Volleyball ready for breakthrough season

By Nick Phillips
Editor

“The days when people don’t respect Pembroke volley- ball, has passed. They have to now.”

In years past, this statement from UNCP head volleyball coach Jeff Billington might have been, oh, a bit of wishful thinking. Not in 2011. In what he calls his most talented team to date at UNCP, Billington is excited to discuss his team’s upcoming campaign.

“We have enough talent on this team to be playing full of ability and depth,” Billington said.

“Potential is potential. You still have to realize it,” he added.

Why shouldn’t Billington be excited about his Lady Braves?

With a roster that sports five seniors, three juniors, three sophomores and three freshmen, it is not only one of the most balanced rosters in recent memory, but it is one that has ability and depth.

That depth includes senior Rebecca Morgan, whose play last season earned her a spot on the PBC All-Conference team. Her abilities have also placed her on the PBC preseason All-Conference team as the 2011 season begins.

Billington also hinted that there are several players, including Morgan, whom we could see on the end-of-season All-Conference team. He also said that there could potentially be a freshman of the Year on this year’s squad.

“The last time the Lady Braves saw that honor bestowed on a player was when now-se- nior Allie Schneider received the award in 2008.

The balanced roster also is proving to have the most depth Billington has seen.

“Talents and ability and up and down the bench ‘makes my job harder, because I have to figure out how to satisfy everybody,’” Billington jokingly said.

He was also quick to point out that the depth allows the freshmen to ease their way into the program as opposed to years past where they were thrown into major roles.

For the Lady Braves, the season is broken down into four stages – the forming, storming, norming and performing stages. As it enters the beginning of their 2011 season, Billington said that the team is in the middle of the storming stage.

“These are the same four stages as last year, when Billington said his team ended up getting stuck in one stage and never advancing to the next stage.

“This is the key to it. Right last year. We peaked too early, then we had some injuries, then we ended up losing our last four matches,” Billington said.

In 2010, the Lady Braves sat at 19-10 entering those last four matches, eventually dropping all four to finish the regular season at 19-14.

UNCP then fell in the opening round of the PBC Tournament to end their stumble to the finish line.

Billington believes this team will be able to do the same.

“I am very optimistic and have high expectations for them,” he said.

Our ultimate goals are to be in the top three (in the PBC) Ultimately our goal is to go to nationals and get an NCAA bid and be in the top in the region,” Billington said.

With the talent we have, I think there is a good possibility of that as well,” Billington added.

One nice perk of having an older team is that they can help the newcomers adapt, as the Lady Braves upperclassmen are showing more leadership and are helping the teaching process.

“The hardest thing is getting the newcomers up to speed with everything,” Billington said.

“The intricacy of our offense is what takes time – developing that chemistry and being able to be on the same page,” he added.

Billington and assistant coach Kris Wejciech both raved over the amount of energy and competitiveness the newcomers have brought to the team.

Wejciech pointed to a recent 7a.m. practice that had the Lady Braves “hanging balls at each other” and pushing everyone else to be that much better.

“It’s going to be a fun season,” Billington said of the Lady Braves’ 2011 outlook.

“I’ve been here seven years, and I believe the amount of work we’ve put into this is definitely going to bear fruit now,” he added.

Despite all the talk about what this season can be, Billington couldn’t help but look into the future.

“The cool thing is we’re going to be really good next year, too,” he said.

Hold on coach. Make 2011 a memorable season first. The pieces are in place.

Gibbs steps down; Johnson moves up

By Curtis Brooks
Asst. Sports Editor

After five seasons at the helm of the UNCP wrestling program, former head coach Jamie Gibbs resigned this summer, and Othello Johnson was named head coach in the wrestling program’s history.

On July 15, Gibbs stepped down as UNCP head coach to become the first full-time coach at NCAA Division III Bald- win-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio.

Gibbs took over as head coach of UNCP prior to the 2006-2007 season and led the Braves to top 30 national finishes in each of the last five seasons. Under Gibbs, nine individuals, seven Braves have become All-Americans, as well as eight student-athletes being named to the NWCA Divi- sion III All-Academic Team.

Gibbs helped send 16 UNCP wrestlers to the NCAA Division II National Championships in his five seasons in Pembroke. Individually, the Braves compiled a 51-40 dual meet record in five seasons and posted its best finish by being ranked 11th during the regular season and tied for 17th at the 2011 NCAA Division II Championship tournament.

On Aug. 9, Johnson was handed the reigns to the program after being an as- sistant coach for each of the last five seasons. Johnson is familiar with what has been done in the past and what needs to be done in the future for the Braves to continue to progress.

“I am very honored to take over such a successful program,” Johnson said.

“I look forward to continuing the success the program has built over the last five years under Coach Jamie Gibbs. I believe there is much more UNCP wrestling capable of, and I am very excited to be lead- ing the Braves into the fu- ture,” he added.

Prior to becoming an as- sistant at UNCP, Johnson was a student assistant coach at UNCP-Greensboro.

He also serves as a camp instructor for the annual Ken Chertow Wrestling Camps and has attended each of the last three National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA) conventions.