

Over the past two seasons, the South Carolina women's basketball team has won 48 games, has been ranked in the final top 20 polls, recorded two top five SEC finishes and participated in back-to-back NCAA Tournaments. But winning games and participating in the postseason tournament do not complete the top entry on the Gamecocks' "To-Do" list. The ultimate goal for USC this season is the top prize, the national championship, and South Carolina will not be satisfied until they bring home the championship trophy.

When she first arrived at USC, head coach Susan Walvius set her goals to become a team that challenges in the SEC. Now entering her seventh year, her team regularly competes for the SEC title and in 2003-04, the Gamecocks will look to a veteran nucleus and the nation's 10th best class of freshmen to continue its quest to become one of the nation's best teams.

South Carolina welcomes back two starters and three letterwinners from last year's 23-8 team that advanced into the second round of the NCAA Tournament last March. The Gamecocks finished fifth in the SEC but the team was not happy about its play in the NCAA Tournament.

"Any time that your team makes the NCAA Tournament and is ranked in the top 20 in the final polls, you have to be somewhat pleased," said USC head coach Susan Walvius. "But that's not where we want to be as a team. We want to be recognized as a one of the nation's top programs and we will work on that this year.

"Obviously we will miss departed seniors Jocelyn Penn and Petra Ujhelyi but we have five players returning from last year and I believe that our eight highly-recruited freshmen will be able to contribute quickly."

Cristina Ciocan established herself as one of the top point guards in the country last year by dishing 207 assists and averaging over 13 points per game. A senior with 473 career assists, Ciocan is only 123 away from becoming the school's all-time assists leader. The fiery redhead from Romania is already attracting attention from preseason all-star teams and will be counted on to lead the Gamecocks in 2003-04.

One of three seniors, Kelly Morrone is ready for a healthy season for a change. A three-time team captain, Morrone has played through back, hand, nose and knee injuries during her career and is still one of the top three-point threats in the SEC.

After transferring to USC last year from Gulf Coast Community College, senior Kasia Roszak feels confident in the Gamecock system. Known for her rebounding prowess at GCCC, Roszak will look to make her presence felt in the SEC this year.

Sophomores Sarah Burgess and Olga Gritsaeva were impact players for South Carolina last year as freshmen and head coach Walvius predicts that fans will see even more from the duo this season.

"Sarah Burgess was able to step up as a freshman and win some games for us, even though she wasn't healthy a majority of the year. You don't usually see first-year players come into the SEC and be that fearless but that's one of the reasons we recruited her. I look forward to her taking on more responsibilities and staying healthy this year. Olga Gritsaeva came in late last year and improved every time she stepped on the court. We put her on a weight program and she's gotten much stronger over the summer. At 6-4, she will be a big part of our rebounding and defending schemes this year.

"We will count on our three seniors, Cristina Ciocan, Kelly Morrone and Kasia Roszak, for leadership this season and they have already taken on this role with the younger players.

"I don't think that many people outside the SEC have had the opportunity to see Cristina Ciocan play yet. She is one of the best point guards in the nation who can score, drive to the basket, pass the ball and play defense. If she has the season that we're expecting, she will be our fifth first-round WNBA pick in three years. I have been really impressed with Kelly Morrone's hard work and leadership this fall and I believe we'll see big things from her this year. Kasia Roszak is a rebounding specialist and we will rely on her strength and maturity this year."

For the fourth time in six years, head coach Susan Walvius and her staff signed another top 25 recruiting class. This year's eight freshmen were named as the 10th best group in the nation by *All Star Girls Report*. The class includes three of the best high school players from the state of South Carolina (Columbia's Lauren Simms and Lakesha Tolliver and Barnwell native Melanie Johnson) and two high school teammates from Lawrenceville, Georgia, (Stacy Booker and Shannel Harris) who turned down other offers to attend USC. Committed to finding the best players in the world, Walvius also signed two standouts from Croatia (Lea Fabbri and Iva Sliskovic) and Larissa Kulcsar, who played with Cristina Ciocan on the Romanian National Team.

"I'm very excited to get our freshmen out on the court with the veterans. Our guards will be very good and we may to have to change our system a bit to push the

ball up the court more. I see Lauren Simms as a potential starter for us during her freshman year. She is a point guard who scores and attacks the rim. Lakesha Tolliver has the skills to be one of the best players ever at South Carolina if she continues to work hard. She is a true back-to-the basket physical SEC player. Melanie Johnson is a tremendous athlete who gets up and above the rim. She will be a really good player for us. Stacy Booker and Shannel Harris were instrumental members on two Georgia State Championship teams at Collins Hill High School. Booker is a shooting specialist who is explosive and sees the court well. Shannel Harris is a quick and wiry payer who can play inside or out. Lea Fabbri and Iva Sliskovic both played for the Croatian National Team. Lea scored 16 points against the United States Under-20 team which was comprised of mainly SEC players. She is a very strong, fast point guard who is not afraid of taking the ball in the paint. Iva Sliskovic will be a big impact post player in the SEC. She is 6-5 and can face the basket or play with her back to the basket. We will need her to get stronger and more physical but I can see her starting as a freshman this year too. Larissa Kulcsar will be an exciting player to coach. She's very intelligent, has a nice vertical jump and doesn't mind physical play."

Also new to the Gamecock family is Columbia, South Carolina native Angela Hunter who transferred to South Carolina last summer after spending her freshman year at Tennessee-Chattanooga. Hunter will redshirt the 2003-04 season but will be able to practice with the team in preparations for her 2004-05 sophomore season.

The Gamecocks welcome two new faces to the bench this season as the team lost assistant coaches Linda Hill-MacDonald and Shell Dailey to the WNBA's Washington Mystics and San Antonio Silver Dollars, respectively. Third-year assistant coach Chris Brower will instruct the "number two and three guard positions" when not out recruiting another nationally-ranked freshmen class. Over the summer, South Carolina added a wealth of basketball knowledge when 18-year veteran Ed Baldwin joined the staff. Most recently, Baldwin served for two years as Dawn Staley's top assistant at Temple but his reputation for coaching and recruiting excellence was built during his 13 seasons as the head coach at UNC Charlotte where he led the 49ers to a national ranking and postseason appearances. Baldwin also served as an assistant to Hall of Fame coach Kay Yow at NC State for three seasons.

Former Tennessee standout Michelle Marciniak begins her first year of coaching and will offer invaluable insight to the Gamecock players. The MVP of the 1996 NCAA Final Four, Marciniak helped lead the

Lady Vols to the 1996 National Championship during her senior year. She also played professionally in the ABL and the WNBA before joining the coaching ranks this summer.

USC made another step to improve its basketball program by establishing its first-ever director of basketball operations position. The Gamecocks hired former head coach Robin Muller to coordinate the day-to-day basketball details.

"Everyone said that I should talk to Ed Baldwin when we started the hiring process last spring," said Walvius. "He is a great recruiter and has had coaching success at NC State, UNC Charlotte and at Temple. He will work with our post players while Michelle Marciniak will direct our point guards. Marciniak was a member of the 1996 National Championship team at Tennessee and will teach our players what it takes to compete at that level. Robin Muller was the head coach at Winthrop University for seven years and my assistant coach for two years at VCU. She has vast experience in all phases of directing a Division I women's basketball program and allows the coaches to concentrate on scouting, player development, recruiting and other basketball-related activities."

The rigorous 2003-04 schedule will test South Carolina's young team with only 11 home games and 16 road games. The Gamecock coaches intentionally designed the demanding schedule to prepare the team for postseason play. USC will face nine teams who finished the 2002-03 year ranked in the USA Today/ESPN Coaches' Poll and participated in postseason play last season.

South Carolina opens the season on Friday, November 21st with a road game at instate rival, Clemson. This is the second consecutive year that the two schools have opened the season against each other. Last year, USC defeated Clemson in the Carolina Center's inaugural game before a sellout crowd of 17,712 fans. The Gamecocks return home for a three-game stand Thanksgiving week against Appalachian State, Mercer and Florida A&M before beginning a four-game road swing.

The Gamecocks play in The Colonial Center only once in the month of December. USC travels to DeLand, Florida, to face Stetson University on December 2nd before continuing west to Albuquerque, New Mexico, for the Southwest Airlines Lobo Shootout December 5th and 6th. The Gamecocks face Southern Utah in the first round and then face either Tennessee State or host New Mexico State. USC goes to Charlotte on December 14th to play the UNC Charlotte 49ers.

On December 18th, South Carolina finishes its exams in time for the Louisiana-Lafayette Ragin Cajuns and the team's first home game in three weeks. Before taking off for Christmas break, South Carolina ventures to Myrtle Beach on December 20th to meet North Carolina in the ACC-SEC Beach Ball Classic. The Gamecocks regroup after Christmas for a trip to New Jersey to face the Seton Hall Pirates on December 30th.

South Carolina makes its first-ever regular season national television appearance on Saturday, January 3rd as the Gamecocks face the University of Minnesota Golden Gophers in the CBS Game of the Week.

The Gamecocks host only 11 home games at The Colonial Center this season but have seven demanding SEC guests coming to dinner. The updated 2003-04 home-and-away SEC series for South Carolina involves two battles against Alabama, Kentucky and Tennessee this season with five SEC head coaches making their first visit to The Colonial Center.

South Carolina opens the 2004 SEC calendar at Alabama on January 11th where the Gamecocks have won the last two contests. Tennessee makes its first visit to The Colonial Center on Thursday, January 15th, in what should be the second consecutive Columbia sellout between the two teams. On January 17th, 2002, South Carolina set a Carolina Coliseum record when 12,168 fans turned out. Only three days later, USC will look to extend its three-game home winning streak over Arkansas when the Lady 'backs and new head coach, Susie Gardner, visit on January 18th.

After a January 22nd battle at Florida against Carolyn Peck's young and improved Gator squad, another new SEC head coach makes her first visit to USC's new arena on January 25th when longtime Tennessee assistant Mickie DeMoss brings her first Kentucky Wildcat team to The Colonial Center. South Carolina then travels to Charleston on January 28th to play the College of Charleston Cougars under new head coach Nancy Wilson. A familiar name to Gamecocks fans, Wilson coached USC for 13 seasons (1984-1997) and led the team to five Metro Conference championships.

The Gamecocks continue their SEC travels with a February 1st contest in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, against an LSU squad that has been ranked in the top five in all preseason polls.

Although she worked as the FOX Sports' color commentator at a South Carolina home game last year, Carol Ross has never attempted to coach over the

vocal USC fans in The Colonial Center. On February 5th, Ross and her Ole Miss Lady Rebels come to town with USC not suffering a home loss to Ole Miss since 1994.

The Gamecocks wrap up the home-and-away series with Tennessee and Alabama with a February 8th visit to Knoxville and a February 12th home contest against the Crimson Tide. South Carolina visits Auburn and Mississippi on February 15th and 19th, respectively, before returning home to host the Georgia Bulldogs on February 22nd.

After visiting Kentucky on February 26th, South Carolina closes out the 2003-04 regular season with Vanderbilt on February 29th as second-year head coach Melanie Balcomb makes her first visit.

"We are going to be tested on the road this year," remarked Walvius. "Playing this many good teams will prepare our team for postseason play and will further establish our team's reputation nationally.

"After opening the season at Clemson, which is always a tough place to play, we travel to New Mexico where the Lobos average over 10,000 fans per game in "The Pit." We face a Charlotte team that played in the NCAA Tournament last year and then have to compete against North Carolina in Myrtle Beach. And that's just the month of December.

"We are really excited to have the opportunity to play on CBS in January. It is a real credit to how hard the kids on the team have worked over the last couple of years to be picked for a national game.

"I can't wait to see this team step out on the court on Saturday, October 18th, our first day of practice. Our three seniors have been inspirational leaders during the preseason workouts and the younger players already know the goals for this season. Our expectations are to compete for a national championship and nothing less will satisfy our team this season."