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**2006 SEASON PREVIEW**



# 2006 SEASON PREVIEW

## THE OUTLOOK

Nancy Somera hit the ground running when she was hired as South Carolina's ninth volleyball head coach on Feb. 25, 2005. Spring training began just a few weeks after that date, and when it concluded in late April, official practices would not start again until August. In a transitional year for the Gamecocks, Somera and her staff did not have much time to instill within and teach the squad her and its style of volleyball.

"One of the things in taking over a program that many people may overlook is while there are different classes of players in terms of sophomores, juniors, etc., they are all really freshmen in your system," Somera said.

The Gamecocks managed to win their first five matches and six of their first seven with the one loss coming to Big Ten power Purdue. South Carolina entered Southeastern Conference play with a 7-3 non-conference record and was 2-2 in the league after four contests. USC went on to lose nine of its next 10 before playing its final three matches of the year at home.

Despite a difficult one-month stretch that ended with the Gamecocks sitting at 10-14 overall and 3-11 in the SEC, Somera's team ended the season on a high note. South Carolina first defeated Auburn and then Alabama on Senior Night in a match in which it trailed 2-0 after the first two games. It was the Garnet & Black's first victory of the year in a five-game match, as it lost the previous four. The 2005 campaign was capped off with a 3-0 drubbing of Winthrop.

"I liked that at the end, we finally came together as a team, with everybody committed to the same level of effort and proper competitive attitude," Somera said. "We struggled during the middle portion of the season, partly because of inconsistent skills, but also because we didn't behave like a winning team."

With one year under her belt, Somera enters 2006 with her Gamecocks in a much better position to enjoy the success that was had from 1995 to 2002 when the program made the NCAA Tournament six times. Nine letterwinners return from a year ago, four of whom are seniors, and four talented freshmen were added to the roster. Included amongst the returnees is senior Shonda Cole and sophomore Marija Milosevic, who both earned All-SEC recognition the year prior.

Somera not only added new players to the program but a new assistant coach as well after Jason Hou departed for rival Clemson. Damian Elder is the newest member of the staff, officially joining the Gamecocks in mid-March. Elder came to Columbia, S.C., after serving as a volunteer coach for Stanford during the 2004 and 2005 seasons.

"We are very excited about having Damian on our staff," Somera said. "He brings a lot of energy and enthusiasm to the gym, and he is also a great technical skills coach as well as motivator. At Stanford, he had the opportunity to work with some of the best players in the country. For years, I have seen

how he works with players and how he helps them play at the highest level of the game."

Somera, her husband and associate head coach Ben, and Elder accomplished many goals during spring practice in 2006. South Carolina competed in three tournaments and gave a strong showing in its final event of the year in Aurora, Ill., by finishing fourth out of 24 teams at the Great Lakes Center NCAA Invitational.

"It was a great way to end our spring training," Somera said. "In earlier tournaments, we struggled in some areas that we thought we were improving in. That helped us shift our focus and training criteria in the practice gym."

"The Great Lakes tournament was our strongest competition of the spring, so we were able to feel confident that we had improved in our serve, receive, passing and defense by the result of our fourth-place finish. Routine defensive plays were converted into multiple attacker situations so our transition game picked up, and our defensive pursuit and ball handling got much better as well."

"Overall, it was as good a spring as we could have hoped," Somera continued. "A year after the fact, the system is understood and is being executed more consistently. It's hard for a player to be consistent when she's not only thinking about making the play, but doing it properly within a new system."

Now that the Gamecocks have played under Somera for over a year, the learning curve has lessened, and loftier goals have been established for a team looking to finish above .500 for the first time since 2002.

"We definitely have the possibility to be as competitive as any team in the SEC this year," Somera said. "The reality will be determined by how much they have learned over this past year, and whether they can continue moving in the right direction as a team through the entire season. I would be disappointed, though, if their hard work doesn't show up in season results this year."

A positional breakdown of the Gamecocks' 2006 roster follows.

## OUTSIDE HITTERS

### LETTERWINNERS & 2005 STATS (3)

Name	Ht.	Yr.-Exp.	KPG	HP	DPG	BPG
Shonda Cole	6-1	Sr.-3L	4.18	.281	1.17	0.86
Marija Milosevic	6-0	So.-1L	2.77	.218	1.77	0.36
Lynae Vanden Hull	6-2	Sr.-3L	2.74	.242	1.61	0.61

### PLAYERS LOST & 2005 STATS (0)

None

### NEWCOMERS (1)

Name	Ht.	Yr.-Exp.	Hometown
Meredith Moorhead	6-1	Fr.-HS	Charlotte, N.C.

South Carolina's outside hitters consist of senior Shonda Cole (6-1, Kings Mountain, N.C.), sophomore Marija Milosevic (6-0, Ljig, Serbia), freshman Meredith Moorhead (6-1, Charlotte, N.C.) and senior Lynae Vanden Hull (6-2, Papillion, Neb.).

Cole is the most decorated of the quartet having earned consecutive second-team All-SEC honors in 2004 and 2005. Her name also appeared on the AVCA All-South Region honorable mention list a season ago, making her Carolina's first regional award recipient since 2002. The senior trained with USA Volleyball's National A2 Team for the second summer in a row in June 2006 and competed at the Pan American Cup in Dominican Republic.

As South Carolina's returning leader in kills and hitting percentage from the 2005 season, Cole will likely shoulder much of the offensive burden once again in her final year. She recorded 414 kills as a junior, making her just the sixth player in school history to eclipse the 400 plateau for a season. Cole also became the 10th Gamecock with 1,000 career kills, and she will have a good chance of moving into the No. 2 spot all-time, needing 273 to tie Cally Plummer's 1,345.

"As our leader in kills last season, she'll be asked to play a significant offensive role, but she'll have more help this year," Somera said. "She's learning the intricacies of her position and playing the whole game, including back court skills, at a much higher level. As she settles into her role this year, I anticipate her having an honor-worthy season."

Cole's classmate Vanden Hull is hoping to conclude her career in a much better way than how last season ended. Prior to the Clemson match



Senior setter Iris Santos is one of the Gamecocks' best all-around players thanks to her abilities in setting, passing, hitting and blocking.



in mid-September, Vanden Hull suffered a season-ending knee injury that occurred during warm-ups. She was Co-SEC Freshman of the Year in 2003 after taking a redshirt as a true freshman and has just under 600 kills for her career. Vanden Hull figures to be an important part of the Gamecocks' offense with her knee completely rehabilitated.

"Lynae is a bit of a question mark going into preseason practices because of the timing of her rehabilitation," Somera said. "Aside from one spring tournament, she hasn't competed since last September, so her challenge will be getting comfortable with competing again in time for the opening of season. She's worked extremely hard, however, and I see no reason why she can't return to pre-injury form. When she does, she'll be scoring points for us. She has a nice jump serve, provides a big block on the right side, and it's great having a lefty over there as well. She's also one of the most terminating left-handed, left-side attackers I've ever seen."

Milosevic, one of South Carolina's two foreign players, finished her first year second only to Cole in many offensive categories. She piled up 266 kills while hitting .218, a number Milosevic hopes to improve this year. The Serbian also displayed a knack for defense with 170 digs. She made the All-SEC Freshman Team for her efforts and is expected to contribute offensively and defensively in 2006.

"Marija finished the year playing so well, and she got a lot stronger in the spring," Somera said. "Like any freshman, the first year is a transition year, but for her it was even more difficult because Europeans train and play the game differently. 2005 was a little of getting acquainted with U.S. collegiate volleyball. We hope to see her play the beginning of this year the way she played at the end of last year. I predict more kills, digs, and consistent passing from her this season. Marija also has one of the best jump serves on our team and maybe even in the conference."

Moorhead enters her freshman year coming off a highly decorated career at Providence Senior High School. She was a Prepvolleyball.com All-America selection following her senior year and was listed among the site's top 100 senior players in the nation. Moorhead's club team, Carolina Juniors 18 Slam, won the 2006 USA Volleyball Junior Olympics 18-Under National Tournament in Atlanta, and her performance earned her the National Tournament MVP award. Additionally, she helped Providence Senior win three state 4A championships.

"Meredith has great size, she's athletic and skilled all around," Somera said. "She can jump, she has good hands, her movement on the floor is good, and she can make an immediate impact. Meredith will have to beat out the three upperclassmen for a starting position. We'll have to see how quickly she grasps the speed of the game, but she's smart so it may not take long. She's a winner and future leader in our program."

## MIDDLE BLOCKERS

### LETTERWINNERS & 2005 STATS (2)

Name	Ht.	Yr.-Exp.	BPG	KPG	HP	DPG
Crystal Johnson	6-0	Jr.-2L	1.10	0.60	.149	0.24
Belita Salters	6-1	So.-1L	1.38	1.24	.103	0.32

### PLAYERS LOST & 2005 STATS (2)

Name	Ht.	BPG	KPG	HP	DPG
Lauren Ford	6-2	1.10	2.32	.266	0.39
Nicole Miller	6-1	1.13	1.83	.252	1.00

### NEWCOMERS (2)

Name	Ht.	Yr.-Exp.	Hometown
Christine Hauer	5-11	Fr.-HS	Aiken, S.C.
Ivana Kujundzic	6-1	Fr.-HS	Subotica, Serbia

Three middle blockers, who all hail from the Palmetto State, are listed on the Gamecocks' volleyball roster with freshman Christine Hauer (5-11, Aiken, S.C.), junior Crystal Johnson (6-0, Camden, S.C.) and sophomore Belita Salters (Lake City, S.C.). South Carolina also had a late July addition with Ivana Kujundzic (6-1, Subotica, Serbia).

The most obvious trait shared amongst USC's middle blockers is youth and inexperience. While Salters and Johnson both took redshirts as true freshmen, their playing time has been limited. Johnson was used sparingly during her first year in 2004, but she appeared in half of South Carolina's 100 games and 19 of its 27 matches overall last season. She managed to block 55 attempts for an average of 1.1 per game, which tied for third-best

on the team.

"Crystal has the opportunity to be one of the best blockers in the Southeastern Conference," Somera said. "She has eliminated the guessing from her blocking and can read and respond to setters. Offensively, she's improving and expanding her options."

Salters, who is regarded as one of the Gamecocks' best athletes, saw action in 13 matches in 2005 and 37 games overall. Her time on the court increased dramatically in the latter part of the season, as she played in USC's final seven matches. Salters displayed solid blocking skills with 51 total stops and an average that led the team at 1.38. Her average also was the seventh-highest figure for a single season in school history.

"Belita is starting to become a very good player," Somera said. "She was our most improved player by the end of the spring competitions. For a redshirt freshman, she was competing and executing at a very high level. What gets overlooked is her energy on the court that helps keep us going in the right direction. Our gym does not have the same energy when she is not there. Belita will give teams a lot of problems this year. She can hit all the sets and is getting better in our defensive blocking system."

Hauer led Aiken High School to the South Carolina 4A Regional State Championship her senior year. In addition to making the all-state and all-region teams in her final two seasons, Hauer was named MVP for her Junior Olympic team three consecutive times. She also played with club team BAMESO, which won the 2005 USA Volleyball Open Championship.

"Christine will add depth for us," Somera said. "We'll have to wait and see what she can bring in the preseason practices. She has a great positive attitude and works hard, and she's excited about being on the team. Christine will fill whatever role she's given and do it to the best of her abilities."

Kujundzic is the second Serbian player added to USC's roster in as many years. She comes to the Palmetto State with a vast knowledge of volleyball and figures to see a great deal of playing time her freshman year.

"Ivana is the most polished middle blocker of the group because of the years of experience she has playing at a high level of volleyball," Somera said. "She can serve and pass, and it'll take her some time to acclimate to the speed of the offense in the United States. Her processing speed may be a little slow, but she may not have any problem at all. The best thing Ivana gives us is her competitive experience having played for a high-level European club team."

## SETTERS

### LETTERWINNERS & 2005 STATS (2)

Name	Ht.	Yr.-Exp.	APG	DPG	KPG	HP
Petra Lorenzi	5-9	So.-1L	5.03	1.29	0.09	-.024
Iris Santos	5-10	Sr.-3L	7.62	2.36	2.23	.231

### PLAYERS LOST (0)

None

### NEWCOMERS (0)

None

South Carolina used two setters last season, but the majority of the work was given to senior Iris Santos (5-10, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic), who played her first two years at outside hitter. Sophomore Petra Lorenzi (5-9, Crescent City, Calif.) was given several opportunities to showcase her skills as well.

Santos had an exceptional year for the Gamecocks from a statistical standpoint, becoming the first player in school history to compile 200 kills, 200 digs and 500 assists in one season. In less than a one-week span in September, Santos registered a pair of triple-double performances in victories over North Carolina and Houston. She needs just 109 kills in 2006 to become only the second Gamecock to finish her career with at least 1,000 assists and 500 kills. Santos' versatility makes her a difficult match-up for the opposition and gives USC a significant threat in every aspect of the game.

"Last season was Iris' first year really setting the offense, having previously been a libero, outside hitter and sometimes a setter," Somera said. "Iris learned a lot about what is required in the setting position, and under Damian Elder's tutelage, she will learn even more about play calling and leading in that position. She is the best all-around volleyball player on the team, as last year's statistics prove."

Somera and her husband recruited Lorenzi while they were working



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at Oregon State, and they managed to bring her across the country when they decided to make the move to Columbia. Lorenzi played in all but three of South Carolina's matches and appeared in 77 games. She tallied 387 assists and a pair of double-doubles while gaining valuable experience as a setter.

"Petra saw a significant amount of playing time as a freshman, and she and Iris will compete for the starting position," Somera said. "Petra worked extremely hard her freshman year and took feedback from the spring and went home this summer to train in those areas. That helped her close the gap heading into this season because she can be moving forward from day one. Her efforts should give her more confidence."

## DEFENSIVE SPECIALISTS

### LETTERWINNERS & 2005 STATS (2)

Name	Ht.	Yr.-Exp.	DPG	APG	KPG	HP
Dinelia Concepcion	5-3	So.-1L	2.43	0.23	0.03	.000
Alexcis Thomson	5-10	Sr.-3L	1.46	0.21	0.20	.034

### PLAYERS LOST (1)

Name	Ht.	DPG	APG	KPG	HP
Sarah Morgan	6-0	2.64	0.25	0.70	.127

### NEWCOMERS (1)

Name	Ht.	Yr.-Exp.	Hometown
Sarah Cline	5-7	Fr.-HS	Rock Hill, S.C.

Senior Alexcis Thomson (5-10, North York, Ontario, Canada), sophomore Dinelia Concepcion (5-3, Deltona, Fla.) and freshman Sarah Cline (5-7, Rock Hill, S.C.) are the defensive specialists for the Gamecocks in 2006.

Thomson, who possesses skills as a setter as well, played in 23 matches last season, which was a personal-best for her at USC. She tallied 89 digs in 61 games for an average of 1.46 and averages 1.67 digs per game for her career. The Gamecocks are hoping she will have the most productive season of her career as a senior.

"Alexcis is really more of a utility player," Somera said. "She goes through all of the hitting drills, she trains like the outside hitters, passes and digs balls with liberos, and she sets as well. Her fundamentals have gotten a lot better. Alexcis improved her mental game the most of anybody in the spring. She'll help us win matches in a variety of roles this season."

Concepcion finished second on the team in digs last season to departed senior Sarah Morgan with 238. She recorded at least 10 digs in the 27 matches she played and notched a season-high 21 against Arkansas. At one point during the year, Concepcion went six consecutive matches where she reached double digits in the digs category. Standing at 5-3, Concepcion is the smallest player for the Gamecocks, but she is expected to make large contributions in defensive saves.

"Dinelia saw a lot of time as a libero in 2005," Somera said. "She definitely refined her passing style, and that will make her a lot better this year. Dinelia is vocal on the court, and she brings that spark and grit you want from a libero. She's focused and determined and is emerging as a leader."

Cline played for Northwestern High School and was named the South Carolina High School Volleyball State 4A Region 3 Player of the Year as a senior. She also was a member of the all-state and all-region teams during her career. The summer prior to becoming a Gamecock, Cline's club team, Carolina Juniors 18 Slam, won the USA Volleyball Junior Olympics 18-Under National Tournament in Atlanta. Along with fellow South Carolina rookie Moorhead, Cline was named to the all-tournament team for her performance.

"Sarah will add depth and push the others," Somera said. "She is quick and explosive, and comes in more ready than Dinelia was last year. Sarah also has a good base of training and defensive understanding."

## THE SCHEDULE

The Gamecocks have 32 regular-season matches this fall, which is the most since 1991 when USC had 36. USC's Volleyball Competition Facility will serve as the venue for 14 of the contests, and 20 will come versus Southeastern Conference foes, as the league implemented a new home-and-home format for 2006. Vanderbilt is the lone school that does not sponsor volleyball.

"Double round-robin is a more honest and true method in determining a conference champion because everybody plays each other twice, home and away," Somera said.

The SEC also will not sponsor a post-season tournament for the first time in its history. SEC Tournament champions had been crowned since 1979, a string of 27 years. The league's regular-season champion will earn the conference's automatic NCAA berth.

USC begins its journey in Fort Worth, Texas, at a tournament hosted by TCU over Aug. 25-26. The Gamecocks open the season against Boise State and then take on the host Horned Frogs later in the day. The final day of the event pits the Garnet & Black against Loyola (Md.) and Texas A&M-Corpus Christi.

After returning from Cowtown, South Carolina will take a short bus ride to Clemson, S.C., to compete in the Tigers' tournament. USC and Clemson square off in the tourney's opening match Aug. 31, and the Gamecocks follow up with contests against Charlotte and Tennessee State the next day. South Carolina concludes its stay playing Western Carolina on Sept. 2.

Over Sept. 8-9, South Carolina hosts a tournament that includes St. John's, Florida State and three-time NCAA champion Southern California. Play kicks off with South Carolina and St. John's meeting at 10 a.m. on Friday, followed by Florida State-Southern California at noon, Florida State-St. John's at 5:30 p.m. and South Carolina-Southern California at 8 p.m. The Women of Troy face St. John's at 11:30 a.m. in Saturday's opening match, and the tournament concludes with the Gamecocks playing Florida State at 1:30 p.m.

"The philosophy in non-conference scheduling is for it to be strong enough to prepare us for conference play but forgiving enough that we gain confidence," Somera said. "We have a good balance in our matches to prepare us and help us get better. We're less concerned with our win-loss record in non-conference and more interested in the feedback we receive, but certainly we need to have a winning record."

"We're excited about our home tournament," Somera continued. "We played Florida State last season and they were a young team like us, and I expect them to be much improved. I know Southern California well, and they're a perennially strong team and well coached. They'll make us play our best and make us a better team."

Somera's knowledge of Southern California is extensive, as she played for the Women of Troy from 1985 to 1988 and coached there from 1991 to 1998. She was a two-time All-Pac-10 selection as a junior and senior and still ranks among the top 10 on the school's career records list in seven statistical categories.

SEC play begins Sept. 15 with USC hosting Auburn at 7 p.m. and Florida at 1:30 p.m. on Sept. 17. Three consecutive road contests await the Gamecocks afterward at LSU (Sept. 22), Arkansas (Sept. 24) and Georgia (Sept. 27). After a home tilt with Alabama on Oct. 1 at 1:30 p.m., South Carolina hits the road again to take on Tennessee (Oct. 6) and Kentucky (Oct. 8). The first half of the conference season ends with the Garnet & Black hosting Mississippi on Oct. 13 at 7 p.m. and Mississippi State at 1 p.m. in a match to air live on SEC TV.

Half two of SEC competition begins with USC at Florida and Auburn on Oct. 20 and 22. Arkansas and LSU play the Gamecocks in Columbia on Oct. 27 and 29 at 7 and 1:30 p.m. USC visits the Magnolia State on Nov. 3 and 5 to face Mississippi State and Mississippi before hosting Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia on Nov. 10, 12 and 15 at 7, 1:30 and 7 p.m. The SEC regular season ends Nov. 17 with South Carolina taking on Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

"I'm excited for my second year in the SEC," Somera said. "My first year was spent getting to know the coaching styles and the teams' strengths and weaknesses. Now, I have a better grasp of what each team brings."

"There have been a lot of coaching changes in the SEC in the past few years, so several programs are on the upswing. A lot of programs are rebuilding, and this year they will all be better."

South Carolina's regular season ends Nov. 22 with a home match versus College of Charleston at 5 p.m. The NCAA Tournament begins with first- and second-round action taking place from Nov. 30 to Dec. 3. Regionals begin Dec. 7 and end Dec. 10, and the Final Four takes place Dec. 14 and 16 at the Qwest Center Omaha in Omaha, Neb.