

STANFORD TENNIS

2007 OUTLOOK

When the NCAA Championships concluded last May at the Taube Tennis Center at Stanford, the Cardinal may have come up short of winning the national title, but they came up big in gaining respect as one of the top teams in the nation. Stanford advanced to the quarterfinals before losing a hard-fought 4-3 match to Baylor in a college tennis classic. Instead of advancing on its home court at the NCAA's, the Cardinal had to settle for an 18-4 overall record and a Pac-10 championship.

The Cardinal has some unfinished business heading into the 2007 season. Led by All-American Matt Bruch, returning veterans James Wan and Blake Muller and a talented group of young players, including one of the nation's top freshman classes, Stanford is poised to take its place among the nation's elite teams once again.

"We have the potential to be a very good team," said head coach John Whitlinger, now in his third season as the Cardinal's head coach and 21st on the coaching staff. "We are still a young team with six freshman and sophomores, but we've got solid talent throughout our lineup and good depth. We are capable of doing very well at the NCAA's."

Four of Stanford's top six singles players return from a year ago, including Bruch, who played Nos. 1-3 in '06, Wan, Muller and Phil Kao. Senior Eric McKean returns after missing last season due to a wrist injury, the freshman trio of Richard Wire, Kevin Kaiser and Paul Morrissey are among the best group in the nation, senior David Ryan and sophomore Jeff Zeller round out a very deep roster for Whitlinger.

"I really like our depth," he said. "I have more options than I've had in the past. I've got 10 players who can all contribute and I am comfortable playing any of them. It will be fun to see us continue to improve and compete."

The Schedule

Once the 2007 dual match season gets underway on January 27, it will take about a month for the Cardinal to find out where it stands on a national level. That's because Stanford does not ease into its season – it gets tested early and often. First, a very good Boise State team visits the Taube Tennis Center on January 27, followed by road matches at USC on Feb. 2, UCLA on Feb. 3 and Baylor of Feb. 11. A week later (Feb. 16-19), the Cardinal will compete at the National Team Indoor Championships in Chicago.

"We have a very challenging schedule early in the year," says Whitlinger. "That should give us a good indication of our team. Playing Boise at home, then USC, UCLA and Baylor on the road before the National Indoors will give our team a chance to compete against the best."

Later in the season, on April 11, the Cardinal will host defending national champion Pepperdine. Other highlights of the '07 schedule an evening match on Mar. 7 against Florida State at 5:00 pm at the Taube Tennis Center and a rare double header on March 26 when the Cardinal faces BYU at 11:00 am and Santa Clara at 5:00pm. Pac-10 and national powers UCLA (April 13), USC (April 14) and Cal (April 21) will also pay their annual visit to the Taube Tennis Center.

Singles

Matt Bruch went 30-9 overall last year in his freshman season, earned All-America honors, won the Pac-10 championship and held his spot near the top of national rankings all season. Now, in his second year on the Farm, Bruch will spearhead the Cardinal's singles lineup in dual match play and be a threat to win the NCAA championship.

"Matt is a tremendous talent who continues to improve and assert himself as one of the nation's top players. I look for Matt to challenge for the NCAA singles crown this season," says Whitlinger.

But Bruch is certainly not alone. He will be joined in the starting lineup by senior James Wan, sophomore Blake Muller and freshman Richard Wire. James Pade, who still had one more year of eligibility remaining, will not return to the Cardinal in 2007 as he opted to begin his professional career. His departure will be a key void for the Cardinal to fill in 2007.

"It's definitely a loss for our team, no question about it," said Whitlinger. "James was a great player for us and would have been a tremendous asset to our team this year. We wish him well in his pro career. His departure, however, will give someone else the opportunity to step up and contribute."

Wan, who is in his fourth year in the starting lineup, has been one of Stanford's all-time best dual match players. He is 60-11 in dual match play and his .845 winning percentage ranks among the best men's tennis players in Stanford tennis history. He went 18-2 last year playing No. 3 and No. 4.

"His dual match record speaks for itself," says Whitlinger. "On match day, you want James in the starting lineup."

Muller turned in a solid season as a sophomore a year ago, compiling a 12-7 dual match record and 23-10 overall. He played No. 4 and No. 5 a year ago. "Blake is a very talented player. This could be his break out year," says Whitlinger.

Wire, a freshman from Loughton, Essex, England, comes to the Farm as one of the top junior players in Europe. He won England's national U-18 title and received a world ranking of 1,035. He was ranked No. 125 in the preseason ITA rankings. "I expect Richard to have an immediate impact on our team and college tennis in 2007," said Whitlinger.

While those four should play atop the Cardinal's singles lineup in 2007, competition for the final two starting spots will be a battle among senior Eric McKean, freshmen Kevin Kaiser and Paul Morrissey and junior Phil Kao. Senior David Ryan and sophomore Jeff Zeller are also talented players capable of breaking into the starting lineup this season.

McKean sat out last year with a wrist injury. He went 11-11 in dual match play in 2005 as a starter at No. 5 and No. 6. He enjoyed a healthy fall in '06 and is ready to compete for significant playing time this season. "I'm looking forward to Eric's return," says Whitlinger. "He has improved tremendously and I expect him to contribute this season in both singles and doubles."

Kaiser and Morrissey are two freshmen who have the ability to play key roles for the Cardinal this season. Kaiser, from nearby Saratoga, Calif., and Morrissey, from Dublin, Ireland, join Wire in giving Stanford one of the top freshman classes in the nation.

Kao, from Cupertino, Calif., is looking to earn a spot in the starting lineup for the third straight season. He has played No. 5 and No. 6 the past two years, compiling a 23-21 dual match record and a 45-32 overall mark in 2005 and '06.

"We are a young team, but we have great talent and a lot of potential," said Whitlinger. "I think what we'll see this year is a team that will compete and be fun to watch. We need to continue to improve and get better as the season progresses and be ready to play our best tennis in May. If we do that, we are capable of doing well at the NCAA Championships," he said.

Doubles

"We all know how important the doubles point is," says Whitlinger. "It is very much a focus of our team this year. I was very pleased with our doubles play during the fall and the depth we have throughout the roster. All 10 players on our team can play doubles."

Whitlinger will play many combinations throughout the season and look to find the right mix by the time the NCAA Championships are played in

May. During the fall, Muller and Morrissey teamed to go 5-1, including reaching the finals of the ITA Northwest Regional and playing No. 1 in Stanford's match at Hawaii in November.

McKean and Wire played No. 2 in the Hawaii match and competed at the ITA Northwest Regional. Bruch, who did not play during the fall, figures to be in the mix in doubles this season. He was 14-6 in doubles play last year playing with six different partners.

In the 2006 fall preseason ITA rankings, Muller and Bruch were ranked No. 33 nationally.

"I have more options than I've had in the past," said Whitlinger. "There is a lot of talent on our team and earning a spot in the doubles lineup will be very competitive."