

2003 UCLA Men's Volleyball Outlook

Head Coach Al Scates enters his 41st season at the helm of the nation's most storied volleyball program with the same mindset as his first season: win the national championship. He will face many challenges and decisions along the journey to a 19th title, but at the end of the day, all opponents know the road to the title runs through UCLA.

With the initial loss of three starters to begin the 2003 season, Scates will be developing some new talent at the advent of the season. However, unlike the past few years when untimely injuries derailed the Bruins' stretch run, in 2003, he will welcome an infusion of talent in April that will bolster the Bruins' fortunes in the league and NCAA Tournaments.

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

SETTERS

Senior **Rich Nelson** returns for his final season and third year as a starter. He has entered the UCLA record books in career and single season set assists and has improved his defense and blocking.

"Rich has developed into one of the finest setters in the country," said Scates. "Our hitting average will improve this year, and Rich knows exactly where all our hitters like the ball."

Nelson ranks fourth on the UCLA career set assists list and sixth and eighth on the single season lists. He also improved his dig average last season. He earned All-MPSF Third Team honors in 2002.

Backing up Nelson will be third-year sophomore **Jimmy Sepulveda** and redshirt freshman **Dennis Gonzalez**.

Sepulveda played in four matches last season, mostly as a serving specialist. Gonzalez served as the Bruins' second string setter in the fall and has earned the No. 2 spot.

"Gonzalez is confident with the first and second teams," said Scates. "He has a lot of ability."

OUTSIDE HITTERS

Sophomore **Jonathan Acosta** returns as the focal point of the offense. Last season, despite playing in just 14 matches, he led the team by averaging more than four kills per game. Even better news is that he has remained healthy from a nagging abdominal injury that plagued him much of his first two years.

“He has changed his technique without any loss of [hitting] velocity,” said Scates. “The result is that he stayed healthy throughout the fall season.”

In the past, Acosta would reinjure himself every few weeks and sit out more than he played. This fall, he played in every preseason match, made every road trip and missed no practice.

Acosta provided a glimpse of his tremendous potential last season at the Outrigger Tournament when he was named the event’s Most Valuable Player and earned AVCA and MPSF Player of the Week honors.

A full season of regular playing time could make him UCLA’s 50th first-team All-American.

Backing up Acosta will be redshirt sophomore **Brennan Prahler** and second-year freshman **Damien Scott**. Prahler played in 12 matches last season, Scott was impressive in the preseason.

Opposite Acosta in the lineup, Scates expects second-year freshman **Saul Zemaitaitis** to step in for departed Matt Komer.

Although Zemaitaitis did not play during the Fall schedule, he has the head coach’s respect.

“He’s an all-around player—a great digger and passer, who is good at the net,” said Scates. “Right now he looks like the starter.”

Battling Zemaitaitis will be fourth-year junior **Jesse Debban**, who was sidelined last season with a broken leg. He was given major playing time during the Fall and may emerge as the starter as the season progresses.

“Debban was very solid in the Fall,” said Scates. “He’s ready. He has the potential to be a very solid blocker and he scores a lot of points with his float serve.”

Sophomore **Kris Kraushaar**, who earned a letter by playing in 10 matches last season, is listed No.3 at this position.

“Kris played a lot as a true freshman and has demonstrated that he is a solid passer, plays good defense and has a good jump serve,” said Scates. “Like Debban, he just has to hit for a higher average.”

QUICK HITTERS

The Bruins’ deepest position suffered the worst loss at the end of Fall camp: senior All-American **Scott Morrow** underwent knee surgery in early November.

Fortunately, the Bruins recruited for this position and boast a solid stable of players to handle the job until Morrow returns, possibly in February.

At one starting spot, two-year letterman **Chris Peña** returns as a much improved player. Last season he hit .418 and averaged 2.8 kills per game in his first season as a starter. Scates is pleased with his improvement this year.

“His blocking has improved a lot since last year,” said Scates. “He’s a great offensive weapon who opens up a lot of opportunities for other players.”

Junior **Matt Shubin** and sophomore **Paul Johnson** are battling for the other quick hitter’s spot. Right now Shubin, a former Pierce College standout, has the edge. Johnson played solidly last season in Morrow’s place, averaging 1.2 blocks per game, 2.3 kills per game and hitting .403.

Redshirt freshman **Nick Scheftic** and true freshman **Patrick Nihipali** are listed behind Peña.

OPPOSITES

Junior **Marcin Jagoda**, who earned a letter as a redshirt freshman in 2001, emerged in a fierce battle for the starting job at opposite.

“As a left-handed hitter, he gives us an advantage from the right side, and he’ll take 90% of his sets from there,” said Scates. “He fit in very well with the first team when (Allan) Vince got hurt.”

Sophomore **Allan Vince** received most of the playing time in the Fall at this position, but suffered a minor injury during the last week of practice. Jagoda, who began the Fall near the bottom of the depth chart, stepped in and won the job.

Competition still will be tough at this spot with returning letterman **David Russell** listed behind Vince. In addition, Scates will welcome the services of prep All-American **Matt McKinney** in April when basketball season ends. **James Jessen** also will join the team in January after the football season.

LIBERO

Junior **Adam Shrader** earned Libero of the Year honors last season by ranking second nationally in digs per game and recording a personal best of 303 digs.

“Adam is an outstanding passer and he’s our best digger,” said the head coach. “We give him more passing responsibility than anyone on the team. He’s improved every season.”

After two seasons, Shrader ranks 11th on the UCLA career digs list.

Listed behind Shrader is redshirt freshman **Aaron Wexler**, who could start for most teams, according to the head coach.