

# Women's tennis hopes consistency brings good season



Andrew McKay/Collegian

Junior Rebecca Ho returns a ball last season. Ho is contending for the No. 1 singles spot for PSU.

By Chris Adamski  
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

In Buffy Baker's second season as head coach of the Penn State women's tennis team, the road has been much smoother than in her first campaign.

"Last year, I was hired (August 16) and had to jump right into the job," Baker said. "It was a good, solid year before my feet even touched the ground."

"Things are different this year. It will go smoother just because of that (last year's) experience. I feel like this is my place now."

The players also welcome the fact they do not have to adapt to a new coach.

"We have had her for a year now, got to know her," Pilar Montgomery, last year's No. 1 singles player, said. "She knows us all real well, and vice versa. Everyone knows what to expect."

Penn State hopes the added continuity leads to a successful season, which kicks off Oct. 6 at the Penn State Invitational at the Sarni Tennis Center.

In addition to Baker, the team returns most of the nucleus of last year's club, a team that went undefeated in non-conference play and climbed as high as No. 42 in the national rankings.

Fifth-year senior Montgomery will return and should be solid at the No. 1 singles spot, though Baker isn't counting on solidifying the lineup just yet.

"I don't assume anything when it comes to the lineup," Baker said.

If anyone provides a challenge to Montgomery, it figures to be junior Rebecca Ho. Ho went 18-17 last year playing primarily second singles.

"I feel Rebecca is to a point where she is

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Buffy Baker

Penn State women's tennis coach

developing her game and taking it to a higher level," Baker said.

Redshirt sophomore Janelle Perez is back after missing most of last season due to shoulder surgery. Perez played No. 2 singles in 1998-99 as a freshman.

Sophomore Judy Wang has a year of valuable experience under her belt, and senior Teresa Whiteside returns after posting an impressive 21-10 singles record last year.

Beyond the returnees, the team did not totally escape change, however.

Ben Gabler was hired last month as the team's new assistant coach, replacing the departed Mike Spletter.

"He's a great addition," Baker said of the former Minnesota star and touring professional. "I was looking for someone with knowledge and experience in the ways of the Big Ten. We were lucky enough to get him here."

Ho agrees. "His credentials as one of the top players for Minnesota and as a pro give him credibility with us," she says. "The players are all willing to listen to him."

Gabler thinks his age (25) will be an asset in his coaching as well.

"It wasn't just a couple years ago I was going through the same things they are," he said. "I think I can relate well to them not only athletically but academically."

Two incoming freshmen join Gabler as new faces this year. Greensburg, Pa.'s Kristen Nowicki and Leigh Ann Merryman, from California, have already impressed the team's upperclassmen.

"They have got great talent. They're both in great physical shape. They should make us a better team," Ho said.

"In some capacity, I expect both will contribute right out of the gate for us," Baker said.

Nowicki said her and Merryman have fit in right away.

"(The upperclassmen) are just the nicest girls," she said.

"They work real well together, and they support each other."

Montgomery confirms the tightness of the bonds between the team members.

"We are always together," she said. "We're very close."

The tight-knit team will look this season to improve its performance in the Big Ten, a conference in which Penn State has won only one match in the last three years.

"We don't set team goals until January," Baker said. "I am very process-oriented. I don't look at the results as much as the day-to-day improvement of the team."

"We just want to build on the foundation we set last year."

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