

# Missouri volleyball debuts new head coach in Black & Gold Scrimmage

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Missouri volleyball opened its 2019 season with its annual Black & Gold scrimmage Friday at Hearn Center. The team hosted a youth clinic in the Hearn Center Fieldhouse before the scrimmage just like it always has. The Tigers were split up into two teams, black and gold, just like they always are.

But don't be fooled. This season will be very different from any other since the turn of the century.

For the first time in 20 years, Wayne and Susan Kreklow are not the head and assistant coaches of Missouri's volleyball program. Instead, Joshua and Molly Taylor, who have been on the team's coaching staff since 2016, are now in charge.

"It's pretty surreal," Joshua Taylor said.

Replacing a coach who led the Tigers to 413 wins, 15 NCAA Tournament appearances and two Southeastern Conference Championships during a 19-year span — not to mention consecutive Sweet 16 appearances in his last two seasons — is a difficult task to say the least. But having been on Kreklow's coaching staff for three years, Taylor is familiar with the team and unfazed by the challenge.

"I've been fortunate," Taylor said. "Wayne gave me some opportunities to do a decent amount of coaching the last couple of years, and it has allowed me to develop these great relationships with the girls. So it's just kind of continuing on.

"The only thing that has changed, really, is my title."

Besides the newly-promoted coaches, all eyes were on Kylie Deberg, Missouri's Preseason All-SEC outside hitter. The pressure will be high this season for the 6-foot-4-inch junior who cracked the conference top-10 list with 425 kills last year, but she calmly dispatched any doubts about her ability to cope with the spotlight after grabbing the first point of the match with a powerful spike. She also drew the biggest celebration of the day from her teammates later in the first set after putting up a big block on strength and conditioning coach Mike Larson.

"(Deberg) is so mindful," Taylor said. "It's really fun to work with someone who is sensitive to what works and notices what's going on with herself physically, mentally and emotionally. We're making small tweaks and I'm really looking forward to what she's going to bring this year."

But according to Taylor, Missouri's strength comes not just from its All-Conference hitter, but from the talent and competitiveness up and down its deep roster.

Deberg (who finished the scrimmage with nine kills) is an established starter at the outside hitter position alongside Lector Member-Meneh (nine kills) and Dariana Hollingsworth-Santana (nine kills). But freshman Kenna Sauer also impressed on Friday with eight kills. While she is unlikely to overtake the trio of juniors on the depth chart this season, she will definitely push them to always be at their best.

The Tigers will also have two solid and versatile options at setter next season. Andrea Fuentes and Jaden Newsome play the position very differently, Fuentes is more of a classic back-row setter who links up well with her teammates (who recorded 1,026 assists in 2018) while Newsome has a big presence at the net and excels in dumping the ball over for a score (she had 57 kills last season), and each one is capable and experienced at the collegiate level.

But the biggest boost to the squad during the scrimmage was the return of middle blocker Kayla Caffey, who missed the entire 2018 season with a leg injury.

“It just feels really awesome (to be back on the court),” Caffey said. “I’ve been off for a long time, so just getting back to that competitive spirit has just been really fun and exciting and just being back out there with my teammates. When I was out, most of the time I was in the treatment room or just not out here and it’s just fun to be out with my girls again.”

Despite losing a team stalwart in Alyssa Munlyn when she graduated, Missouri’s middle blocking unit is still one of the strongest in the SEC, with Caffey, who tallied 202 kills in 2017, linking up with Tyanna Omazic, 237 kills in 2018, and being backed up by underclassmen Brynn Paumen and Claudia Dillon.

“This is the first time that I’ve been here where we’ve had this amount of depth,” Taylor said. “I really liked how each side was challenging each other and I just talked to our girls today about being grateful for hard battle every day, because they’re training against some of the best girls in the country who just happen to be their teammates.”

*Supervising editor is Melanie Rau.*