can go with a faster offense."

LIVONIA STEVENSON

Head coach: Kelly Graham, fifth season.

League affiliation: WLA (Lakes Division).

Season opener: 9 a.m. Saturday at Delta Invitational.

Last year's overall record: 20-9-4.
Notable losses to graduation: Nicole Tobin (first-team All-Area); Gina Paimar (second-team All-Area); Kelly Kistay, Beth Pinnock.

Leading returnees: Stephanie Dutz, 5-11 Jr. OH; Lindsay Pfeiffer, 5-7 Jr. OH; Stacey Nasr, 5-8 Sr. OH; Becky Peterson, 5-4 Sr. def. specialist; Jodi Lalland, 5-8 Sr. def. specialist; Dawn Kistay, 5-7 Sr. OH.

Promising newcomers: Sarah Witrock, 5-7 Jr. setter; Irena Bickanova, 5-10 Sr. setter (exchange student from Czech Republic); Korie Lalland, 5-10 Soph. MH; Brenda Pederson, 5-4 Jr. def. specialist; Kristi Cope, 5-7 Jr. OH.

Graham's 1997-98 outlook: "We've had to reconfigure our lineup because a couple players didn't come back."

"The strength of this team is senior leadership. Stephanie Dutz and our setters. With Bickanova we give height, setting and can hit with power on right side. Dutz is a big, strong hitter."

"The most difficult part is communication in our offense."

"I think we can be in the top three in our division."

WESTLAND JOHN GLENN

Head coach: Stacy Graham, fourth season.
League affiliation: WLA (Lakes Division).
Season opener: Dec. 13 (finished 0-3-1 in South Lyon Invitational).

Last year's overall record: 17-19-7.
Notable losses to graduation: Chrissy Harkless (first-team All-Area), Jamie Rome, Jenny Smith, Beth Bussard, Rebecca Harden.

Leading returnees: Jamie Barker, 5-8 Jr. OH; Megan Brady, 5-8 middle-blocker; Malia Hamilton, 5-7 Sr. OH; Jessica Pickup, 5-8 Sr. OH/def. specialist.

Promising newcomers: Jessica Lefebvre, 5-7 Jr. setter; Noelle Swartz, 5-11 Soph. MB; Megan McLeod, 5-8 Soph. OH/MB; Melanie Panyard, 5-8 Jr. OH; Laura Engstrom, 5-8 Jr. def. specialist; Amanda Bell, 5-5 Jr. def. specialist; Kristin Kohn, 5-8 Jr. OH.

Graham's 1997-98 outlook: "We lost five starters so this will be a building year for us. But of the 11 players, nine played AAU."

"This will be a very different team than in the past."

"Swartz is a very strong blocker in the middle and McLeod is a good, all-around player — but both need experience."

"They work really hard and communicate well. They're great kids, very coachable."

"We have a lot of things to work on, but they show a lot of promise."

WAYNE MEMORIAL

Head coach: Laura Fisher, second season.
League affiliation: Mega Conference (White Division).

Season opener: Dec. 17 at Westland John Glenn.

Last year's overall record: 9-30.
Notable losses to graduation: Tammy Raines, Wendy Sent, Pam Troch.

Leading returnees: Kristin Boll, 5-5 Sr. set-

ter; Kristin Keher, 5-10 Jr. MH; Bethany Molitor, 5-11 Jr. MH; Rachel Raines, 5-8 Jr. OH; Bridget O'Rourke, 5-5 Jr. def. specialist; Sayd Stach, 5-7 Jr. OH.

Promising newcomers: Erika Haley, 5-5 Sr. def. specialist; Jenny Wolfe, 5-5 Jr. setter; Natalia Thomas, 5-7 Jr. OH; Courtney James, 5-7 Jr. OH; Carly James, 5-7 Jr. OH; Nicole Suchan, 5-5 Jr. def. specialist; Melissa Jones, 5-5 Soph. def. specialist; Stacy Long, 5-11 Jr. MH.

Fisher's 1997-98 outlook: "I'm very, very excited because I think it's going to be a wonderful season. I have great expectations because we're extremely talented."

"Every single player is strong defensively and offensively. We have a tall team. We're going to run a 4-2 offense."

LIVONIA LADYWOOD

Head coach: Tom Teeters, 12th season.
League affiliation: Catholic League (Central Division).

Season opener: Dec. 13 (won Midland Tournament with 60 record).

Last year's overall record: 52-7.
Titles won last year: Central Division, Catholic League playoffs, Schoolcraft Invitational, Class A district and regional.

Notable losses to graduation: Nicole Vondracek (first-team All-Area), Kristin Dause (second-team All-Area), Cathy Hermann.

Leading returnees: Sarah Foglia, 6-1 Sr. setter (first-team All-Area); Jenny Lacapelle, 5-9 Sr. MB; MaryLu Hemme, 5-10 Sr. MB; Katie Brogan, 5-8 Sr. setter/OH; Jenny Young, 6-1 Jr. OH; Natalia Rosell, 5-9 Sr. OH; Tracey Dewitt, 5-6 Jr. def. specialist; Andrea Rahley, 5-7 Sr. def. specialist; Leslie Orzech, 5-10 Sr. MB.

Promising newcomers: Rebecca Pawlik, 5-7 Jr. def. specialist; Patty Horst, 5-8 Soph. OH; Rebecca Thornton, 5-7 Jr. setter/OH; Mickie Finn, 5-8 Jr. OH; Deana Labure, 5-10 Jr. OH.

Teeters' 1997-98 outlook: "This is the oldest team, in terms of grade, I've ever had. We're a lot stronger than I thought originally."

"Young has improved a lot, a much stronger athlete now and versatile. She can hit from the right and left side and is an all-around player now."

"Lacapelle is faster and jumps better. She can play middle and is one of our best defensive players. She's a pure athlete and can do a lot of things."

"Hemme has improved on her hitting. She's a higher jumper and can hit outside and play front row."

"Foglia, a left-hander, can also set in back row. Defensively, she's improved a lot. We're still looking for her to improve her blocking."

"She's also doing some good jump serving."

"Katie Brogan taken on more responsibility and for us she's more valuable at setting. She's filling a spot left by Vondracek and doing quite well."

"Rosell was a serving specialist last year and played a little front row. Now she's playing front, right and some left side. She has a good spin serve that helps us out in many games."

"Dewitt, who saw some action last year, is coming to back row and doing good job for us defensively."

defensively."

MURON VALLEY LUTHERAN

Head coach: Jeff Hale, fourth season.
League affiliation: Michigan Independent Athletic Conference (Red Division).
Season opener: 6 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 6 vs. Michigan School of the Deaf at Livonia St. Paul's Lutheran School.

Last year's overall record: 0-18.
Notable losses to graduation: None.

Leading returnees: Stacie Graves, 5-8 Soph. setter; Amy Day, 5-5 Jr. OH; Katie Orlandino, 5-8 Jr. OH; Jessica Whitaker, 5-8 Soph. OH; Daniel Joly, 5-8 Soph. setter/def. specialist; Stephanie Graves, 5-10 Jr. MH; Gretchen Groszinski, 5-10 Soph. OH.

Promising newcomers: Regina Piskunova, 5-5 Fr. OH; Nikal Valad, 5-6 Fr. def. specialist; Rachel Zehn, 5-5 Fr. OH/def. specialist; Cassandra Zull, 4-8 Fr. def. specialist.

Hale's 1997-98 outlook: "I think we're finally going to win a match. It looks very promising with seven returning girls from last year. We're very excited."

"I thought we did OK in our scrimmage last Saturday. The girls have hope. With the four freshmen, we feel we're going to be decent. We're still a very young team. We're looking to the juniors for leadership."

"Graves will be our team leader this year."

LIVONIA CLARENCEVILLE

Head coach: Aliaha Love, seventh season.
League affiliation: Metro Conference.
Season opener: 9 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 3 at Saginaw Valley State Invitational.

Last year's overall record: 28-13-1.
Titles won last year: Metro Conference (regular season), Class C district and regional championships.

Notable losses to graduation: Amy Jones (third-team All-Area), Nicole Ried, Kelly Ackroyd.

Leading returnees: Michelle Berry, 6-0 Sr. MH (first-team All-Area); Jackie Kibiko, 5-3 Sr. def. specialist; Agnieszka Palaz, 5-9 Sr. OH; Kristin Jaber, 5-5 Sr. OH; Kristina Skaria, 5-7 Sr. setter/middle-hitter; Joanna Skaria, 5-7 Sr. OH.

Promising newcomers: Melissa Berry, 6-0 Sr. MH; Theresa Lathrop, 5-8 Sr. OH; Jessica Syle, 5-9 Jr. setter; Sarah McNeilly, 5-9 Fr. OH/MH; Ashley Pearson, 5-4 Fr. def. specialist; Vera Skaria, 5-5 Soph. def. specialist.

Love's 1997-98 outlook: "We're developing a new setter, Kristina Skaria. She has good hands and feet."

"We need consistency at whatever we're trying to do."

"Melissa Berry was a foreign exchange student last year in Sweden. She's developed confidence. She's a very good blocker and reader. We're working on developing her in the back row."

"Lathrop's hitting is where it should be. She had a broken ankle and it's slowing her down physically a little bit, but not mentally."

"Our defense is going to make or break us. Our offense is not a concern. We have a lot of very good hitters."

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