

SIUE women's volleyball team will feature significant depth

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EDWARDSVILLE – When SIUE volleyball Head Coach [Leah Johnson](#) comes to practice, she sees 16 individuals ready to compete for a spot in the starting lineup.

Every day since the Cougars started preseason practice, it has been a spirited battle for positions and has opened up opportunities for the whole team.

"The nice thing about having a deep roster is that your practice atmosphere is infinitely more competitive. We've worked hard to design practices so that every person has an equal opportunity to compete for playing time," said Johnson.

With the deepest roster ever at SIUE, Johnson has been data driven. The team regularly quantifies every play while scrimmaging. It has brought a few players to the top, and it has solidified the notion that not one position on the court has been settled on who will start when the Cougars play their season opener Friday at Wright State.

"Across the board, there is no guarantee," noted Johnson.

"[Ashley Witt](#) (Lincoln, Nebraska) was just named preseason All-[Ohio Valley Conference](#) and is a great player, but her spot is not guaranteed. It's that competitive."

Another example of the competitiveness is the setter position where three-year starter [Mallory Mangun](#) (Joliet, Illinois) and redshirt freshman [Samantha Knight](#) (Orland Park, Illinois) both have been impressive.

"Right now Mallory and Samantha are competing to either own a 5-1 offense or argue they are both equal and that we'll run a 6-2 offense (with both players setting during the match)," said Johnson. "There are so many factors that play into that decision such as which hitters they connect with the best."

The Cougars looking to replace two-time All-OVC pick Kristen Torre in the middle are [Taylor Joens](#) (Johnston, Iowa), [Carley Ramich](#) (Nenah, Wisconsin), [Madison McKinley](#) (Russellville, Arkansas), [Kiana Fields](#) (Lafayette, Indiana) and [Annie Ellis](#) (Edwardsville, Illinois).

Joens is transitioning from the outside to the middle this season and has showed tremendous gains in the preseason, according to Johnson. Ramich was fourth in kills on the team last season. McKinley, Fields and Ellis are freshmen seeking to make a difference.

"We're going to keep training everyone there to make sure we have depth there and make sure we are healthy," said Johnson.

The outside hitter position remains a key one for the Cougars. Witt and [Emily Harrison](#) (Thorntown, Indiana) are the top returners.

"We are taking every pin hitter, cross training them, and recording stats on the left and the right sides. We can get an idea of who wins more in what position, and we're seeing trends on who is doing better on the left and who is better on the right," said Johnson.

The Cougars also have a host of options from outside hitters.

[Jackie Scott](#) (Wildwood, Missouri), who transferred last spring to the Cougars from Western Kentucky, provides an interesting six-rotation option for the Cougars. [Taylor Held](#) (Brookfield, Wisconsin) is back after being sidelined last season. Freshman [Dylynn Otte](#) (Grand Rapids, Michigan) has shown to be one of the team's best blockers and is still learning her timing at the collegiate level, noted Johnson. Senior [Alicia Streetar](#) (Verona, Wisconsin) continues to display a high level of confidence and lifts the Cougars with her ball control.

"Because of the depth and the cross training, the lineup is pretty complex right now. The decisions are very hard. Everyone is very close. Only a couple of players have separated themselves," said Johnson.

The Cougar defense has three players aiming for a starting position. [Katie Shashack](#) (Edwardsville, Illinois) has been the starting libero for the past two seasons. She is being challenged by senior [Tessa Amsden](#) (Columbia, Illinois) and freshman [Emma Leahy](#) (St. Louis).

Johnson said Leahy provides another layer as a defensive specialist with an ability to hit well out of the back row. "She adds another component to make herself competitive at that position," said Johnson.

Depending on where the Cougars need a defender in the back row likely will dictate who gets the starting nod, but the serve receive data Johnson records in practice will be very important in deciding the libero position.

"We will always be working through lineups. Ultimately, you want someone nipping at the heels of the person in front of them and thriving to get an opportunity so that we keep rising. That's how you peak," said Johnson.