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VOLLEYBALL

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Volleyball Opens 2005 Campaign Against Northern Illinois On Friday

First serve is set for 7:00 p.m. (CST) at the Flames Athletic Center.

Aug. 24, 2005

Chicago, Ill. - University of Illinois at Chicago Head Volleyball Coach [Nancy Mueller](#) brought an attitude with her upon her arrival on the West Side of Chicago in 2004.

A winning one.

That winning mentality rubbed off on Mueller's new troops, as the Flames improved from a seventh-place standing in 2003 to a fourth-place finish in the Horizon League in her first season with UIC.

"I was very, very impressed with what we were able to accomplish (last season)," Mueller said. "From seven to four is a huge jump for this team and this program.

"I think it made a statement about where this program is heading."

If last season is any indication, the Flames are heading to the top of the Horizon League...and fast.

"I am looking forward to this season," Mueller said. "We learned a lot about ourselves and what we're capable of last season and I'm looking forward to building on it.

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Junior middle hitter Ambria Springer and her teammates will open the

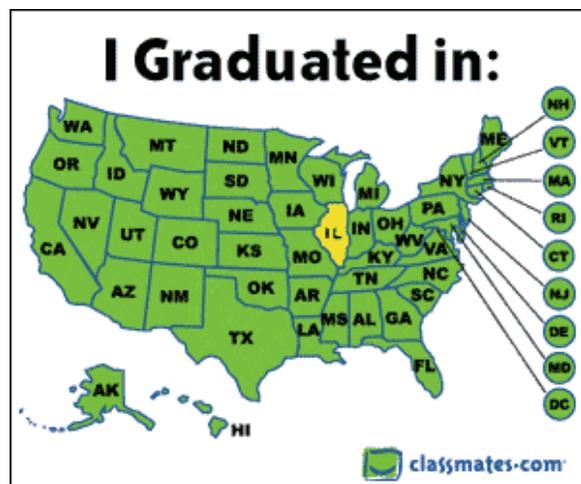
"We have a young squad with only two seniors, but we have some players with some good experience which will be crucial heading into conference play."

Leading the charge for the Flames will be All-Horizon League junior setter [Katie Kozak](#). As a sophomore, Kozak dished out 1,332 assists, good for fifth in school-history in a single season.

"Kozak is going to be the glue that holds this team together and this team knows that," Mueller said. "Katie likes to challenge herself every single day and she's also going to challenge the people around her to do better."

"We're fortunate that she's young, yet has great experience, and these kids are going to respond to her," Mueller continued. "Our team feeds off her energy and that's going to be important for us."

On the receiving end of Kozak's sets will be sophomore outside hitter/right side [Katarina Nedeljkovic](#) and junior middle hitter [Ambria Springer](#).



Nedeljkovic, a 2004 Horizon League All-Newcomer selection, garnered 220 kills and a team-best 44 service aces in her rookie campaign with the Flames.

"Kat is a really passionate kid who loves the game and just wanted an opportunity to compete at this level and she really skyrocketed from this experience," Mueller said. "She's very versatile, she can play outside, right side, can hit the heavy ball and she's fearless."

"I think she's going to be a huge threat for us," Mueller continued. "It's very exciting to have her for another three years."

"We were very lucky to get her as a true freshman."

Mueller believes that Springer merely scratched the surface as a sophomore, and is ready to explode as one of the Horizon League's premier players in 2005. During her first season as a starter, Springer totaled 291 kills and led the squad with 116 total blocks.

"If Bria stays healthy, she's not only going to be one of our best players, but one of the best players in the league," Mueller said. "She's gained a lot of confidence, so she's more eager for the ball than she was last season. "This is going to elevate her game and her confidence," Mueller continued. "She knows she has to be on, for us to win."

Mueller's deepest position on the court is the libero, where incumbent starter [Liz Hrebic](#) will have to battle both juniors [Jillian Kufra](#) and [Julie Popp](#).

"When you have good players that are pushing each other on a daily basis, it only makes them better to hold onto that spot," Mueller said.

season against Northern Illinois on Friday.

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As a freshman, Hrebic led the Flames with 365 digs on the campaign, and was one of only two UIC players who appeared in all 120 games.

"The reason we brought Liz to this program is because of her personality," Mueller said. "She's a competitor who hates to lose and has very high expectations of the people around her.

"One of the things we do when we recruit is look for that personality that is going to generate chemistry and Liz's personality is very intense and electric," Mueller continued. "If she's not doing her job, she's okay with you being in her face to make her better.

"That's the kind of personality we want on the team."

Kufta, who has seen extensive action for the Flames in her first two seasons, tallied a career-high 258 digs in 2004.

"Jill's strength is serve-receive, but this spring she got a lot better at defense," Mueller said. "So she's going to challenge Liz for that libero spot and that's going to make Liz a better player.

"Jill is a very consistent player who is hungry for more responsibility," Mueller continued. "That's going to make our defense better and now you're adding a very talented [Julie Popp](#) to the mix, our defense should readily improve.

"Liz (Hrebic) has her work cut out for her."

Popp, who has battled severe leg injuries over her first three seasons with the Flames, expects to be at full strength once the 2005 campaign begins. Last season, Popp appeared in nine games and finished with 10 digs and two service aces.

"I think that Julie is going to be a definite threat when the knee is 100 percent because she has personality and people respond to her," Mueller said. "She is very direct with her teammates and expects a lot out of them, and this team responds to her.

"She has worked extremely hard to return to this team this season, so she's earned a ton of respect from her teammates and her coaching staff throughout this process," Mueller continued. "Julie just wants to play as much as she possibly can and she's going to push for that spot.

"She's not going to sit on the sidelines and watch."

Also recovering from a knee injury is senior middle hitter [Tisha Graf](#). Graf is expected to return to the court once Horizon League play begins. As a junior, Graf totaled 96 kills and 28 blocks in 51 games.

"Tish proved to be a great asset at the end of the season for us, and I think her experience will be needed with such a young squad," Mueller said. "Tish has a very realistic picture of what she's capable of, and if she can do that in a consistent manner, she'll be on the floor for us.

"She's all about the team, what's best for the team and she understands her role."

Junior [Camille Mankus](#) figures to serve as Mueller's `utility' player, being able to play both the right side and outside hitter positions for UIC. Last season, Mankus totaled 33 kills in 34 games for the Flames.

"Camille had a great spring," Mueller said. "Camille has the potential to be a starter for us because she is very consistent for us on the outside and she hits a heavy ball.

"If she can improve on her blocking," Mueller said. "She will be out there."

Rounding out the returning players for Mueller's squad is senior [Catherine Roy](#) and sophomore [Ashley Martin](#). Both are expected to compete for playing time at outside hitter.

The 2005 roster will feature five new players on the Flames' squad, and Mueller believes that each and every one of them will make an impact in their rookie season.

Outside hitters [Maura McCarthy](#) and [Kirsten Thompson](#) bring a wealth of experience to the Flames, as each transferred from Division I schools.

McCarthy, a junior, comes to UIC via Illinois State, while Thompson, a sophomore, is a transfer from UT-Martin.

McCarthy, a former teammate of Kozak at Chicago perennial high school power, Mother McAuley, totaled 102 kills and 105 digs for the Redbirds in two seasons

"Maura was a huge transfer for us and she's going to get a lot of playing time because of her experience at the high Division I level at Illinois State," Mueller said. "Maura is going to be one of our go-to outside hitters."

In her freshman year for the Skyhawks, Thompson totaled 80 kills in 52 games. Mueller figures that the Hawthorne Woods, Ill., native will step in and contribute immediately.

"Kirsten is probably the most versatile player that we have coming in," Mueller said. "She's a very good jumper who is going to be a solid, consistent contributor for us.

"She's definitely going to push for a right side or outside hitter position."

Mueller is eagerly awaiting the arrival of her three freshmen, including setter [Nicole Dolgner](#), middle hitter [Keri Hee](#) and middle hitter/right side [Christin Hunt](#).

"Our freshmen are all a threat as well, which is a positive component to add to our current roster," Mueller said. "All three of them could potentially get a lot of playing time."

Dolgner comes from a winning program as she helped Waupun High School in Waupun, Wis., to a pair of WIAA Division

2 championships during her tenure.

"(Dolgnier) knows how to win and how to get it done," Mueller said. "She does a nice job of running and quarterbacking her team."

Mueller sees a lot of similarities between Hee and Springer on the court.

"Keri is a quick athletic middle who is very good laterally from side to side and a very big jumper," Mueller said. "She's never sat on the sidelines so she's going to want to be in there and push for a starting role."

Mueller believes that Hunt can be an imposing presence, whether as a middle hitter or at right side.

"Christin is 6-1, and has played both the middle and the right side," Mueller said. "So her versatility is going to help us out.

"If we need a bigger block on the right side we have the option of putting her in to be a bigger block for some matches."

As a whole, Mueller knows that her team will not overpower any opposing team, but one thing is for certain.

They will not be outworked.

"We are very aware of what our goals are, and we're going to do everything that we need to, in order to reach those goals," Mueller said. "I think it's that attitude that we carry into practice every day that is going to give us an edge."

That edge will be needed as UIC will serve as the host for the 2005 Horizon League Volleyball Tournament from November 17th to the 20th.

In order to better prepare her squad for the postseason, Mueller scheduled the UIC Invitational, a grueling four-match tournament on Labor Day weekend.

"I wanted the kids to sleep in their own bed and I wanted them to feel comfortable and successful in their own gym," Mueller said. "I wanted a format of a grueling schedule early on so they can get a taste for what it's going to be like later in the season."

Mueller hopes that early preseason success for her squad will translate into a successful tournament run for the Flames, and that's not out of the question, according to the second-year skipper.

"I think we're going to surprise some people," Mueller said. "They don't know what to expect from UIC, other than that they'll come to play hard.

"My challenge is going to be to get the kids ready psychologically, emotionally and mentally motivated to compete with confidence," Mueller continued. "It's going to be a dogfight with every team, so if we can play consistently and the players I project to be our go-to players can play at a high, consistent level, we'll be a solid team."