Volleyball grasps for the big one this year

By Tom Carlson

Three years ago, women's volleyball appeared on the sports scene at MIT and immediately grabbed the headlines. Using a core of three freshmen, Shella Luster, Karin Altman, and Sue Coppersmith, the team built a 6-0 regular season record under the direction of Coach David Castanon and Assistant Coach Robert Carras.

Two years ago, Lisa Albright joined this team and helped her fellow sophomores capture the Division II State Championships. Last year, with Luster, Altman, Coppersmith, and Albright all jumpees, the team won the AIAW Division II Eastern regional tournament, earning it a trip to compete in the National Championships. This year, with its nucleus now seniors, the women's volleyball team is 1-4, but is trying to claim all its previous accomplishments.

Three accomplishments include total domination of the women's volleyball scene in Massachusetts. Not since Eastern Nazarene College headed the team its only regular season loss three years ago has MIT had a match in another Massachusetts school.

You might call MIT "the big bully on the block" except for one thing: the team is not big and the players can hardly be called bullies. The average height is 5'7", and the average weight is 135 pounds, making the MIT squad smaller than most of its opponents.

The team doesn't overpower its foes either. Instead, the team relies on solid defense. Defense has been the key to the team's success. Since the team doesn't have enough height to stop the spike at the net, Coach Castanon has his players concentrating on six-person coverage of the floor. The team is also able to save many shots which other teams would miss.

Once a shot has been saved, either Albright or Coppersmith sets the ball up to the spikers. The team's most potent spikers are Luster and Altman who slash the ball very effectively through opponents' defenses. To count out the team, an opponent needs to hold out on Celia Berry's 6'4" body and block. Kathy Chirin '81 and Karen Samuelson '81 are two new members of the varsity team who are improving rapidly.

This year, Castanon is giving his players experience they will need for post-season matches by entering them in tournaments during the season.

Two games ago, the team competed in a tournament at Central Connecticut College against four Division I schools. MIT beat GW-Fordham and Robert Lynnman while losing to East Stroudsburg and Central Connecticut. The two teams ranked among the top 16 major college squads. In three of the four games the team lost, the opponents won by only two points.

On November 4 and 5, the team will go to URI to play against Southern Connecticut, Delaware, URI, and Maryland, the defending Division I Eastern Champion. A victory against any of these teams would be an upset.

In Massachusetts, after winning two straight State Division II crowns, the team will compete in the Division I State Championships for the first time this year. The team's main competitor will be cross-state rival Springfield.

Looking toward the Easterns, Castanon is cautious about predicting another victory. He notes that many of the teams MIT played last year were composed primarily of sophomores and may have improved. However, when asked to compare this year's MIT team to last year's, Coach Castanon states without reservation that this year's team is better since the experience of the last three years has seasoned his players. Therefore, MIT must be considered one of the favorites in the Easterns. If the team finishes first or second in the Easterns, MIT will once again compete in the National Championship tournament. The squad could almost certainly improve upon last year's 6-9 tournament record, especially if players aren'tiddled with injuries as they were during last year's championships.

While it returns to be seen what the team will accomplish this year, one thing is certain: the women's volleyball team is one of the best things that has ever happened to the MIT sports program. If you don't believe it, come see for yourself. The team's next home game is 7pm Tuesday, October 25, against Wheaton.