

Press Clippings - 8/28/2024

- Northern Public Radio - Federal pandemic relief funding for schools is ending. How has it impacted Illinois schools?

By: Peter Medlin

Date: August 28, 2024



The hallways of Northwest Elementary School in LaSalle, Illinois.

Superintendent Brian DeBernardi walks along the outside of Northwest Elementary School in LaSalle.

“You can see where this kind of juts out. None of this was here,” he says, pointing to a 15,000 square-foot addition to the school. It’s brand-new — kids just stepped in the doors last week.

Northwest is a small school where a majority of kids are low-income. And DeBernardi says they just didn’t have enough space for their students.

“We never had an art room, we never had a music room. We never had any space,” he said. “We were down to using storage closets and mechanical rooms to do a lot of things.”

They also renovated another wing of the school. None of it would be possible without ESSER or “Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief.” It’s pandemic relief money from the federal government.

School districts have had the past several years to spend that money, and it expires in about a month. We’re talking about millions of dollars, even in a smaller district like La Salle.

DeBernardi says it made up a healthy portion of their budget.

And now that it's gone -- are Illinois schools headed towards a financial cliff? Well, Angie Smith says it depends on how schools spent the money. She helps lead school business operations at the Aurora West School District and wrote her dissertation about the impact of ESSER.

Her district, like LaSalle, spent a lot of money on capital projects like new roofs and HVAC systems -- and they spent less money on hiring new teachers. She says that's for a simple reason:

"This," said Smith, "is not permanent money."

So, they focused on one-time expenses instead of ongoing costs that'll stick around even when the federal funding ends. But that's not limited to construction. Many districts like Aurora West upgraded technology, gave teachers bonuses, and started summer school programs to get their students back on track after the initial disruption of the pandemic.

"We added people who were doing professional development for teachers," she said. "We added restorative practice coaches that worked with students -- things that either weren't going to be long term or, in some cases, we piloted them and liked them, but then had to figure out what comes out of the budget to make room for that."

In other words, Smith says, schools used the money to try new things, but now they've got to decide if they're worth keeping. Ann Williams at the U-46 district in Elgin says they also have to consider if these new programs, projects, and positions are helping students. Are they getting a solid return on their investment?

And, she says, that's not always simple. It's easier to think about with tutors. You pay for tutors. Did the tutoring help students improve in that area? Pretty straightforward. What about construction? Going from learning in a storage closet to a new classroom -- how much does that help students improve academically? Williams says a little harder to measure, but they try.

"We assess the impact of expenditures by evaluating their effects on the whole student, looking at the social emotional learning and development of students," said Willias. "We have surveys for employee engagement that allow us to evaluate the success of some of our initiatives."

Marguerite Rosa is the head of the research center Edunomics. She's worried that many students are not back on track academically.

"In some schools, scores continued to decline, and then we would say, 'whatever you spent it on, that did not work,'" she said. "In Illinois, broadly compared to most other states, we saw a pretty strong growth in reading, which was impressive, less so in math compared to other

states.

In her ESSER dissertation, a question Angie Smith set out to answer was: are these funds going to lead to systemic change or is it just some extra money?

She says, because it's a one-time thing, it's just extra money. But some say this has made a lasting change. DeBernardi thinks about their new school addition and classroom renovations. Without ESSER, it may have taken another 20 years to build. Another whole generation of students come and gone without the adequate space they need to learn.

In LaSalle, students are performing better on state tests than pre-pandemic in both reading and math. But other districts are still playing catch up. And now they're playing catch up without this extra money. And if they didn't spend it wisely, with fewer resources to help their kids.

- The Examiner -

Dist. U-46 Board approves four separate SRO pacts

By: Seth Hancock
Date: August 28, 2024

The Board of Education in School District U-46 approved of contract renewals with four municipalities to provide school resource officers (SRO) at secondary schools at its meeting on Monday, Aug. 5.

The vote was 5-0, board members Samreen Khan and Melissa Owens were absent.

The total cost of the contracts is \$1.2 million which will be paid from the tort fund. It includes seven SROs from the City of Elgin (\$82,629 salaries for \$578,402 total; \$72 overtime rate), three from the Village of Streamwood (\$94,841 salaries for \$284,524 total; \$82.07 overtime) and two each from the villages of Bartlett (\$77,704 salaries for \$155,408 total; \$56.04 overtime) and South Elgin (\$114,763 salaries for \$229,525 total; \$80.59 overtime).

"The approval of these four contracts will provide six officers in the high schools and eight officers in the middle schools," the proposal stated. "The goal of the program is to create a safe school environment, while providing a law enforcement resource to school administrators, teachers, students and parents. The School Resource Officer will not enforce school rules, policy or discipline, but instead will serve the recommended TRIAD roles of: 1) Law Enforcement; 2) Teacher; and, 3) Informal Counselor/Mentor."

The proposal added: “School Resource Officers will support and participate in violence prevention activities and enhance student voice and leadership in school safety and violence prevention. The School Resource Officer will partake in the mandated safety drill compliance, to include, three evacuation drills (one observed by the respective fire department), one severe weather drill, and one law enforcement observed Run-Hide-Fight drill, per the Illinois School Safety Drill Act 105 ILCS 128. The district will also provide professional development in crisis prevention, student special needs awareness in autism and special education and training in adverse consequences of school exclusion and the justice system.”

The contracts are effective from Aug. 13, 2024 to June 5, 2025. The cost is 7.5 percent higher from the 2023-2024 school year.

“School Resource Officers will continue to be a valuable resource to administration, teachers, students, and parents,” the proposal states. “School Resource Officers will mentor and make positive relationships with students that will build trust and an understanding between one another. School Resource Officers will ensure that school buildings are a safe and welcoming environment for school district employees, students, parents, and visitors.”

- The Examiner -

New accounting firm to conduct annual U-46 audit

By: Seth Hancock

Date: August 28, 2024



New accountability relationship
Along with being focused on the beginning of the new 2024-25 school

year, the District U-46 Board of Education also took time to approve a new financial audit firm to oversee the district. At a recent board meeting, Lauterbach & Amen was awarded a five-year contract by U-46.

Law requires an annual audit be conducted for school districts and it must be done by a certified public accounting firm.

School District U-46 will have a new financial auditor after the Board of Education approved of a \$341,400 contract with Lauterbach & Amen (L&A) at its meeting on Monday, Aug. 5.

The vote was 5-0, board members Samreen Khan and Melissa Owens were absent. It's a five-year contract, and the cost will be paid from the education fund.

State law requires an independent audit be done annually by a certified public accounting firm.

The district's current auditor, RSM, informed the district in July that it would not "stand for reappointment as the district's independent auditor for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2024," the proposal stated.

L&A was the lowest of two proposals, the other coming in at \$665,100. For the Fiscal Year 2024 audit, this proposal will be a 7.8 percent decrease from the cost of RSM.

"L&A currently provides auditing services for more than 50 Illinois school districts, including several large unit districts," the proposal stated. "The audit team recommended to serve School District U-46 has extensive experience auditing in the public sector. The team lead for the project has 15 years of public sector accounting experience while the rest of the team's experience ranges from 7 to 14 years.

The proposal added: "The annual independent audit shall be conducted in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards and the standards applicable to financial audits contained in Government Auditing Standards. Completion of the annual audit will produce the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (AFR), which are documents prepared for the Illinois State Board of Education and a Single Audit Report, which is the document that focuses on our federal programs and is prepared for the Federal Government."

- Daily Herald -
High school scores for Aug. 27
Date: August 27, 2024



Patrick Kunzer for Shaw Local Huntley's Julia Lesniak, left, and Summer Massow block against Crystal Lake Central in girls varsity volleyball at Huntley Tuesday.

Upcoming events Wednesday, Aug 28

Girls volleyball

Barrington at Stevenson, 6 p.m.
Buffalo Grove, Benet, Fremd, Glenbard East, Glenbard West, Kaneland, Montini, West Aurora, York at Wheaton North Invitational, 4:30 p.m.

Downers Grove South at Sandburg, 5:30 p.m.
Elgin at Conant, 6 p.m.
Glenbard North at Hoffman Estates, 6 p.m.
Grayslake Central at Zion-Benton, 6 p.m.
Harvest Christian at Willows Academy, 6 p.m.
Leyden at Rolling Meadows, 6 p.m.
Libertyville at Lakes, 6 p.m.
Mather at Maine East, 6 p.m.
Mundelein at Deerfield, 6 p.m.
Naperville Central at Plainfield North, 5:30 p.m.
Oswego East at Waubonsie Valley, 5:30 p.m.
Prairie Ridge at St. Charles North, 5:30 p.m.
Prospect at Niles West, 6 p.m.
Proviso East at Fenton, 5:30 p.m.
Riverside-Brookfield at Timoty Christian, 6:30 p.m.
South Elgin at Schaumburg, 6 p.m.
St. Viator at Warren, 6 p.m.
Vernon Hills at Lake Forest, 6 p.m.
Waukegan at Grant, 6 p.m.
Wheaton Warrenville South at Marist, 6 p.m.
Whitney Young at Willowbrook, 6 p.m.

Boys soccer

Antioch at Wetosha Central (WI), 6:30 p.m.
Cristo Rey St. Martin at Round Lake, 6 p.m.
Grayslake Central at Deerfield, 7 p.m.
Hoffman Estates at Jacobs, 6:30 p.m.
North Ridge Prep at Christian Liberty, 4:30 p.m.

Palatine at Mundelein, 6:30 p.m.
Taft at Leyden, 6:30 p.m.
Crystal Lake South at Rockford Boylan, 6:30 p.m.
Hampshire at Wheaton Academy, 7 p.m.
Hoffman Estates at Jacobs, 6:30 p.m.
Huntley at Rockford Guilford, 6:15 p.m.
Larkin, St. Edward at DeKalb Barb Cup, 5 p.m.
Metea Valley at East Aurora, 6:15 p.m.
Proviso West at Wheaton North, 6:30 p.m.
Rockford Lutheran at Harvest Christian, 4:30 p.m.
Streamwood at Glenbard West, 6:30 p.m.
Westmont at Cristo Rey, 6 p.m.

Boys golf

Bartlett, Jacobs, South Elgin, St. Edward, Streamwood, West Chicago at Larkin Invite (Golf Club of Illinois), 1 p.m.
Benet at Glenbard West (Village Links), 3:30 p.m.
DeKalb, Naperville North at Waubonsie Valley (White Eagle), 3:30 p.m.
Glenbard North, Wheaton North at St. Charles East (Royal Fox), 3:30 p.m.
Hinsdale Central at Oak Park River Forest, 4 p.m.
Huntley at Cary-Grove (Foxford Hills), 4:30 p.m.
Marian Central at Aurora Christian (Phillips Park GC), 4:30 p.m.
Metea Valley at Neuqua Valley (Bolingbrook GC), 3:30 p.m.
Morton at Downers Grove South (Village Greens), 4 p.m.
Plano at Lisle (River Bend), 2:45 p.m.
Riverside-Brookfield at West Aurora (Orchard Valley), 4 p.m.
Westmont at Montini (Village Links), 4 p.m.

Girls flag football

Elgin at Wauconda, 5:30 p.m.
Elk Grove at Conant, 6:30 p.m.
Evanston at Maine South, 6 p.m.
King at Prospect, 7 p.m.
Libertyville at Lakes, 4:30 p.m.
Maine East at Maine West, 5:30 p.m.
Niles West at Vernon Hills, 6 p.m.
Rolling Meadows at Hersey, 6:45 p.m.
Schaumburg at Streamwood, 6 p.m.

Girls tennis

Cary-Grove at St. Francis, 4 p.m.
Hinsdale Central at Hinsdale South, 4:30 p.m.
Lake Park at Rolling Meadows, 4 p.m.
Oak Park-River Forest at Benet, 4:30 p.m.
Plainfield North at Neuqua Valley, 4 p.m.
Riverside-Brookfield at IC Catholic Prep, 4:30 p.m.
South Elgin at Geneva, 4 p.m.

Streamwood at Palatine, 4:45 p.m.
Trinity at Timothy Christian, 4:30 p.m.

To read the full article please click [here](#).

- Daily Herald -

Boys soccer Top 20

By: Chris Walker

Date: August 27, 2024



Naperville North's Noah Radeke returns for a Huskies team that's ranked No. 1

1. Naperville North (23-2-3): Huskies dynamic from front to back
2. Leyden (18-5-1): Eagles' deep, balanced roster ready to go
3. Elgin (16-4-3): Saldana-Salinas will lead the way
4. Streamwood (15-5-4): All-stater Sabanovic (21 goals) among the best
5. Crystal Lake South (22-4-1): 2A state champs have Ahmed, Prus brothers back
6. Stevenson (16-3-1): Bachar dangerous man up
7. Libertyville (7-8-0): Underwood leads marvelous returning group
8. Naperville Central (12-6-7): DeFalco, Jarrell, Lafferty are quality in middle
9. West Aurora (19-4-0): Ndayishimiye-Seleman dangerous duo
10. Timothy-Christian (18-7-0): All-State GK Buikema 0.68 last year
11. Marmion Academy (12-4-3): Midfielder Magana CCL Blue Division POY
12. Round Lake (16-6-1): All-Stater Morales 18 goals, 11 assists
13. Warren (12-10-2): Crowson one of eight back from a year ago
14. Benet Academy (14-4-3): Bergnach, Picha, Wesley ones to watch
15. Wauconda (13-3-2): Barnshaw-Jurczyk will be very good up top
16. Grayslake Central (12-5-0): Rams lost plenty, but cupboard is not bare
17. St. Charles East (19-8-0): Saints will need to replace 8 starters
18. Hersey (8-6-3): GK Smakowski three-year veteran
19. Mundelein (10-9-4): Senior-laden roster inspires hopes for success
20. Rolling Meadows (7-13-0): All-State GK Okonski will keep his club in games

- Daily Herald -

Girls volleyball: Scouting DuPage County and Fox Valley

By: Mike Miazga

Date: August 27, 2024



Geneva's Sam Vanda had 214 kills last year for the Vikings.

Addison Trail Blazers

Coach: Katie Inzinga (4th season)

Last season's record: 12-23, 3-3 West Suburban Gold

Top returners: Riannah Varghese, 5-4, sr., S, Itzel Gamboa, 5-3, sr., DS, Giuliana Gallo, 5-10, soph., OH, Francesca Rohlfing, 6-0, soph., MB

Worth noting: Varghese recorded 406 assists and 23 aces on her way to all-WSC Gold honors last season. Gamboa had 249 digs, 27 aces and passed at a 2.03 clip on a 3.0 scale. Gallo had 163 kills and 26 aces, while Rohlfing had 20 blocks. Communication, serving, a crafty and smart approach on offense and relentless ball pursuit on defense will be strengths, Inzinga noted. She added Gamboa, Gallo and Rohlfing have been working hard to increase foot and arm-swing speed, as well as build consistency with defense. "As returning players, they bring a maturity and experience to the game and mesh well together," Inzinga said.

Aurora Christian Eagles

Coach: Mayra Johnson

2023 record: 20-10-2, 4-3 Metro Suburban Blue

Top athletes: Madalynn Johnson, OH/RS/DS, sr.; Hope Wagner, OH/RS, jr.; Breanna Hard, S, jr.; Ashlyn Aseltine, L, jr.

Worth noting: The Eagles eclipsed the 20-win mark for the first time since 2018 last season, and hope to go even further in their fourth season under Johnson.

Wagner, who led the team in kills with 269 and serving aces with 62, and Johnson, who led the team with 164 digs and added 163 kills and 41 aces, will continue to lead the front line, with Johnson entering her fourth year on varsity. They'll be paired alongside Hard, who broke out her sophomore season with 62 aces and 434 assists.

With Aseltine expected to lead the backcourt and freshman Gabriella Cotto taking on the role of main blocker for graduate Jada Haymon, Johnson is hoping this'll be the year where the

Eagles take home a regional championship after falling just short in each of the past two seasons.

“A goal for Aurora Christian this year is to make it once again to the regional championship game and take it this time,” Johnson said. “Four of the returning key players have played now for two years in a row with each other and have great chemistry as teammates. ACS has key players in all positions, and we are expecting an electric and fun season.”

Bartlett Hawks

Coach: Robert Schwantz

Last season's record: 20-14, 6-3 in conference (3rd place)

Top returners: Martyna Sowiak, sr., MH; Ashlyn Lomax, sr., OH; Sarah Savoia Free, sr., S; Sam Buss, jr., OH; Sydney Johnson, sr., L.

Top newcomers: Neda Bazys, jr., RS; Elsie Nwabuego, sr., MH

Worth noting: Schwantz notes he has a veteran team this season with no sophomores or freshmen. Sowiak, Buss and Johnson are hoping to play college volleyball. Schwantz said the team's goal remains the same – winning the school's first regional title – and also a conference championship. "With the new conference alignment, we feel we have a very good chance to make it to the Upstate Eight Conference championship match," Schwantz said.

Batavia Bulldogs

Coach: McKenna Kelsay

2023 record: 12-25, 2-5 DuKane

Top players: Teagan Rokos, L, sr.; McKenna Bremner, S, sr.; Hallie Crane, OH hitter, sr.; Morgan Raiser, S, so.; Delaney Wik, DS, so.

Worth noting: After losing all but two players heading into 2023, the Bulldogs return a strong core from a season ago after only graduating four seniors and look to finish with a winning record for the first time since 2017.

Returning in the backcourt is Rokos, who led Batavia with 315 digs, and Wik, third on the team with 123, who also led the team in aces with 26. At the net, Bremner returns as a dual-threat after leading the team in assists (211) and kills (210) last season

And with Raiser proving to be a solid setter in her freshman season, it wouldn't be surprising to see the senior see more chances at the net this year.

“Last year we were super young, so the returners now have more experience under their belt and have shown some really great strides,” Kelsay said. “I can't wait to see them come together and start to get into the groove that we know they can play with.”

Benet Academy Redwings

Coach: Brad Baker (16th season)

Last year's record: 39-3 (Class 4A runner-up)

Top returners: Gabby Stasys, 6-1, sr., MB, Audrey Asleson, 6-0, sr., S, Aniya Warren, 5-9, sr., Libero, Morgan Asleson, 5-8, sr., Libero, Sophia Pursley, 6-0, sr., OH, Marikate Ritterbusch,

5-8, sr., Libero, Ellie Williams, 5-10, sr., S, Taylor Kunka, 5-5, sr., Libero, Ava Leedeubuhr, 5-8, sr., Libero, Kierra O'Donnell, 6-1, sr., OH, Brooklyn Brass, 5-10, jr., OH, Ellie Stiernagle, 6-1, jr., S, Sophia Chinetti, 6-0, jr., OH, Lynney Tarnow, 6-5, jr., MB, Molly Welge, 6-2, jr., MB, Grace Jermak, 5-10, jr., OH, Abby Lee, 5-6, jr., Libero

Worth noting: The cream of the crop certainly in DuPage County, likely the Chicagoland area, a November Normal suspect and surely worthy of national following. Baker (594-67) has 11 Division I commits on the roster — eleven — in Stasys (Yale), Audrey Asleson (Colorado), Warren (Indiana), Morgan Asleson (Dayton), Pursley (Army), O'Donnell (Southern Miss), Brass (Maryland), Stiernagle (Northwestern), Chinetti (Rhode Island), Tarnow (Wisconsin) and Welge (Marquette). Warren played on the U19 national team this summer and is in the conversation as one of the top liberos in the country, while Tarnow is one of the Class of 2026's top recruits and is committed to coach Kelly Sheffield's University of Wisconsin program. Benet has 4 state titles, 4 runner-up and 1 third-place finish since 2008 (finishing second in 2022 and 2023 and earning state trophies in four of the last five seasons).

Burlington Central Rockets

Coach: Julia Smagacz (third season)

Last season: 20-16, 7-11 FVC (tied for seventh)

Top returners: Leah Freesemann, sr., OH; Brianna Gritzman, sr., L; Haidyn Schatz, jr., OH; Julia Johnson, jr., OPP; Emily Maramba, sr., OPP; Peyton Strout, jr., MB; Ainsley Wilson, so., MB; Sarah Jack, sr., S; Tea Cetina, sr., S; Tiernan Naus, so., S

Key newcomers: Leah Bellak, jr., OH; Kassidy Barrett, sr., OH

Worth noting: The Rockets last year came up just short of their first regional title since 2014, falling to Sycamore 14-24, 25-15, 25-18 in the Class 3A Burlington Central Regional final. ... Gritzman was an All-FVC selection with an FVC-leading 426 digs. She added 44 aces and 82 assists. ... Freesemann is committed to Campbell University. ... The Rockets return all three of their setters in Jack, Cetina and Tiernan Naus. ... Central won the Richmond-Burton Tournament and Woodstock North Tournament Silver Bracket. ... "We are optimistic for this season, with a roster full of veterans and returners," Smagacz said. "We have effective weapons at all three hitting positions and an incredibly reliable defense. We are looking to improve upon last year's conference and postseason finishes."

Cary-Grove Trojans

Coach: Patty Langanis (30th season)

Last season: 4-31, 2-16 FVC (10th)

Top returners: Addison DeKett, sr., S-RS; Lucy Wittenberg, jr., OH; Abby Vongsiri, sr., OH

Key newcomers: Emily Figas, sr., OH; Addison Kessler, jr., MB; Audrey Neuses, jr., RS

Worth noting: The Trojans will look to bounce back after a 10th-place finish in the FVC. The team's two conference wins were against Burlington Central and Crystal Lake South. ...

Langanis enters her 30th year at C-G with a 736-325 record. ... The Trojans last won a regional title in 2019. ... The team's lone All-FVC selection last year (Morgan Haslow) graduated. ... "I

expect this team to work incredibly hard to get better every week,” Langanis said. “They are a very committed group and they are dedicated to the culture of Cary-Grove volleyball. I’m very excited to have a group that wants to fight and work to start the long and difficult climb back to the top of the FVC.”

Crystal Lake South Gators

Coach: Annie Moore (third season)

Last season: 23-14, 11-7 FVC (tied for third)

Top returners: Morgan Johnson, sr., OH; Olivia Apt, sr., S; Kendall Brandt, sr., OH; Maddy Cook, jr. DS; Laken LePage, jr., DS; Bobbi Wire, so., OH; Emma Feinberg, so., DS

Key newcomers: Gabi Hindley, sr., RS/S; Joanna Kruzolek, so., MB; Ellesse Sain, sr., MB; Anna Hougas, jr., OH; Layla Addison, so., DS; Peyton Ziegler, so., RS/S

Worth noting: South lost to Woodstock 25-14, 26-24 in the Class 3A Rockford Boylan regional final. South has reached 20 wins in four straight seasons. ... The Gators will have to replace the production of outside hitter Gabby Wire, one of the top FVC players over the last few seasons. She led all FVC players with 366 kills, along with 64 aces and 274 digs. ... Johnson earned All-FVC with 219 kills, 65 aces and 254 digs and is approaching 500 career kills ... Bobbi Wire made an immediate impact as a freshman with 131 kills, 41 aces and 282 digs. ... Apt is approaching 500 assists in her career. ... “I’m super excited to see our energy and effort turn into growth and victories,” Moore said. “Our youth brings a fresh and dynamic energy that fuels our potential. With big goals and tons of passion, I know we’ll tackle every challenge and make this season a successful one.”

Downers Grove North Trojans

Coach: Mark Wasik

Last season’s record: 22-15, 3-3 in West Suburban Silver (tied for 3rd)

Top returners: Kelley Crowley, jr. OH; Jenny Buehler, sr. OH; Abby Gross, sr. L; Nora Benjamins, jr. MB; Alyssa Walters, sr. S

Key newcomers: Ellery Cabaj, fr. S; Rylie Marshall, so. RS; Nicole Liu, so. OH

Worth noting: The Trojans feature five third-year or second-year varsity players, including 5-10 all-conference Crowley (238 kills, 230 digs, 32 aces last season). Buehler (184 kills), Gross (395 digs), Benjamins (124 kills, 35 blocks) and Walters (250 assists) also were among stat leaders. “We will rely on their leadership particularly as we will also need to count on young talent,” Wasik responded. Regional finalists the past two seasons, the 2023 Trojans rejoined the 20-win club and showed potential by winning the Kaneland Invite and reaching the Silver finals at the McAuley Challenge all while playing a challenging schedule.

Downers Grove South

Coach: Madisen Babich

Last season’s record: 17-19 overall; 4-2 in West Suburban Gold (3rd)

Top returners: Alex Barcnas, sr. S; Jayda Dixon, jr. P; Sylvia Masiulionis, sr. P; Keegan

O'Keefe, jr. L

Key newcomer: Jen Curran, so. MH

Worth noting: In Babich's fourth season, the rebuilding Mustangs are poised for their first winning season and perhaps first regional title since 2019. "I want to keep focusing on changing the culture of the program and get back to our roots," Babich responded. On varsity since freshman year, setter Barcenas surpassed 1,000 career assists last season en route to being named All-WSC Gold.

Dundee-Crown Chargers

Coach: Jason LeBlanc (first season)

Last season: 16-20, 5-13 FVC (ninth)

Top returners: Coley DiSilvio, sr., MB; Allison Mathesius, sr., MB; Riley Jedras, sr., OH; Maura Minogue, jr., L

Key newcomers: Nina Marcanti, so., L-DS; Victoria Brents, fr., S-RS; Erin Bruce, fr., OH

Worth noting: LeBlanc takes over for Alexis Clayton, who led the Chargers for one season.

LeBlanc graduated from D-C and coached the past two years at Marengo and previously was an assistant at Genoa-Kingston and at Crystal Lake Central. ... D-C lost to Huntley 25-12, 25-13 in a Class 4A Rockford East regional final. D-C's last regional title was in 2010. ... Outside hitter Audrey Prusko and setter Courtney Komperda, both of D-C's All-FVC selections, graduated. ... "Dundee-Crown has a strong senior class that will be leaders on and off the court, plus we have a great group of talented incoming players," LeBlanc said. "A real good mix that I believe will make us a team to watch. Personally, I'm excited to be coaching in the Fox Valley Conference again. It's very competitive with a lot of great coaches and talented athletes."

Elgin Maroons

Coach: Kaylee Dries

Last season's record: 5-28

Top returners: Mahitha Ratakonda, sr., MH; Olivia Pennington, jr., OH; Brielle Boehm, so., S;

Top newcomers: Fiona Villaluz, so., L; Aylin Montes, so., L. Kelly Taruc, sr.

Worth noting: Dries is another new coach who is excited for the season and her newcomers, which include captains Ratakonda and Pennington.... Taruc has impressed Dries with her natural skill..... "So far we have been working really hard to get to know each other and build a strong team foundation," Dries said.

Geneva Vikings

Coach: Lauren Kosecki

2023 record: 24-13, 5-2 DuKane

Top players: Sam Vanda, RS, sr.; Fiona Turnbull, MH, sr.; Lillian Hallahan, OH, sr.; Annabel Stevenson, OH, sr.; Bridget Feichter, S, sr.; Sophia Broderick, L, sr.

Worth noting: After recording their best full season under Kosecki since they made it to supersectionals back in 2016, the Vikings return a good majority of their key role players in an

attempt to win their first regional title in eight years.

Geneva's main strength will come from their frontcourt, even after graduating Charlotte Potvin. Vanda, first on the team with 214 kills, Hallahan, third with 177 and Turnbull, fourth with 159 will lead the attack, while Feichter sets the pace after recording 550 assists last year.

Broderick will be expected to step in and lead the defense at libero after Reilly Day graduated.

"We are returning several key players and adding competitive new ones," Kosecki said. "This is a fun group to coach, and I am looking forward to seeing what they accomplish this year."

Glenbard East Rams

Coach: Bradley Cardott (4th season)

Last season's record: 21-16, 6-3 UEC

Top returners: Grace Johnson, 5-8, sr., OH, Belle McDermott, 6-0, soph., OH, Veronica Witt, 5-10, sr., MB, Harmonie Hallman, 6-1, sr., MB

Key newcomers: Natalie Slusher, 5-9, jr., S, Jess Larson, 5-5, soph., Libero-DS, Megan Pham, 5-7, soph., RS, Laila Hoffmann, 5-6, soph., OH

Worth noting: Johnson was an all-UEC honorable mention selection (156 kills, 135 digs, 41 aces), while McDermott posted 108 kills and 73 digs in 2023. "We will be young with 4 sophomores at the varsity level and we should have a strong defensive team," Cardott said. Johnson, a 6-rotation player, will be a go-to hitter, Cardott, said, and there are high hopes for McDermott, who stepped up last year as a freshman due to an injury situation. Cardott also is looking for big things from Hallman as an attacker and blocker at the net, while Witt brings balance and an explosive arm swing in the middle, along with high energy and high character as a floor leader. Cardott said Glenbard South and West Chicago are top contenders in the revamped UEC East. The league that has gone to two divisions with the additions of Elmwood Park, Ridgewood and Riverside-Brookfield, previous orphans from the defunct Metro Suburban.

Glenbard South Raiders

Coach: Chad Grant (14th season)

Last season's record: 18-21, 8-1 (Upstate Eight runner-up)

Top returners: Brooklynn Moore, 5-11, sr., MB, Mirabelle Hines, 5-8, sr., S, Nel Adamczyk, 5-6, jr., Libero, Molly Purse, 6-0, jr., MB, Emma Full, 5-7, soph., OH, Alyna Krabec, 5-3, soph., DS

Key newcomers: Callie Hardtke, 5-9, jr., OH

Worth noting: The Raiders, who reached a 3A sectional title match last year, have 11 players back, including the likes of 2-time all-UEC picks in Moore (291 kills, 50 blocks) and Hines (550 assists, 215 digs, 66 kills, 43 aces). Adamczyk had 289 digs and 54 aces in an all-UEC season, while Full put up 113 kills and 110 digs and Krabec 133 digs and 58 aces as ninth graders. Purse contributed 40 kills and 44 blocks. "It's kind of surreal where we are today vs. a year ago,"

Grant noted. "We serve well and will be much improved offensively. It helps that we have one of the most powerful middle attackers in the state (Moore)." Serve receive, Grant said, will be the wild card. South is part of the new-look UEC East with Elmwood Park, Fenton, Glenbard East, Ridgewood, R-B and West Chicago. Grant said East and West Chicago are contenders in the East.

Glenbard West Hilltoppers

Coach: Dan Scott

Last season's record: 35-4 overall; 6-0 in West Suburban Silver (champions)

Top returners: Cara Herbert, so. S; Kate Harvey, jr. DS; Kayla Street, jr. M; Gabby Orozco, sr. OH, Emily Overtoom, sr. OPP; Mariia Iurchenko, sr. DS; Jamie Ham, sr. DS

Key newcomers: Ella Rowe, so. OH; Farryn Burrige, so. M; Grace Mullin, jr. OH; Clarke Wallin, jr. M; Kate Gusanders, jr. DS; Francie McGann, jr. M

Worth noting: The Hilltoppers graduated 11 seniors from a veteran group that secured back-to-back Silver titles and a 10th regional title in the past 12 postseasons. Standout setter Herbert and fellow returning starters Harvey and Street were important to that success, and this year's seniors are poised to contribute significantly. As evidenced by 20-win seasons 16 of the past 17 full seasons, the Hilltoppers always find ways to reach full potential. "We are a young but talented group," Scott responded. "It will be exciting to see them grow throughout the season."

Hampshire Whip-Purs

Coach: Omar Cortez (first season)

Last season: 19-17, 9-9 FVC (tied for fifth)

Top returners: Jorah Rutter, sr., S; Elizabeth King, jr., OH; Katelyn Petterson, jr., OH; Peyton Wurtz, jr., L; Anna Schiltz, jr., MB; Kylie Lambert, jr., S

Worth noting: Cortez enters his first year as head coach at Hampshire. ... The Whip-Purs came up just short of back-to-back regional titles, falling to Hononegah 26-14, 24-26, 25-21, in the Class 4A Hononegah regional title match. ... King and Wurtz were named to the All-FVC team. ... Rutter is committed to Eastern Illinois and had 474 assists, 167 kills, 53 aces and 147 digs as a junior. ... King tallied 302 kills, 68 aces and 194 digs as a sophomore. ... Wurtz recorded 62 aces, 279 digs and 93 assists. ... "My team's strengths are that they have been together for two years and have the bond and chemistry to get over some of last year's struggles," Cortez said. "My expectation for this team and for the season as a program is very high, and I believe for the next three years we will be in the conversation for top three in conference."

Harvest Christian Academy Lions

Coach: Andy Kownacki

Last year: 23-10, 6-0

Top returnees: Alyssa Burke sr., OH; Kenzie Weidman sr., OH; Taylor Martin, sr., L/DS; Ella Schoenberg, sr., S; Malea Learned sr., MH

Top newcomers: Zoe Nwole 5-9, So., OH/MH Jessica Vambute, 5-9, So., OH/RS; Alayna Booras 5-8, So., OH/RS

Worth noting: Harvest has three players who will continue playing in college: Martin (Bemidji State University), Schoenberg (Judson University) and Burke- (Judson University)....Kownacki expects another string season from his experienced squad. "I have a very strong senior class, with great underclassmen coming behind to strengthen the team," Kownacki said. "I look forward to pushing this team, and seeing how far they can go.

Hinsdale Central

Coach: Kelly Stapleton

Last season's record: 24-12 overall; 3-3 in West Suburban Silver (tied for 3rd)

Top returners: Ava Young, sr. L; Alice Joergenrud, sr. MB; Caitlin Leddy, jr. S; Lauren Nieman, sr., MB; Caitlyn Peterson, sr. OH; Allie Garchar, sr. S; Nora Bergin, jr. OH

Key newcomers: Maddie Brooks, so. OH; Kaleigh Kozlowski, so. OH

Worth noting: The Red Devils' added to a third straight 20-win season with their first regional title since 2012. Fourth-year starter Young, who received 2023 IVCA 4A honorable mention all-state honors, is 31 aces and 245 digs from becoming the program's career leader in both. She currently ranks No. 2 and 3, respectively. Joergenrud, among the top 10 in career block kills, and Leddy enter their third varsity seasons. Previous starter Nieman was hampered by injury last season, and Leddy missed 2022 action with a broken wrist. Peterson, Garchar and Bergin return with expanded roles. "The team graduated seven seniors, including five key role players. Despite those losses, we are looking to come out strong," Stapleton responded.

Hinsdale South

Coach: Ben Goodell

Last season's record: 15-20 overall; 5-1 in West Suburban Gold (2nd); lost to Glenbard South 25-18, 23-25, 25-21 in 3A Glenbard South Regional final

Top returners: Kotryna Melstrad, jr. OH; Isabel Rios-Tejeda, sr.; Maeve Savage, jr.; Lexi Fedinec, sr. OH/RS; Jane Gallagher, sr.; Katarina Damis, sr. DS; Hailey Radicker, sr. OH/RS

Key newcomers: Kaleia Lin, jr. DS; Emily Musil, so. DS; Taryn Bazon, jr. OH; Paige Lilek, so. S

Worth noting: The Hornets have 11 seniors and are coming off their highest Gold finish since 2018. Third-year starter Melstrad earned all-conference. "She has the ability to generate kills at a strong clip and is one of the best defensive, serve-receiving outsides I've seen," Goodell responded. Fourth-year starter Fedinec may add setter to her right-side hitting. Damis, Lin and Musil compete at libero. Experience and defensive grit is needed to offset most of the Hornets' height graduating. "The team will be consistently scrappy on defense with some offensive weapons that can put up big numbers," Goodell responded.

Huntley Red Raiders

Coach: Karen Naymola (13th season)

Last season: 31-7, 17-1 FVC (first)

Top returners: Georgia Watson, sr., RS; Mari Rodriguez, sr., DS-L; Jocelyn Erling, sr., MB; Alex Goritz, sr., DS-L; Sienna Robertson, sr., OH
Key newcomers: Abigail Whitehouse, jr., S; Emily Ernst, jr., S; Izzy Whitehouse, so., DS-L; Summer Massow, so., MB; Diellza Sejdini, sr., OH; Lucy Watson, fr., MB
Worth noting: Huntley won its seventh straight Class 4A regional title and dominated the FVC with a 17-1 record to claim back-to-back conference championships. The Red Raiders have dropped only one FVC match in the past two seasons, going 35-1. Huntley's season ended with a 25-22, 15-25, 25-20 loss to Warren in a Class 4A Huntley sectional semifinal, ending a streak of three straight sectional titles. Huntley has reached 30 wins in four out of the past five seasons (not counting the COVID-19 shortened season). ... The Raiders graduated Morgan Jones (team-high 301 kills, 57 aces) and setter Laura Boberg (748 assists). ... Watson, a Kentucky commit, posted 218 kills, 26 blocks and 31 aces. ... Erling will play at Harper College. ... Huntley has nine seniors. ... "I am excited about this team," Naymola said. "We have great senior leadership and an entire team of talented and hardworking athletes. These kids love to work and push themselves and each other. Can't wait to watch our growth throughout the season."

IC Catholic Prep Knights

Coach: Lauren LaVigne (1st season)

Last season's record: 36-4, 6-1 GCAC White (Class 2A state runner-up)

Top returners: Delilah Hyland, 6-0, sr., MB, Emily Carling, 5-7, sr., OH

Key newcomer: Mary Kate Hilgart, jr., S

Worth noting: Hyland is a returning Class 2A all-state selection after hitting .323 with 68 total blocks as a key cog in the Knights reaching the Class 2A state title match. She's committed to UW Stevens Point. "Delilah is one of the most active middles I have seen," LaVigne said. "She has great pin-to-pin movement, really great technique and timing, and is a highly effective hitter and teammate." Carling, along with Hyland, also are returning all-GCAC White selections. "Our strengths will be our camaraderie and unity together," said LaVigne, who took over from program playing and coaching great Nancy Kerrigan, who stepped down this summer. "They truly lift each other up and are each other's biggest cheerleaders." LaVigne likes the variety of hitters the team has across the net, while Defense will continue to be one ICCP's key, longtime calling card. "One of the main things we focus on is serve-receive," LaVigne said. "We have two strong returning defensive specialists/liberos that help us set the tone in the back row and we have great movement on defense." Also keep an eye on libero-DS Natalie Lawton, who "reacts quickly and can consistently get the ball up to set up our offense," LaVigne said.



IC Catholics Delilah Hyland is returning Class 2A All-state selection.

Jacobs Golden Eagles

Coach: Mike Depa (fourth season)

Last season: 19-17, 9-9 FVC (tied for fifth)

Top returners: Jordan Miller, sr., L; Mia Koltuniuk, sr., DS; Alena Clarke, sr., DS; Layla Merlin, jr., RS

Key newcomers: Gianna Coletti, jr., S; Emmerson Freewalt, jr., MB; Gracyn Sanders, jr., MB; Hailie Barton, jr., MB; Maddie Mitchell, jr., OH; Rylee Van Stone, jr., OH-DS; Rachelle Zieba, so., OH

Worth noting: Jacobs fell to Warren 25-22, 25-27, 26-24 in the Class 4A Jacobs regional final, which would have been the team's first regional title since 2021. ... The Eagles graduated one of their top players in middle blocker Ali Pierre. ... Jacobs graduated its top defensive player overall in Grace Breeze, but do return three senior defensive specialists. ... "I expect our team to battle and be in every game that we play this year," Depa said. "I am excited to see our junior and sophomore hitters coming up to the varsity level. We have a lot of strong hitters and I'm excited to see them pound the ball this year. We also have some new young hitters at the varsity level who bring a lot of power with their swing."

Kaneland Knights

Coach: Cynthia Violet

2023 record: 27-11, 8-2 Interstate Eight

Top athletes: Morgan Beam, MH, sr.; Audrey Peters, OH, sr; Kayli Loonam, RS, sr.; Abby Carter, S, jr.

Worth noting: The Knights were one of only two area teams to win a regional title last year after defeating Montini in straight sets in a 3A regional championship match, but it'll be a little harder to repeat the feat this season.

Beam, who is the only returning starter from last year, will be one of the main focal points of the offense, but will enter the season after suffering an arm injury during the offseason. Violet will be expecting players like Peters and Loonam to step up to try and take the Knights back to the regional championship.

"We will be a young but strong conference contender after graduating 10 seniors," Violet said.

"As always, the hopes and expectations are to make it to the regional championship game."

Larkin Royals

Coach: Arika Rhodes

Worth noting: The Royals won three games a year ago, and now they turn to a new varsity coach in Rhodes. Other than two returnees, Larkin's varsity will be made up of last year's JV squad making the move up. Michelle Anderson is a new outside hitter to watch.

Lisle Lions

Coach: Payton Litney (1st season)

Last season's record: 8-25, 1-13 Illinois Central Eight

Top returners: Isabella Furmanski, 6-2, sr., MB, Anna Gorzkowski, 5-8, jr., S, Sophia Harer, 5-8, jr., OH

Key newcomers: Grace Klicman, 5-11, jr., RS, Emily Staley, 6-0, soph., MB

Worth noting: Furmanski had 87 kills and 68 blocks last season and Litney said to keep an eye on her continued growth in the sport and the effect she will leave in her senior season.

Gorzkowski had 127 kills and 160 assists. Harer also was a key contributor. Litney said a versatile offense and hustle on defense will aid the Lions, as will disciplined blocking and consistent serve-receive. Two more key cogs are Brooklyn Burton, whose dedication in the preseason, Litney noted, has set high expectations for her, as well as Chloe Hrabrich, whose consistency and effortless defense will be a huge asset," Litney added.

Metea Valley Mustangs

Coach: Dave MacDonald (12th season)

Last season's record: 28-9, 8-2 (DuPage Valley champions)

Top returners: Katie Schuele, 5-9, sr., S, Addison Torain, 5-7 sr., OH-Libero, Maddie Hopkins, 5-9, sr., OH, Kelly McGrath, 5-8, sr., RS, Jenna Green, 5-6, sr., DS-Libero, Olivia Stewart, 6-1, jr., MB, Ashley Ward, 5-8, jr., RS-S, Ava Guzaski, 5-6, jr., DS-Libero

Key newcomers: Cheliyah Mattox, 6-0, sr., MB, Eve Berta, 5-3, jr., DS-Libero, Allyse King, 5-6, soph., OH, Raina Parekh, 5-8, soph., MB

Worth noting: Schuele, headed to Division I East Carolina, is the reigning DVC player of the year and was an honorable-mention all-state pick. Torain (headed to Division I Winthrop), Hopkins and Stewart also earned all-DVC accolades, while Schuele, Torain and Stewart are returning all-area selections. "We are a very senior-heavy team and return everyone but two from our starting lineup," said MacDonald, whose squad won a Class 4A regional title last season. "This is a very tight-knit group that gets along and wants to continue the success we have had over the past couple years." Torain, who played libero last season, moves to the left side with the graduation of Camille Morrison (now at Western Michigan). MacDonald labels her the team's Swiss Army Knife due to her position versatility the last four years on the Metea varsity. Hopkins, Stewart, McGrath and Ward are 2-year varsity players and continue to excel, MacDonald added. MacDonald said the DVC will be loaded with the Naperville and other Valley schools presenting persistent challenges. "Our conference is very tough with veteran coaches who know each other very well," he said.

Montini Broncos

Coach: Erik Vogt

Last season's record: 10-26, 2-6 GCAC Red

Top returners: Morah Quirk, 6-0, soph., MB, Sienna Skarda, 5-11, sr., RS, Francesca Lorenzo, 5-11, jr., RS, Isabel Evenson, 5-9, sr., OH, Sophie Maquet, soph., OH

Key newcomers: Hope Garland, 5-6, fresh., Libero, Saniyah Arams, 5-8, fresh, Micaela Haggerty, 5-7, fresh., Peggy Pacelli, 5-8, fresh.

Worth noting; Skarda earned all-GCAC Red honors last season. "We gained some great experience from last season only losing 3 seniors," Vogt pointed out. "With the addition of some very talent underclassmen, we should be very good defensively." Versatility will be a strength on offense, while Evenson and Maquet should anchor the Bronco defense and freshman Garland should make an immediate on the floor, bringing with her an impressive club resume as a libero, Vogt pointed out. Vogt likes how Lorenzo has the ability to take over a game, and said Skarda will help as a solid and reliable player who can play any position needed.

Naperville Central Redhawks

Coach: Brienne Isaacson (20th season)

Last season's record: 19-16, third DuPage Valley

Top returners: Georgia Von Lehmden, 6-1, RS, Sara Butler, 5-9, S, Makenna Devick, 5-9, OH

Key newcomers: Caroline Impey, 5-9, jr., OH, Sophia Svingen, 6-1, jr., RS

Worth noting: Von Lehmden (San Jose State) and Butler (Austin Peay) will both continue their careers at the Division I college level, while Von Lehmden, Butler and Devick are returning all-DVC picks. "We are an experienced team," Isaacson said. "We will be scrappy on defense and balanced on offense. We have several attackers who can contribute." Isaacson noted Von Lehmden, Butler and Devick, all three-year varsity players, have great passion for the game "and are also hard workers," she said. Isaacson said Metea Valley and Naperville North will be tough in the league.

Naperville North Huskies

Coach: Jennifer Urban (21st season)

Last season's record: 12-16, 7-3 DuPage Valley (runner-up)

Top returners: Paige Selman, 5-8, sr., S, Bella Fleurima, 5-10, jr., OH

Key newcomer: Joelle Pye-Blacknard, 5-10, soph., OH

Worth noting: Six players return from last season's DVC runner-up team. Urban (551-166 in 21 seasons) said Alabama A&M commit Fleurima and Selman "are poised to be exceptional leaders on and off the court," she said. Pye-Blacknard is poised to make a significant impact on the left side, Urban noted. "Despite having a relatively young and inexperienced roster, our dedication and hard work promise continued improvement throughout the season," Urban said.

Neuqua Valley Wildcats

Coach: Jamie Buhnerkemper (3rd season)

Last season's record: 19-18, 5-5 DuPage Valley

Top returners: Alyssa Jones, 5-5, sr., Libero, Hailey Stumpf, 5-11, sr., MB, Lauren Schmidtgal, 5-6, sr., DS

Key newcomers: Tatum Kelly, 5-11, fresh., S, Ella Cole, 6-1, jr., OH

Worth noting: Jones is a 3-year varsity player who led the team in digs last season and will surpass the 500-career-dig total early this season. Stumpf registered 68 kills and was second on the team with 41 blocks. "We bring back the core of our defense in Alyssa and Lauren. We have great leadership in the back court," Buhnerkemper said. "Our consistency in serve-receive and trust in our large block will help us." Buhnerkemper likes the versatility the team has in the front row and two new dynamic setters, "who run a quick and fluid system," she said. Kelly, Cole and Addison Frisby will be fighting to be the team's go-to, Buhnerkemper noted. "I am looking forward to which one will step up to the role," she said.

Rosary Royals

Coach: Kate Scafidi

2023 record: 10-24, 3-3 Girls Catholic Athletic Conference

Top players: Clare McEniry, RS, sr.; Molly Lambert, S, sr.; Lily Caruso, S/RS, sr; Sarah Wessels, DS/L, sr.; Reese Gilla, MB, sr; Sarah Nierman, MB, sr.

Worth noting: Scafidi is entering her first season as head coach with a senior-heavy team that is looking to finish above .500 for the first time since 2019.

McEniry will look to be the main piece at the net after putting up 260 kills, 171 digs and 31 service aces a season ago to earn a GCAC White Division All-Conference Team selection.

Caruso, 153 kills and 37 aces, will most likely be the secondary option. Lambert also returns after putting up 445 assists and 34 aces.

With the amount of seniors on the team, Scafidi said this is a team that may be a surprise in the GCAC this season.

"I'm thrilled to be back at my alma mater as head coach, and there's no better group of players than the one Rosary has this year," Scafidi said. "They're driven, passionate and wildly talented, and they're going to fight tooth-and-nail to win out from start to finish. They're a very senior group, so we started preseason leaps and bounds ahead, and it shows."

South Elgin Storm

Coach: Jesse Bossenga

Last season's record: 13-23, 5-4

Top returners: Grace Bach, sr., MH; Paige Genke, jr., S; Alena Amel, jr., MH

Top newcomers: Bri Decheva, so., OH; Cassie Verley, jr., OH

Worth noting: Bach is coming off a strong club season while Genke brings more experience as a third-year starter and the "leader of our offense" according to Bossenga. ... Amel is expected to

make an impact at the net; Decheva should provide control and consistency, and Verley is making a position change to the outside, giving the Storm a strong attack. ... South Elgin has 13 seniors. "They are a tight group that I am excited to see how they play together and pull for each other," Bossenga said.

St. Charles East

Coach: Kate McCullagh

2023 record: 9-26, 3-4 DuKane

Top players: Kaleigh McQuillen, MH, sr.; Morgan Tapson, OH, sr.; Claire Trask, S, sr.; Avery Smith, DS, sr.; Kaylee McInnis, OH, jr.; Sofia O'Sullivan, MH, sr.

Worth noting: After the Saints came away with a fourth-place finish to cap off the coaching career of longtime coach Jennie Kull, they struggled to find their footing in their first season under McCullagh, but still managed to pull off some wins to finish fifth in the conference.

With the last five players on the 2022 roster graduating after last year, and with key players such as McQuillen and McInnis returning with a year of experience under their belt and a good batch of newcomers coming in, it wouldn't be surprising if the Saints start to get back to their winning sooner rather than later.

St. Charles North

Coach: Lindsey Hawkins

2023 record: 23-14, 6-1 DuKane

Top players: Haley Burgdorf, OH, jr.; Mia McCall, S, jr.; Sidney Wright, MB, jr.; Meg Kalenowski, L, sr.

Worth noting: Despite losing eight seniors to graduation last season, the North Stars return a roster that has more experience than what was expected at the beginning of last year due to a surplus of injuries.

Leading the charge will be the trio of juniors – Burgdorf, McCall and Wright. Burgdorf, who committed to Penn State in July, is expected to take a bigger lead part this season after leading the North Stars with 344 kills, 42% kill percentage, 190 digs and 30 blocks a season ago.

McCall slid into the setter role perfectly last season with 408 assists to go along with 36 aces and 47 digs, and Wright asserted herself at the net after leading the team with 47 blocks.

Along with Kalenowski assuming the libero role after filling in for an injured Jackie Ruder for most of last season, Hawkins is expecting for the four of them, along with the young supporting cast, to help the North Stars to their 21st straight winning season.

"All four of these returners had to step up in a big way and shoulder much of the load for most of last season. That situation has definitely given these players a lot of experience leading already, which is good because their supporting cast is quite young this year," Hawkins said.

"We are looking forward to being very competitive this year and seeing the fruits of all the hard work these girls have put in during the club season. They are a very talented group, so fitting all the pieces together these last two weeks has been very fun. I'm looking forward to seeing what they can accomplish."

St. Edward Green Wave

Coach: Dawn Gross

Last year: 15-17, 1-6

Top returners: Samantha Pogorzelski Jr., S; Savannah Lynch, so., MH/OH; Alaina Nolan, Jr., MH

Top newcomers: Francesca Buono Jr. OH/MH/DS/L; Annabelle Deang, Jr., DS/L/S; Giana Forlini, so., DS/L Taylor Kapetan, Jr., MH/OH

Worth noting: Pogorzelski is a three-year varsity player who led the team in assists(405) and aces (80)...Lynch had 80 kills and led the team with blocks last year as a freshman.....Nolan gives the team a solid middle, and her swing is stronger according to Gross.... The newcomers include the versatile Buono who brings showing great passing and defense along with several other skills....St. Edward has no seniors on the team this year. "These girls are up for the challenge to play great volleyball in this harder conference," Gross said of the Chicagoland Christian. "We know what these teams are about and will be ready for them. These girls have great energy and just need to fine tune their skills. We have a little more height and vertical jumps and plan on using it."

St. Francis Spartans

Coach: Lisa Ston (9th season)

Last season's record: 34-8, 5-2 GCAC White (Class 3A state champions)

Top returners: Addy Horner, 6-3, sr., S-RS, Emma Delaney, 5-11, sr., MB

Key newcomers: Dylan Kokkinos, 5-3, sr., Libero, Jenna Glaudel, 5-9, sr., S-RS, MacKenzie Krus, 5-9, jr., S-OH

Worth noting: The defending Class 3A state champions of equal noteworthiness return state tournament MVP Horner (headed to University Wisconsin). Krus is committed to George Washington, while Glaudel is back after missing last season with a knee injury and brings quick hands, versatility and a competitive drive to the table. "Our strengths will be that we hope to run a varied offense with many options to score behind the leadership of Addy Horner," said Ston, who has coached in the Francis program for 25 seasons. Offensively, Ston is excited about the versatility of the Spartans' roster to attack from multiple positions. Kokkinos will lead the defensive charge, added Ston, who noted Francis will have its hands full in an always tough Girls Catholic Athletic Conference. Delaney will also be key at the net. "Emma is an experienced middle who likes to be involved in the action," Ston said.



St. Francis Addy Horner will play college volleyball at Wisconsin.

Timothy Christian Trojans

Coach: Scott Piersma (12th season)

Last season's record: 28-7, 10-0 (Chicagoland Christian champions)

Top returners: Abby VanderWal, 6-3, sr., OH, Bella Potempa, 5-7, jr., OH, Ella Rickert, 6-1, jr., MB, Elizabeth Alex, 5-10, jr., S

Key newcomers: Jenna Wasco, 5-11, sr., RS, Audrey Williams, 6-0, soph., MB

Worth noting: The Trojans have experience back from a 2023 team that won a conference title and reached a Class 2A sectional final. The key here is another season of VanderWal, one of the top prep players in the country headed to coach Jerritt Elliott's University of Texas squad.

VanderWal hit .527 on the pin last season, while being one of the team's primary passers.

Potempa finished with 191 kills, 190 digs and 56 aces, while Rickert had 100 kills and 52 blocks out of the middle as a 10th grader. Alex had 261 assists and 84 digs. Wasco is a transfer from York. Potempa and Rickert also are receiving college interest. "It's not a lie that all our hitters are capable of swinging in multiple positions," Piersma said. "We will be able to move girls around and show teams a lot of different looks. Abby, of course, is our top player, but the other girls are great complements to her that will allow us to take some of the load off her shoulders." Height and length at the net will be keys for Timothy's defense, Piersma noted. "Balls needing to go over our block will give our back row plenty of time to see, move and pick up the ball," he explained. "if we can get our block set consistently in the correct spot, we should be able to force opposing offenses into predictable patterns." VanderWal should get her 1,000th career varsity kill early in the season. Piersma said Chicago Christian and Wheaton Academy will be top challengers in the Chicagoland Christian Conference.

Waubonsie Valley Warriors

Coach: Kari Galen (9th season)

Last season' record: 17-19, 5-5 DuPage Valley

Top returners: Naomi David, sr., RS, Kaitlyn Reinhard, sr., OH, Ava Bellafiore, sr., OH, Asia Mitchell, sr., Libero-DS, Liv O'Hara, jr., S

Key newcomers: Hailee Pietryk, jr., Libero-DS, Anna Axelsen, soph., MB, Belle Black, soph., S

Outlook: Dowd, a Northern Illinois commit, was an all-DVC selection, while Reinhard, Mitchell

and Bellafiore were special mention picks on a team that took third in the league. Experience and shared common goals will power Waubonsie this season, Galen noted. Dowd, Galen explained, is a tough defend on the right side for opponents due to high reach and a quick arm, and is looking to incorporate more middle attacking this fall. Mitchell is a dynamic 2-year varsity libero and is the team's strongest defender — contributing to a quick back row, while Reinhard brings volleyball intelligence on the outside and can find open areas on the court, Galen noted. In the DVC, Galen expects defending champion Metea and Naperville North to be strong. "Our group is really special and I am excited to see what they can accomplish," she said. "We mesh really well together."

West Aurora Blackhawks

Coach: Brandon Vicory

2023 record: 13-22, 3-8 Southwest Prairie

Top athletes: Maureen Pokryfke, OH, sr.; Taylor Baratta, MH, sr.; Sydney Wagner, OH, jr.; Ella Maxwell, S, jr.; Lexi Jacquez, L, sr.

Worth noting: The last time West Aurora played in the Upstate Eight Conference, they ended with a 7-2 record and a third-place finish in 2018. Six years later, the Blackhawks hope that the change in conference can help them to their first winning season since 2020.

West Aurora has a good base for a turnaround season after returning all but three players from last season, including key players at the net in Pokryfke (Wisconsin-Oshkosh commit) and Baratta (Carthage commit), who led the team in kills last year.

"Being in a new conference, we are in the unknown about the competition of the other teams," Vicory said. "But hopefully we can compete for a conference title in the Upstate Eight."

West Chicago Wildcats

Coach: Mackenzie Bell (3rd season)

Last season's record: 23-11, 9-0 (Upstate Eight champions)

Top returners: Taylor Frake, 5-8, jr., OH, Jasmyn Trigueros, 5-7, sr., S

Key newcomers: Gracie Perry, 5-6, jr., Libero, Brielle Borner, 5-10, soph., OH

Outlook: Bell said serving will be a major strength this fall. "We have very tough servers," she said. "I am excited to see us use that to our advantage, as well as see how seeing that aggressive serving in our training challenges our passers. We have a great group of dedicated, hardworking girls who have a lot of heart and hustle on the court." While undersized on offense, quickness and athleticism will make up for that, Bell said. Hustle on defense and a focus on reading capabilities should lead to more touches on defense, she added. Trigueros earned all-UEC honorable-mention accolades last season, and may add hitting duties to her all-around game, while Frake is looking to take the next step after being a key 6-rotation contributor as a sophomore. Keep an eye on newcomer Perry, a junior libero, who Bell noted brings scrappy play and strong court awareness to the table.

Westmont Sentinels

Coach: Jason Gentile (2nd season)

Last season's record: 7-25, 1-5 Chicago Prep

Top returners: Jade Curtis, 5-10, sr., RS, Briseis Stanescu, 5-6, sr., OH, Kendal Solik, 5-5, sr., RS, Daylah Belmonte, 5-2, jr., DS

Key newcomers: Elizabeth De La Graza, 5-6, sr., S, Kallie Niemer, 5-8, jr., MB, Kotryna Vanagas, 5-8, soph., OH, Alice O'Connor, 5-5, soph., RS, Ryley Johnson, 5-6, soph., S, Elle Strohmaier, 5-1, soph., DS

Worth noting: Stanescu earned all-conference accolades a year ago as the Sentinels' top attacker in kills and hitting percentage. "Our strengths will be in our pins and our will to play as hard as possible on every play," Gentile said. Gentile added he likes the tempo Westmont plays at offensively and its ability to hit different shots in different situations. Defensively, he added the team is working on controlling first contact. Curtis has worked her way back from injury and "is looking like the player who can dominate a match," Gentile said, who also labeled Vanagas as a young rising star in the program.

Wheaton Academy Warriors

Coach: Leah Dunlap (2nd season)

Last season's record: 29-6, Chicagoland Christian runner-up

Top returners: Katelyn Kulesza, S, Kiera Morrison, OH, Kiana Shields, MB-RS, Abby Schroeder, MH, Maddie Lennox, Libero

Worth noting: Wheaton Academy has 5 returning starters, including Shields, who is headed to Northern Illinois University. Dunlap said varsity experience, quality leadership, firepower on offense and an outstanding libero in Lennox will fuel the Warriors. "We have girls who can make plays from all across the net and a libero that takes over passing to truly allow our offense to be successful," she said. Speaking of Lennox: "Maddie takes over the game and allows our team to run such a strong offense because she gets every ball up," Dunlap said. "She also is always smiling and is a great teammate." Pin hitter Mary Patrick also is drawing rave reviews. "Mary has put in so much work since last year and has improved," Dunlap said.

Wheaton North Falcons

Coach: Justin Hineman

Last season's record: 13-23 overall; 1-6 in DuKane (8th); lost to Geneva 25-10, 25-16 in 4A Addison Trail Regional semifinals

Top returners: Olivia Zamis, sr. MH; Halina Istanbouli, sr. P; Mary Kate Whittington, jr. P; Izzy Gibbons, sr. S; Kate Koliopolous, sr. DS; Emilia Lee, sr. DS; Mackenzie Nettles, sr. P; Emily Rochford, so. S; Hannah Van Denend, jr. P

Key newcomers: Chloe Zych, sr. DS; Sophia Ohashi, jr. S; Abby Lee, jr. DS; Aurora Zingales, jr. S; Ava Schell, jr. P; Haley Hanavan, jr. P; Addison Clausing, fr. MH

Worth noting: The Falcons are determined to rejoin the area elite behind a large returning group that gained significant experience in 2023. Zamis was IVCA 4A honorable mention all-state and All-DKC last season with 128 kills and 80 total blocks, which ranked 10th in 4A,

following 74 blocks and 116 kills as a sophomore. Also surpassing 100 kills were Nettles (team-high 151), Whittington (135) and Istanbouli (114). Gibbons led with 222 assists, Emilia Lee (149) and Koliopoulos (148) were 1-2 in digs and Koliopoulos was second with 34 aces. "This team has a lot of potential and plans on using multiple lineups all season to maximize the depth of talent," Hineman responded.

Wheaton Warrenville South Tigers

Coach: Bill Schreier

Last season's record: 24-14 overall; 6-1 in DuKane (co-champions with St. Charles North)

Top returners: Lauren Coyne, sr. OH; Cate Cassin, sr. OH; Katie Dragas, jr. MH; Kayla Paige, jr. L

Key newcomers: Sarah Hartnett, sr. OH; Zoe Dragas, jr. OPP; Tessa Gonzalez, sr. MH; Mackenzie Hartman, jr. OH; Alison Coyne, fr. S; Audrey Utz, jr. S

Worth noting: The Tigers have experience and a resilient group featuring four-year starter Lauren Coyne and returning starters Cassin, Katie Dragas and Paige. Add talented newcomers, such as Alison Coyne, Lauren's sister, and most players should be able to play at their most effective positions. Co-captains Lauren Coyne and Cassin especially will set the tone early. "With (Coyne's) hitting experience, she will be the engine that gets us going," Schreier responded. "Cate Cassin will help diversify our offense." It's also one of Schreier's tallest teams ever with Lauren Coyne 6-3, Katie Dragas, Zoe Dragas and Hartman 6-0 and Gonzalez 5-11. "Now is the time to figure out where all of these pieces will fit," Schreier responded. "We will go through some growing pains early as we incorporate younger players, but the talent in the gym cannot be denied."

Willowbrook Warriors

Coach: Irene Mason

2023 results: 40-2 overall; 6-0 in West Suburban Gold (champions); 3rd in 4A -- beat Barrington 25-20, 23-25, 25-17 for third at state finals

Varsity returners: Hannah Kenny, sr. S/RS; Anna Marinier, sr. OH/RS; Lily Javier, sr. OH/RS; Ellie Branch, sr. MB/DS; Sydney Brown, sr. DS; Giada Crocetti, sr. DS; Olivia Pollak, sr. H/RS; Wendy Pollak, sr. OH/RS

Key newcomers: Julia Amin, jr. MB; Maggie Hurley, so. MB; Kendall Norton, jr. S; Melanie Marinier, so. S

College commitment: Kenny (Louisville)

Worth noting: The Warriors are riding high after the greatest season in program history. Three returning senior starters and five more returning seniors continue the high standards. "We have a lot of close competition and dynamic players who can play a lot of roles," Mason responded. Fourth-year starter and Louisville recruit Kenny is a three-time All-WSC Gold selection who surpassed 1,000 career assists while collecting 457 in 2023. The 5-7 Kenny also was second in digs (284), kills (245) and aces (100). Anna Marinier was third in kills (152) and fourth in digs (170) and Javier had 90 kills and 48 digs. "The team has been working really

hard every day, connecting with each other and improving. The energy in the gym has been electric, and the new players are learning quickly and getting up to speed.” Mason responded.

York Dukes

Coach: Danny Piwowarczyk

Last season’s record: 25-12 overall; 3-3 in West Suburban Silver (tied for 3rd); lost to Hinsdale Central 25-20, 25-22 in 4A Morton Regional final

Top returners: Katie Day, jr. OPP/OH; Amalia Toliopoulos, jr. S/OPP; Lilly Roach, sr. MH/OPP; Ava Nawrocki, sr. L

Key newcomers: Lila Bennis, fr. L/DS; Eileen Carroll, fr. OH/OPP; Reese Timmerwilke, jr. MH/OPP; Audrey Faley, jr. MH/OPP; Allison Fehlberg, jr. L/DS

Worth noting: The Dukes graduated eight seniors from a second straight 20-win campaign but return third-year varsity players Day and Toliopoulos and inherit several motivated newcomers. Day (171 kills, 29 blocks), Toliopoulos (115 kills, 128 assists, 13 blocks) and Roach (90 kills) were key offensive components. Emerging Roach also had a team-best 57 blocks as she looks to establish herself among top area middles. Libero Nawrocki (61 digs, 171 serve receptions, 1.84 passer rating) will anchor the defensive corps, which includes freshmen Bennis and Carroll with extensive club experience. “I feel very positively about the potential of this group,” Piwowarczyk responded. “I am excited about the work ethic and love of volleyball. It should be a fun season working to try to become the best team we can be.”

- Daily Herald -

Boys soccer: Scouting DuPage County and Fox Valley

By: Chris Walker

Date: August 27, 2024



Benet Academy’s Brendan Bernach was second on the Redwings last year in points during a 14-4 season.

The 2024 boys soccer season starts this week. Here are previews of teams from around the Daily Herald’s DuPage County and Fox Valley coverage area.

Addison Trail

Coach: Ryan Dini (12th year)

Last year's record: 11-7-1, 4-2 West Suburban Gold (third place)

Top returning players: Federico Alessi, sr., W; Daniel Herrera, sr., CB; Daniel Lupa, sr., F

Key newcomers: Christopher Aguilera, jr., GK; Richard Garcia, jr., W; Nathan Lugardo, jr., MF

Worth noting: The Blazers are pleased to welcome back 10 players. "They key to the Blazers

season is team chemistry and being able to adapt to the new formation the team has

implemented during the summer," Blazers coach Ryan Dini said. Daniel Lupa (9 goals, 6

assists), Federico Alessi (3 goals, 8 assists) and Daniel Herrera (4 assists, 1 goal) are among the

returnees for a program that will play in the Joe Novy and BodyArmor tournaments.

Aurora Central Catholic

Coach: Jean-Marie Nazareth (first year)

Last year's record: 10-12-1, 4-5 Catholic Conference League (ninth place)

Top returning players: Nathan Diedrich, sr., D; Connor Dineen, jr., D; Neil Mayer, jr., MF;

Elias Perez, jr., GK/MF; Matthew Vandeman, jr., MF/F

Key newcomers: Alan Acosta, so., MF/F; Leroy Arias, so., MF/F, Landen Diedrich, so., D;

Omar Flores, so., D; Giovanne Gutierrez, jr., F

Worth noting: The Chargers are young but they have some experience returning from last year's team whose 10 wins were the most in five seasons. "At ACC we are not looking up for not only this upcoming season," new coach Jean-Marie Nazareth said. "But building up for the future while representing both the IHSA 1A, Catholic Conference League and the Aurora community at the highest level both on the field and outside of it."

Bartlett

Coach: Anthony Glorioso (second year)

Last year's record: 4-14-4, 2-5-2 Upstate Eight (eighth year)

Top returning players: Rail Arismendi, jr., MF; Will Ehlers, sr., MF; Nate Preissig, sr., D; Adan Rueda, sr., D

Key newcomers: Omar Castro, jr., MF; Marco Costabile, sr., F; Dzamal Dzambegovic, jr., F

Worth noting: Are the Hawks ready for a big jump in the win column? With a large senior class and the lessons learned last year through just a handful of wins, can the Hawks turn close games into wins? 16 of their 22 games were decided by two or less goals last fall. "We will look to make games exciting and competitive in a very tough conference," Bartlett coach Anthony Glorioso said, citing his large senior class mixed with an array of newcomers.

Batavia

Coach: Mark Gianfrancesco

2023 record: 4-15-2, 1-6 DuKane

Top athletes: Xavier Justice, Sr., MF; Evan Hashem, Sr., F; Matt Vrba, Sr., MF; Hudson Legut, So., D; Connor Verde, So., MF; Nate Barsch, Jr., D; Gabe Diaz, Jr., F; Greg Bell, Jr., F

Worth noting: The Bulldogs, who will be looking for another rebound season, lost a good bit of

starters from a season ago, especially from the back line. Batavia will be leaning on the experienced midfield duo of Justice and Vrba, as well as Hashem up front, to help lead the younger Bulldogs squad. “We are looking to build relationships on the pitch throughout the season,” Gianfrancesco said. “We have some nice talent that we will work to bring out as the season progresses.

Benet

Coach: Matt Klosterman (second year)

Last year’s record: 14-4-3, 7-1 East Suburban Catholic Conference (second place)

Top returning players: Brendan Bergnach, sr., F; Jack Kuelthau, sr., D; Danny Sterba, sr., D; Jack Wesley, so., MF

Worth noting: The Redwings lost nine players from a season ago, including a great deal of talent defensively on a team that yielded just four goals in their final 14 games. They return four starters, including Jack Wesley, who led the team with 6 assists), Brendan Bergnach, who was second in points, and defenders Jack Kuelthau and Danny Sterba. Look for Mateo Picha, Ruslan Holubec, Teddy Nawrocki, Mark Ndrio, Ruslan Holubec, Sergio Polanco, Sean Boyle, Will Khazen, Uareme Edeki and Mathew Donaghey to contribute towards another winning season.

Burlington Central

Coach: Dean Ames (first season)

Last year’s record: 11-7-3, 3-6 FVC (tied seventh place)

Top returning players: Charles Wyzukowicz, sr., GK; Maximus Salas, jr., F; Noah Rosborough, jr., M; Samuel Knych, jr., M

Key newcomers: Avery Pawlisch, jr., D; David Mancera, Soph, D

Worth noting: Ames takes over the program and will try to provide stability. The Rockets have had four different coaches over the past five seasons but had a record amount of players come out for the team. “I’m looking to build a program at Central and believe we have a significant amount of young talent to shake things up over the next several years,” Ames said. ... The Rockets will have a mix of old and new after graduating nine seniors from last season’s team. They’ll have strong representation from each grade. “We’re young but very talented,” Ames said. “We have several players that missed the majority of 2023 due to injuries. They’ll need to prove themselves in games but so far they look better than prior to their injuries.” ... The Rockets will try to finish with a winning FVC record for the first time since the Rockets moved to the conference in 2019.

Cary-Grove

Coach: Mark Olson (19th season)

Last season’s finish: 3-10-2, 2-5-2 FVC (ninth place)

Top returning players: Ryan Boutwell, sr., F; Angel Cardenas, sr., F; Daniel Czerwinski, sr., F; Ryan Dixon, sr., GK; Finlay Evangelista, sr., D; Evan Frangiamore, sr., M; Landon Nawracaj,

sr., D; Cole Waddell, sr., M

Worth noting: The Trojans will try to learn from last season's experiences and make a push toward the top half of the FVC standings. They bring back plenty of upperclassmen and Olson is excited to see what C-G gained from last year. ... Waddell comes back after earning All-FVC honors last season. He'll be a major contributor for Olson as he leads from the middle of the pitch. ... C-G is hoping to get over the hump in close matches this season. The Trojans lost four matches by a goal deficit and were also shutout in five matches. ... C-G is looking to make a push in both the FVC and the postseason. The Trojans last finished in the top-five of the FVC when they took fifth in the fall 2021 season. They'll also try to win their first regional title and reach the regional for the first time since 2015.

Crystal Lake South

Coach: Brian Allen (18th season)

Last season's finish: 22-4-1, 8-1 (tied first place), co-FVC champions, Class 2A state champions

Top returning players: Ali Ahmed, sr., F; Nick Prus, sr., M; Mason Ross, sr., M; Hayden Stone, sr., M; Diego Paguada, sr., D; Pierce Johnson, jr., D; Will Prus, so., M

Key newcomers: Ryan Stell, fr., M; Noah Duntemann, so., GK; Kaleb Nunnally, so., D; Dennis Adusah, so., D; Will Witak, jr., D; Ethan Nawracaj, so., F; Zach Vallicelli, so., M; Patryk Pocica, sr., GK

Worth noting: South won its second state championship in program history and second title since 2018. The program also became the first FVC team to win two straight conference titles in at least the last 10 years. ... The Gators will need to rely on plenty of new faces with five starters returning from last year's team. "I am excited for this journey and hopefully helping them find a tremendous amount of growth, maturity and development throughout the course of the season where we can be peaking when it matters most in the playoffs," Allen said. ... Ahmed returns after earning Illinois High School Soccer Coaches Association (IHSSCA) All-Sectional and All-FVC honors after scoring 25 goals and tallying four assists. He'll miss the first couple weeks of the season with an injury but Allen is encouraged he'll be ready for the start of FVC play. ... Nick Prus comes back after scoring 14 goals and had three assists while Johnson had three goals and one assist on the backline. Both earned All-FVC while Johnson also had All-Sectional accolades.

Dundee-Crown

Coach: Rey Vargas (21st season)

Last season's finish: 14-8-1, 4-5 FVC (fifth place)

Top returning players: Diego Flores, sr., D; Gabriel Herrera, sr., F; Christopher Gonzalez, sr., M; Sebastian Sanchez, jr., M; Hugo Arista, jr., M

Key newcomer: Mauricio Ruiz, so., M

Worth noting: The Chargers return a majority of last season's lineup and are ready to take a major step after some growing pains. D-C failed to win a regional title last year for the first time in the last five postseasons. ... Vargas is excited with what he has coming back after the

Chargers won three of its last four matches, including a shootout loss in the regional final to Huntley. “I am looking forward to working with this group as I have a majority of them coming back from last season’s team,” Vargas said. “We had a young team last year and it started coming together at the end.” ... Flores comes back after a strong junior campaign to lead the D-C backline. He earned All-Sectional and All-FVC honors and helped the Chargers defense limit opponents to 1.2 goals per match. ... Sanchez returns after earning All-FVC honors as a sophomore last season.

Elgin

Coach: Jimmy Romano (third year)

Last year’s record: 16-4-3, 6-1 Upstate Eight (first place)

Top returning players: Beto Gaytan, sr., F; Aaron Saldana, sr., CM; Roberto Salinas, sr., CB

Worth noting: All 13 of Elgin’s returning players have played in one or both of the program’s Elite Eight runs the past two seasons and eight of those players are starters. Leading the way are captains, Aaron Saldana (19 assists last year), center back Roberto Salinas and third-year starter Beto Gaytan. The team will need to pick up the void left with the graduation of Eduardo Nava who had 36 goals last year. Elgin, which is 36-5-6 overall the past two years, will have the most experienced team during Romano’s three-year tenure.



Aaron Saldana, right, helped Elgin go 16-4 last season. Saldana had 19 assists last year.

Downers Grove North

Coach: Rafal Slomba

Last season’s record: 10-10-1, 2-4 West Suburban Silver.

Top returners: Manta Palubinskas, sr., MF; Conor Shewe, sr., Kobi Marquez, sr., F; Oliver Davies, jr., MF.

Key newcomers: Grigore Onica, jr., MF; Ty Peboontom, so., F; Dylan Graham, so., F.

Worth noting: Downers Grove North is aiming to move up the conference ladder after a 10-win season in 2023. The strength of the team lies in the returnees.

“The team is coming off a competitive year and has been diligently preparing and focusing on

tactical improvements and team cohesion,” Slomba said. “We are bringing back five starters from last season, so we will rely on our veteran players early on in the season. With a blend of experience and new energy on our roster, we are looking to build off our success from last season.”

Downers Grove South

Coach: Chris Hernandez

Last season’s record: 4-11-12, 3-3 West Suburban Gold (4th)

Top returners: Ryan Deacy, sr., F; Daniel Smazil, sr., F; Jonathan Venouziou, sr., MF; Brennan Free, so., MF; Aleck Galvez, sr., D.

Key newcomers: Brady Dunlap, jr., MF; Omar Flores, jr., MF; Patrick Olczyk, so, MF; Cody McCarthy, jr., MF.

Worth noting: With a new coach and several talented and experienced players in the fold, the Mustangs are a team to watch this season. Daniel Smazil, Jonathan Venouziou and Aleck Galvez will anchor a senior-heavy team.

“I’m excited to lead a program that means so much to both me and the community,” Hernandez said.

Geneva

Coach: Jason Bhatta

2023 record: 13-6-2, 5-1-1 DuKane

Top athletes: Reece Leonard, Sr., MF; Peyton Friedman, Sr., MF; Alexis Ramirez, Sr., D/MF; Tommy Rowoldt, Sr., GK; Jack Hatton, Sr., MF/F; Jackson Raby, Sr., D; Caleb Kelly, Jr., F

Worth noting: After two straight seasons of not getting over the 10-win mark, the Vikings finally eclipsed the mark again in 2023. And they’re looking to go even higher in 2024. Geneva will have some holes to fill on their roster, with the scoring duo of Trent Giansanti and Liam O’Donoghue, who combined for 27 of the team’s 51 goals last season, graduated. However, they still have some fire power ready for this season. Leonard returns after leading the Vikings in assists last year with eight. And Rowoldt will return in net after averaging 1.105 goals a game last year.

And while the holes may still be there for a bit, Bhatta is enthusiastic about the up-and-coming junior class to start taking the reins, especially with players like defender Xavier Ebert, midfielder Alec Graham and forward Chase Marquardt.

“The junior group has largely been together for the past two years and had great success at each lower level and are now ready to compete at the varsity level,” Bhatta said. “This combined with a senior group who many have been on the team since their sophomore year will be exciting to watch as we push for conference and post season honors.”

Glenbard East

Coach: Josh Adler (21st year)

Last year’s record: 7-6-3, 4-3-2 Upstate Eight (fifth place)

Top returning players: Reean Dialektakos, sr., MF; Josh Roimicher, sr., D; Cooper Wooldridge, sr., GK

Key newcomers: Edgar Garcia, jr., MF; Charlie Gidcumb, so., MF; Ryan Kummer, so., D

Worth noting: The Rams only lost twice last season by two goals and surrendered just 19 goals on the year. "This year's team is a young group that is looking to find their way," Rams coach Josh Adler said. "The team has some pace and exciting playmakers. Looking to compete for a top spot in the Upstate Eight East Division and remain competitive through a very demanding schedule." By Sept. 13, the Raiders will have played all three other District 87 schools.

Glenbard South

Coach: William Fajkus (second year)

Last year's record: 5-15-2, 0-9 Upstate Eight (ninth place)

Top returning players: Wyatt Bremer, jr., D; Ryan Hopkins, sr., D; P.J. Lehr, jr., MF; Diesel Oleksak, sr., MF

Worth noting: The Raiders will be more battled-tested this fall after starting three freshmen and six sophomores last year. With changes to the conference, the Raiders are in the East Division along with Elmwood Park, Fenton, Glenbard East, Ridgewood, Riverside-Brookfield and West Chicago. The Raiders open the season with four of their first five games against private schools.

Glenbard West

Coach: Phil Wicyk (4th Season)

Last season's record: 13-9-1, 2-4 West Suburban Silver (5th)

Top returners: Johan Palacios, sr., MF; Alex Ginder so., F; Aidan Adachi, sr., D; Davis Barta, sr., MF.

Key newcomers: Isreal Juarez, so., MF; Angel Garnica, so., F; Harrison Olechowski, so., MF.

Worth noting: The Hilltoppers will have a new identity this year with the addition of 13 new players. The backline will have a great deal of experience as it will hold a rotation of five seniors: Colin Weil, Aidan Adachi, Chris Weber, Tobi Montilla, and Spencer Melms. Glenbard West's attack will be headed by returning sophomore Alex Ginder. Seniors Johan Palacios and Davis Barta will be leaders in the midfield and newcomer sophomore Harrison Olechowski will complement them well.

"All three are skilled with the ball at their feet and have great instincts when it comes to distributing the ball," Wicyk said of his three key attackers. "We are excited to start our season to see what this young group of players can accomplish together."

Hampshire

Coach: Chayanne Martinez (fourth season)

Last season's finish: 3-12-3, 1-8 FVC (10th place)

Top returning players: Jackson Carey, sr., M; Charlie Terriquez, sr., F; Andrew Nuzzo, sr., M; Diego Sanchez, sr., D; Isaac Ludwig, sr., D; Jacob Sheba, sr., D; Parker Smith, sr., GK Grayson Hedderich, jr., D

Key newcomers: Christian Myszczyński, sr., D; Christian Pegueros, sr., M; Jose Lemus, sr., D; Edgar Perez, fr., D; Cage Guge, fr., M

Worth noting: Hampshire will try to show growth this season after featuring a young lineup for much of last year. The Whips are aiming for their first playoff win since 2019 and their first regional title since 2017. Martinez is looking forward to that growth. “[I’m] looking forward to starting the season.” ... Carey and Terriquez will bring back much-needed experience. Carey earned All-Sectional honors for his junior season in the middle of the pitch. ... The Whips will look to a large group of newcomers to fit in with an experienced group. ... Hampshire will make push toward a return to the top of the FVC this season. The Whips won the 2021 spring FVC Tournament and then took fourth in the fall 2021 season before dropping to the bottom half the last couple seasons.

Harvest Christian

Coach: Pedro Assumpcao (fourth year)

Last year’s record: 3-8, 3-3 (fourth place)

Top returning players: Mateo Constante, sr., D; Owen Langfeld, sr., GK; Lucas Menezes, so., MF

Key newcomers: Oliver Beckett, fr., MF; Ethan Schoenberg, so., MF

Worth noting: For the first time in a number of years, Harvest has a solid roster size with 19 players, including multiple returnees and four new freshmen. “The overall quality of our team has increased with maturity and playing options,” Harvest coach Pedro Assumpcao said. “This will give us more opportunities to rest up and rotate players, what was not possible last season.”

Hinsdale Central

Coach: Michael Wiggins, 31st year.

Last season’s record: 13-6-3, 3-3 West Suburban Silver (3rd).

Top returners: Denis Altman, sr., D; Enzo Cinque, sr., D; Martin Contreras, sr., GK; Michael DiTomaso, sr., D; Matt Gantar, jr., MF; Austen Szurgot, sr., MF; Braden Tingler, jr., D; Kostas Zamalaitis, sr., MF.

Worth noting: The Red Devils have experience on their side with six returning starters to join a group of eight freshmen and sophomores on the varsity for the first time.

“This year’s group brings a great mix of younger player and experience,” Wiggins said. “It’s a dynamic we have not seen in a few years, so we’re looking forward to seeing how they come together.”

Huntley

Coach: Matt Lewandowski (sixth season)

Last season’s finish: 16-6-1, 8-1 FVC (tied first place) FVC co-champions, Class 3A regional champions

Top returning players: Mason Leslie, sr., M; Max Connell, jr., M; Finley Williams, jr., D; Noah

Gomez, jr., D

Key newcomers: Mathieu Tchoutan Ngoudjou, sr., D; Aiden Felz, jr., M; Tylar Caddick, sr., F; Anthony Frelas, sr., M; Tyler Murray, so., F

Worth noting: Huntley captured another regional title last season, its fourth over the past five postseasons. The Red Raiders will look different this season, though, with 14 newcomers. Lewandowski will try to get everyone on the same page as quickly as possible. "We will depend on the leadership and experience from our returners, who will form the backbone of our defense," Lewandowski said. "We're looking to use our depth to be a hardworking group willing to do what it takes to get the job done." ... Leslie will be a major returner for the Red Raiders. He scored a goal, had four assists and earned All-FVC honors for his junior season. ... Huntley will try to finish in the top-three of the FVC for a fifth straight season. The program captured an outright title in the fall 2021 and a shared title last season. ... The Red Raiders look to win their first sectional since the 2021 fall season with a young group.

IC Catholic Prep

Coach: Miguel Garcia

Last year's record: 6-5-1, 5-4 (seventh place)

Top returning players: Filip Ciepiela, sr., MF; Sean Pels, sr., D; Alan Salgado, so., MF/F; Tristan Salgado, sr., D

Worth noting: Senior captains Filip Ciepiela and Tristan Salgado are four-year starters and all-conference selections whose leadership along with senior defender captain Sean Pels, should make a huge impact. "Our focus is to take this season one training session, and one game at a time," IC Catholic Prep coach Miguel Garcia said. "The main goal is to make a solid run into the playoffs and earn our first regional championship."

Jacobs

Coach: Colin Brice (sixth season)

Last season's finish: 7-12-1, 6-3 FVC (third place)

Top returning players: Maksym Kharchenko, sr., GK; Esteban Varela, sr., M; Andrew Deegan, jr., D; Victor Stoian, jr., M; Ethan Aldrete, so., M

Key newcomers: Colin Phan, sr., D; Jackson Foley, so., F; Anthony Rodriguez, so., M; Quentin Gillus, jr., M; David Kuklo, fr., M

Worth noting: Brice is excited for what a younger lineup can do this season after graduating a strong class. "We have a very talented young core that will get a lot of experience this season," Brice said. "I believe this team will surprise a lot of people and I'm excited to get the season rolling." ... Brice expects Kharchenko to become one of the top goalkeepers in the area after he earned All-FVC honors last year. "He has a great frame, [is] very technical and has excellent distribution," Brice said. ... Midfielder Kaiji Seto will miss his senior season because of a knee injury he suffered over the summer. ... Jacobs' young lineup will get plenty of experience before starting FVC play against Prairie Ridge on Sept. 17. The Golden Eagles will play at least eight matches before taking on the Wolves.

Kaneland

Coach: Scott Parillo

2023 record: 11-10-2; 8-2, Interstate 8

Top athletes: Jovani Ruiz, Sr., F/MF; Cam Guernon, Sr., MF; Matthew Mitchinson, Sr., MF; Noah McKittrick, Jr., MF/D, Riley Adams, Sr., D, Cooper Van Wagoner, Sr., GK

Worth noting: After seeing 10 players off to graduation, including Interstate 8 Player of the Year Sam Keen, the Knights will look to have some of the newer players step up during the 2024 season.

Guernon and Mitchinson are the top returners for the Knights in terms of scoring, with Guernon recording six goals and five assists, while Mitchinson was second on the team with 11 assists to go with a singular goal. Parillo also said that Ruiz, who played club soccer for the past three years, also could have a positive impact on the team.

Parillo said that his main focus for the season is to make sure that his team stays healthy. Of the 22 players listed on last seasons roster, only two players appeared in over half of Kaneland's 23 games, with Quinn Schulz appearing in all 23, while Keen appeared in 19. "This Kaneland team should be competitive as long as we can stay healthy," Parillo said. "We have a lot of new players on the varsity roster, but they have stepped up and are making contributions during training. I am pleasantly surprised by how we are progressing every day in training and excited about the upcoming season."

Larkin

Coach: Michael Huizar (fifth year)

Last year's record: 13-3-2, 6-1-2 Upstate Eight (tied for first place)

Top returning players: Brian Ceja, so., F; Juan Cruz, jr., MF; Jonathan Garcia, jr., MF/D; Damian Martinez, sr., D; David Terrones, sr., F

Key newcomers: Ulises Flores, so., GK; Christopher Gutierrez, sr., D; Angel Lizarazo, sr., D; Julian Miranda, jr., MF

Worth noting: The Royals outscored opponents 55-23 last year but have a much different squad after losing about half the team due to graduation and transfers. Its top returning players are the lone six that are back, "so we can expect new players in every position this year, but this group had been impressive so far," Larkin coach Michael Huizar said. "It is still very early with such a new team, but I like the commitment and effort from this group so far."

Lisle

Coach: Jamie Clemmons (first year)

Last year's record: 13-3, 7-0 Illinois Central Eight (first place)

Top returning players: John Darkoh, sr., F; Aldo Mora, sr., F; Max Sirovatka, sr., D

Key newcomers: Nicolas Bundschuh, jr., MF; Cole Geist, so., D; Liam Waggoner, jr., MF

Worth noting: Jamie Clemmons, who spent 14 years as Bolingbrook's head coach, takes over for a team coming off a strong season. "We have a team that has several returning starters that

can compete for a conference and regional title,” Clemmons said. Aldo Mora (25 goals) and John Darkoh (15 goals) will look to lead the attack while Max Sirovatka will anchor the backline.

Marmion

Coach: Gerardo Alvarez (fifth year)

Last year’s record: 12-4-3, 5-1-1 Chicago Catholic (co-first place)

Top returning players: Austin Conlin, sr., D; Gio Magana, sr., F; Adam Ozsyath, sr., GK; Emilio Morones, jr., MF; Jordan Peinado, jr., D/F, Diego Tellez, sr., D

Key newcomers: Patrick Bergeron, fr., D; Nate Voelkner, so., MF

Worth noting: The Cadets welcome back the majority of their starters, including all-state forward Gio Magana (15 goals, 9 assists in 2023). “We lost some key pieces down the middle, but have guys that will step up to fill the void,” Cadets coach Gerardo Alvarez said. “Due to success multiplier, we will once again be competing in 3A, which is a welcomed challenge for our group. Looking forward to competing for another trophy this season.”

Metea Valley

Coach: Josh Robinson (16th year)

Last year’s record: 8-11-1, 3-2 DVC (third place)

Top returning players: Cole Hatfield, sr., F; Anthony Hildreth, sr., MF; Sahil Khare, sr., MF

Worth noting: Cole Hatfield (7 goals, 3 assists in 2023), Anthony Hildreth and Sahil Khare (4 goals, 5 assists) are coming off all-conference seasons. They’re looking to give the Mustangs their first winning season since 2021. With 10 others returning, the Mustangs are looking to battle. “(We have) 12 returning players that have a tremendous worth ethic and energy,”

Mustangs coach Josh Robinson said. “(They) truly want to leave something behind at Metea Valley and (are) excited to battle a very difficult schedule.”

Montini

Coach: Mark Kalal (first year)

Last year’s record: 1-14-1, 0-8 Chicago Catholic

Top returning players: Aiden Alonzo, jr., D; Julian Beahan, sr., MF; Robert Gutierrez, so., D/MF; Jonathan Kosinski, jr., MF

Key newcomers: Christian Aguilera, fr., MF; Austin Nelson, fr., D

Worth noting: The Broncos have a new head coach, a couple of freshmen looking to contribute right away and a number of players returning from a challenging season last fall. “After coming off a tough season, we look forward to bouncing back and being competitive,” Broncos coach Mark Kalal said. “Our mistakes are opportunities to learn going forward.”

Naperville Central

Coach: Troy Adams (15th year)

Last year’s record: 12-6-7, 4-0-1 DVC (co-first place)

Top returning players: Michael DeFalco, sr., MF; Ludo Gallina, jr., F; Ryan Gervase, jr., D; Eli Jarrell, jr., MF; Ryan Lafferty, sr., MF; Connor Waite, sr., FK

Key newcomers: Nathan Laird, sr., MF

Worth noting: With only one player left from the 2022 state championship team, "it is a little bit of a new era for Naperville Central" according to Redhawks coach Troy Adams and "with a good mix of talented returning players, excited new underclassman, and a couple of first year senior players, (we will) look to compete for both a conference and sectional title." Ryan Gervase returns to the backline in front of returning goalkeeper Connor Waite while Ryan Lafferty moves to midfield to provide a box-to-box presence. The return of Michael DeFalco, Ludo Gallina and Eli Jarrell offers quite a formidable attack that's already proven it can find the back of the net. Nathan Laird (DePaul) joins the team for his senior year.

Naperville North

Coach: Jim Konrad (21st year)

Last year's record: 23-2-3, 4-0-1 DVC (co-first place), third in state Class 3A

Top returning players: Connor Hanrahan, sr., D; Sam Hess, jr., D; Niko Ladas, sr., MF; Noah Radeke, sr., F; Jaxon Stokes, sr., F

Key newcomers: Brian Biederman, jr., Dylan Healy, so., MF

Worth noting: The Huskies return 10 starters from a team that brought home a trophy from Hoffman Estates last November. Noah Radeke and Jaxon Stokes would win most arguments as the top 1-2 offensive punch in the state. Sophomore newcomer Dylan Healy, who comes from the Fire Academy, and junior Andrew Hebron will join returning starters Niko Ladas and Tony Flores in the midfield while senior Connor Hanrahan and juniors Colin McMahon, Sam Hess and Josh Pedersen make up a backline that coach Jim Konrad said "will be one of the strongest in Naperville North history" with Hess and McMahon at center backs and Pedersen and Hanrahan on the outsides.

Neuqua Valley

Coach: Arnoldo Gonzalez (10th year)

Last year's record: 9-7-2, 2-3 DVC (fourth place)

Top returning players: Wes Karubas, jr., D; Dominic Landato, sr., F; Esteban Pimentel, sr., MF; Ricardo Robledo, jr., MF

Key newcomers: Oskar Marcinkowski, jr., GK; Ebraheem Yaghmour, jr., MF

Worth noting: The Wildcats are coming off their first winning season since 2017 and should be competitive once again as coach Arnoldo Gonzalez said the team is solid from top to bottom. "The spine from goalkeeper through the defense, midfield up to the striker," he said. "The outsides show great potential but have yet to show what they can do." Dominic Landato led the Wildcats with 9 goals and 5 assists last season.

South Elgin

Coach: Jerzy Skowron (sixth year)

Last year's record: 9-8-4, 4-3-2 Upstate Eight (fourth place)

Top returning players: Quentin Albert, sr., FB; Justin Defensor, sr., MF; Jahson Leon, sr., MF; Matt Lipp, so., F; Jack Schmidtke, jr., F

Key newcomers: Rodrigo 'Momo' Gonzalez, so., MF; Christian Moscoso, so., GK; David Tyka, so., CB

Worth noting: The Storm tripled their wins from 3 to 9 the past two seasons. Where will they go now in the newly split Upstate Eight? "We're going to have to find someone or a group to replace the goals we lost (from Ashton Kerrigan and Ryan Nguyen graduating with 26 between them)," Skowron said. Look for Matt Lipp and Jack Schmidtke to take on added offensive roles, namely scoring.

St. Charles East

Coach: Vince DiNuzzo

2023 record: 19-8, 6-1 DuKane

Top athletes: Garrett Melton, Sr., MF; Connor Sychowski, Jr., MF; Ivan Campobasso, Sr., GK; Aidan Richbell, So., MF; Huxley Kapoor, So., F; Will Wade, So., D

Worth noting: The Saints are coming off an appearance in the supersectional, where they lost to New Trier, who went on to win the state championship. It marked the second time in three years that St. Charles East made it to or past the sectional finals, but the Saints have their work cut out for them if they want to make it back.

East lost 14 seniors to graduation, including eight of their starters. On top of that, they lost sophomore defender Michael Grezenko, who started as a freshman, after he moved across state borders to Missouri to join Sporting Kansas City's pro youth system.

What's left behind is a relatively young squad, with Melton and Sychowski being the only players who have plentiful experience at the varsity level. DiNuzzo knows that the season may be tough on his young athletes, but he has faith that the team has what it takes to secure its 12th winning season in 13 years.

"We will lean on our returning players to guide our new players to try to continue the Saints tradition," DiNuzzo said.

St. Charles North

Coach: Eric Willson

2023 record: 11-7-1, 5-2 DuKane

Top athletes: Casey Kriz, Sr., D; Diego Torres, Sr., MF; Ashton Goettel, Jr., D; Oliver Longosz, So., F; Dino Valenti, So., F

Worth noting: Despite losing two key players from last season in forward Walter Delapaz and goal keeper Alex Curtis, the North Stars return a majority of their young stars from a season ago for another attempt at a DuKane Conference title.

Longosz and Valenti return as North's top scorers, with Longosz scoring six and Valenti having three shots find the back of the net.

The North Stars will have the most experience in their backline. Kriz returns after seeing the

field more than anybody last season, Goettel returns after missing some time due to injury, and the senior duo of Cole Weddle and Ryan Knenlein round out the line after seeing plenty of playing time last season.

“We are a team that will always work hard. We have a good combination of veteran leadership and new, young talent,” Willson said. “In a very difficult conference, we will do our best to try and compete with the field.”

St. Francis

Coach: Jim Winslow (fourth year)

Last year's record: 7-7-1, 5-0-1 Chicago Catholic (second place)

Top returning players: Luke Argamasilla, sr., D; John Coco, jr., MF; Junior Diaz, jr., MF;

Nicholas Tisjlar, jr., F; Peter Williams, sr., MF; John Yarusso, sr., MF

Key newcomers: Ryan Callander, so.; Brody Jochum, so.

Worth noting: “(We’re) optimistic, but we need to find some goal scoring from a variety of places since we lost a bunch from last year,” Spartans coach Jim Winslow said. “I like the group a lot, but we have some very big shoes to fill.” The Spartans only non-conference win last year came in a 9-0 win in their opener but their non-conference schedule often has helped prepare them for conference success.

Streamwood

Coach: Matt Polovin (25th year)

Last year's record: 15-5-4, 5-1-3 Upstate Eight (third place)

Top returning players: Alex Alcalá, sr., D; Andy Benitez, jr., F; Max Galvan, jr., MF; AJ

Sabanovic, sr., F; Jairo Sanchez, sr., MF; Luis Vega, sr., F

Key newcomers: Adrian Chavez, fr., MF; Brian Garcia, sr., D; Frank Jaimes, sr., D

Worth noting: AJ Sabanovic (20 goals, 13 assists last year) spent the summer training in Bosnia and will lead a team that returns a solid mix of talent and will have the deepest bench coach Matt Polovin has had in years. In addition to challenging for a conference title and wanting to win the Barrington Tournament and Streamwood Soccer Classic, the Sabres have their eyes set on getting to state. “If we stay healthy,” Polovin said. “This season will be fun for all.”

Timothy Christian

Coach: Joel Zielke (seventh year)

Last year's record: 18-7, 5-1 Chicagoland Christian (first place)

Top returning players: Peter Buikema, sr., GK; Timothy Nulty, sr., MF; Cooper Rainone, sr., MF; Owen Wise, sr., F;

Key newcomers: Zach Baker, so., MF; Aidan Contant, jr., F

Worth noting: After back-to-back state trophies in Class 1A in 2021 and 2022, the Trojans won a sectional in 2A last year before falling to eventual 2A state champion Crystal Lake South in double OT in a supersectional. Most of that group is back with 13 returnees and eight being

starters. Seniors Timo Dacian and Trevor Munk and juniors Ben Schroeder and Wes Huber are back in front of four-year starting goalkeeper Peter Buikema. With seniors Cooper Rainone, Josiah Bhatia, Timothy Nulty and Owen Wise controlling possession this fall, the Trojans have yet another reason to be excited about their opportunities this fall.

Waubonsie Valley

Coach: Jose Garcia

Last year's record: 6-11-4, 1-4 DuPage Valley (fifth place)

Top returning players: Lachlan Ladd, sr., MF; Amiel Nichani, sr., D

Key newcomers: Lucas Garcia, so., F; Rihaan Gupta, so., D, Evan Wojtowich, so., D

Worth noting: The Warriors welcome back seven starters and will look for some talented sophomores to be a part of the mix this year. "We are an experienced team who is very focused," Warriors coach Jose Garcia said. "The team has great leaders who will lead the younger players. We look to make it very far in conference." The Warriors are vying for their first winning season since 2016.

West Chicago

Coach: Jose Villa (13th year)

Last year's record: 10-8-2, 4-3-2 Upstate Eight (sixth place)

Top returning players: Donovan Avila, sr., D; Pedro Nicoski-Rios, sr., D; Kuba Slupski, jr., F; Cung Thawng, sr., MF

Key newcomers: Enrique Correa, fr., Julian Lopez, fr., Michael Richardson, so., Yurem Siu, jr.

Worth noting: The Wildcats have enjoyed a winning season every year since winning the Class 3A state title in 2019. "We're looking to be competitive in every game and challenge for conference as well as the tournaments we will be a part of," Wildcats coach Jose Villa said. "We're feeling confident that this group can gel together and play for each other."

Westminster Christian

Coach: Barry Versaw (second year)

Last year's record: 17-3-1, 6-0 Northeastern Athletic (first place)

Top returning players: Heitor Bannwart, jr., MF; Zach Hoon, sr., MF; Brian Powers, jr., F/D; Elijah Schultze, jr., MF

Key newcomers: Alex Mirion, fr., F/MF; Elias Vaagan, so., MF/D

Worth noting: Last year Westminster lost most of its starting lineup to graduation and dealt with injuries but still found a way to dominate its schedule. "This season will once again be about who steps up to lead and who takes the opportunity to shine," Westminster coach Barry Versaw said. "Depth will be more of a challenge this year than the past few seasons." Zach Hoon got hurt a few games in last fall and didn't return. He's back along with with Brian Powers (4 goals), Elijah Schultze (4 goals) and Heitor Bannwart (12 goals, 9 assists).

Westmont

Coach: Francisco Delgado (seventh year)

Last year's record: 7-12-1, 1-5

Top returning players: Juan Bolivar, so., D; Manuel Tobin, sr., MF

Key newcomers: Adam Dubiel, fr., D; Edwin Rodriguez, fr., MF

Worth noting: Despite having less than 400 students, Westmont is fielding a F/S team for the first time coach Francisco Delgado's seven-year tenure. "The young group is solid and we are hoping to be able to keep them all together for the next couple of years." The team had relied heavily on Abraham Johnson for scoring as he found the back of the net 73 times before graduating earlier this year. Who will step up and score for the Sentinels?

Wheaton Academy

Coach: Jeff Brooke (13th year)

Last year's record: 13-9-3, 5-1 Chicagoland Christian (second place)

Top returning players: Mason Brooke, so., MF; Sam Brown, sr., MF; Carlton McClure, jr., F/D

Key newcomers: Finn Ruch, sr., CB

Worth noting: In addition to a winning season, last year provided a great opportunity for the Warriors to grow. Now they'll see what that experience can do going forward. "We had a lot of young players log significant minutes last year which allowed for great growth," Warriors coach Jeff Brooke said. "We have a strong culture and I believe we will have a solid group this year."

Sam Brown (15 goals, 6 assists), Mason Brooke (12 goals, 5 assists) and Colton McClure (1 goal, 4 assists) are among the team's top players looking for even greater success.

Wheaton North

Coach: Joe Klingelhofer (2nd season)

Last season's record: 4-13-1, 2-5 DuKane Conference (5th)

Top returners: Jackson Galbraith, sr., D; Gabe Brada, sr., D, Luke Hodel, sr., MF; Alex Leon, sr., F; Junior Edwin Gitonga, sr. F; John Thawng, jr., F.

Key newcomers: Felmon Kori, jr., MF; Mathew Garza, jr., D, Chris Mann, jr., D; Rocco Johnson, so., MF; Ryder Froebe, jr., MF.

Worth noting: Jackson Galbraith is the only starter from last year returning, but he's joined by fellow senior leaders Luke Hodel and Edgar Carmona in setting a hard-working and team first example.

"This is a high soccer IQ group that can win games because of their work ethic and understanding of the game," Klingelhofer said. "We mix an exciting junior class in with a very deep senior class. There are a lot of players on our roster that can wind up having an impact. I'm excited to watch this group grow during the season and find out which players step up. We will aim for a strong finish in what is always a highly competitive conference."

Wheaton Warrenville South

Coach: J. Guy Callipari

Last season's record: 5-10-3, 2-4-1 DuKane Conference (5th).

Top returners: Semin Razman, jr., F; Jet Oehrlein, sr., MF; Aaron Escareno, sr., MF; Am Za Lian, jr., MF; Diego Bautista, sr., MF; Jared Ferreyra, sr., GK.

Key newcomers: Carlos Garcia, so., D; Logan LaFratta, so., MF.

Worth noting: The Tigers should be among the top teams in the area because of an experienced core back. Junior forward Semin Razman, who had nine goals and assists in 2023, joins senior midfielder Jet Oehrlein (three goals, five assists), senior midfielder Diego Bautista, senior goalie Jared Ferreyra (80 saves) and senior midfielders Aaron Escareno as the top returnees. “We have 16 returning players,” Callipari said. “We will get out slowly while trying to develop continuity in our ideas given the majority of players that are new to the level of play. Our goal is to compete in the DuKane Conference.”

Willowbrook

Coach: Al Ramirez

Last season’s record: 2-19-1, 0-6 West Suburban Gold (7th).

Top returners: Kamil Kurpacha, sr., F; Jonah Slinn, sr., MF; Mathew Herz, sr., D.

Key newcomers: Szymon Sokoloski, fr., D; Ian Mueller, fr., MF; Brayden Doston, so., F.

Worth noting: The Warriors enter a new era, led by first-year coach Al Ramirez. But the Warriors are looking to make some positive steps this season.

“It’s a rebuilding year for the program,” Ramirez said. “Our goals this year are to have a .500 season and make a deep playoff run. We will look for our team captain, Jonah Slinn, and Kamil Kurpacha, to help us lead the team this season.”

York

Coach: Jordan Stopka

Last season’s record: 16-5, 4-2 West Suburban Silver (2nd).

Top returners: Diego Ochoa, sr., GK; Freddie Steen, sr., D, Sr.; Oliver Conner, sr., MF; Aaron Jobi, sr., MF/F.

Key newcomers: Cameron Coates, jr., D; Roberto Barriga, sr., MF; Quinn Stratton, jr.; MF/F; Carmie DiMiele, sr., F/

Worth noting: With numerous experienced players back this season, the Dukes have goals of winning the conference this season.

“This team has had a lot of moving pieces since the end of the 2023 campaign,” Stopka said.

“There are going to be at least six new starters on the squad, with a mixture of some coming from club and others being promoted to varsity. The boys have had a very intense start to the season and practice competition is at an all-time high. The season hinges on players playing some new roles and new players stepping up.”

- Chicago Tribune -
Rick Armstrong’s top 10 football teams and 25 players to watch in Aurora-Elgin for the 2024 season

By: Rick Armstrong
Date: August 27, 2024



H. Rick Bamman/The Beacon-News St. Charles North's Ethan Plumb (10) faces pressure from Geneva's Rocco DiLeonardi (33) during a DuKane Conference game in St. Charles on Friday, Oct. 20, 2023.

St. Charles North enters season as cream of the crop, although Batavia, Geneva and Oswego will be right on the North Stars' heels.

Top 10 Team

1. St. Charles North (6-4): Six starters led by four-year quarterback Ethan Plumb return on offense and five on defense led by his younger brother Matthew, a junior middle linebacker. It has the North Stars tabbed by many as one of the top contenders for the DuKane Conference title.
2. Batavia (11-2): Quarterback Ryan Boe (Northwestern), a three-year starter, is among 11 graduates from last season currently in college football camps. Junior Bodi Anderson, Boe's successor, has options with many talented skill players at his disposal. Senior safety Chase Osborne, a tackling machine, returns with senior nose guard Malachi Smith to lead defense.
3. Geneva (9-3): Senior wide receiver Talyn Taylor (Georgia) is a top 100 prospect in the nation who will be must-see attraction at Vikings' resurfaced Burgess Field. Marmion transfer Gavin Burt joins returnee Sean Lane to anchor defense at inside linebacker spots for team looking to challenge in powerful DuKane Conference.
4. Oswego (6-4): Linebacker trio of Carson Cooney (Iowa), Mikey Claycombe and Easton Riley lead what should be strong defense for Panthers. Senior wide receiver Jeremiah Cain will be a big option for senior quarterback Brett Connolly. Schedule gets tougher with addition of Joliet Catholic and Bolingbrook.
5. South Elgin (9-2): Former coach Pat Pistorio, who led Storm from 2013 through 2017, returns following Dragan Teonic's move to Cary-Grove. Combination of senior quarterback Jack Ginnan and senior wide receiver Ishmael George should provide plenty of highlights for spread offense that replaces triple-option for one of Upstate Eight favorites.

6. West Aurora (5-5): Junior quarterback Mason Atkins can target high-flyers Terrence Smith, who has 16 scholarship offers, and Kewon Marshall, the state champion in the high jump, as well as sure-handed Reece Powers. Atkins also can hand it off to Michael Williams or Azuriah Sylvester in Blackhawks' return to the Upstate Eight Conference.

7. Yorkville (6-4): Senior defensive end Bryce Griffin (Kent State) and senior wide receiver Dyllan Malone (Northern Illinois) figure to be headliners as Foxes try to repeat as conference champs in Southwest Prairie after winning first title since 1989 last season. Enters season with streak of six straight playoff appearances.

8. Jacobs (6-4): Look for senior PJ Barnes, who is 6-foot-3 and 245 pounds, to have a big impact on both sides of the ball at tight end and defensive end as Eagles take aim at fourth straight playoff berth. Senior outside linebacker Luke Gormsen calls shots on defense, while junior quarterback Connor Goehring does same on offense.

9. Oswego East (3-6): Junior quarterback Niko Villacci, with a year of starting experience under his belt, looks to open up the passing game and lead Wolves back to playoffs after streak of seven straight appearances ended last season.

10. Sandwich (8-4): Junior quarterback Brady Behringer and senior running back/defensive back Simeion Harris headline group of eight players on offense and 11 on defense who started or played regular minutes during run to quarterfinals of Class 4A playoffs.



West Aurora's Mason Atkins (2) gets forced from the pocket by Oswego East during a Southwest Prairie Conference game in Aurora on Friday, Oct. 6, 2023.

The 25 Players to Watch

- Isaiah Brown, Batavia, senior, wide receiver.
- Jake Buckley, Kaneland, junior, offensive lineman.
- Jeremiah Cain, Oswego, senior, wide receiver.

- Mikey Claycombe, Oswego, senior, linebacker.
- Carson Cooney, Oswego, senior, linebacker.
- Ishmael George, South Elgin, senior, wide receiver.
- Sheka Gjokaj, St. Charles East, junior, wide receiver.
- Bryce Griffin, Yorkville, senior, defensive end.
- Donald Hubbard, Bartlett, senior, defensive end.
- Zach Hultgren, Burlington Central, junior, offensive lineman.
- Sean Lane, Geneva, senior, linebacker.
- Dyllan Malone, Yorkville, senior, wide receiver.
- Zach Morrisroe, Oswego East, senior, defensive lineman.
- Chase Osborne, Batavia, senior, safety.
- Joe Pettit, Geneva, senior, offensive lineman.
- Ethan Plumb, St. Charles North, senior, quarterback.
- Matthew Plumb, St. Charles North, junior, linebacker.
- Andy Pohlman, Oswego East, senior, defensive back.
- Dominic Recchia, Yorkville, senior, kicker/punter/defensive back.
- Declan Smith, St. Charles North, junior, defensive end.
- Malachi Smith, Batavia, senior, nose guard.
- Terrence Smith, West Aurora, senior, wide receiver.
- Azuriah Sylvester, West Aurora, senior, defensive back/running back.
- Talyn Taylor, Geneva, senior, wide receiver.
- Luke Zook, Yorkville, senior, defensive back.