

AMC RIVALRY RENEWED

ST. LOUIS – The anticipation is growing for days in advance as the rivalry between Missouri Baptist and Park University (Mo.) will boil to the surface once again.

"Its two teams battling it out, leaving everything out on the court preparing endless weeks for each other and just giving it their all on the court against each other," says men's volleyball graduate assistant Travis Collard. "You have the most fans at both places every single season just for that match. You know that there's going to be a high level of volleyball."

On game day, the stands will fill with rowdy fans as both teams take the court in pursuit of the top spot in the American Midwest Conference and rivalry bragging rights.

"I think it's one of those things to where we just have to prepare for it like any other game," says women's Head Coach Chris Nichols. "We can't get caught up in the hype, we can't get too high, can't get too low. We just have to tell our kids to prepare like it's any other match and then really just stay focused. All that other stuff can just be a distraction. So we're just making sure that we would prepare like we would do for any other match."

The rivalry between Missouri Baptist and Park University has stood the test of time in both the men's and women's volleyball programs.

"The Park rivalry is a huge rivalry for us," says men's Head Coach John Yehling. "Every year we know they're going to be a top team in the conference and top of the national rankings men's, women's doesn't really matter. So we know it's going to be a huge match for us each time we step on the court."

Even though the rivalry in the women's program may not have really found it's footing until 2011, the competition grows more intense each year.

"My junior and senior year, there was really some bad blood created between the women's program and the men's program now," says women's volleyball alum Madeline Nesbit. "It's not pretty, it's fun and their good matches, but it's not pretty."

The Missouri Baptist and Park volleyball rivalry brings out the best play in both teams every time they take the court against each other.

"They had a fabulous team," says women's volleyball alum Lauren Stuckel. "I enjoyed playing them. I mean the competition was up there and it made me play the best that I could play and I think visa-versa for them too. We just had that rivalry against each other and it brought out the best in us and the way we played volleyball."

The MBU/Park match is always a game that fans note on their calendars as one of the biggest games of the year.

"The rivalry has grown over the years, absolutely," says men's volleyball alum Robert Esser. "It's much more aggressive now than it was back when I was a freshman because volleyball in general is getting bigger. There's more and more teams coming out, tougher teams and Missouri Baptist and Park are still some of the teams to beat."

The women's volleyball teams will face each other for the first time in the 2015 season on Oct. 29 at the Breckon Sports Center in Parkville, Mo.

"Against Park everything is a little more distinct and intense with everything that we do and the guys feel that, the girls feel that when we're out there competing against them," says Yehling.

The Pirates hold a slight advantage over the Spartans at the Breckon Sports Center of 4-3 and MBU looks to tie things up on Thursday.

The last time that Missouri Baptist won on the Pirates home court was in 2012 in the regular season.

MBU also looks to halt Park's home court win streak at 37 wins.

MBU comes into the match ranked second in the nation with a current 30-3 overall record and boasts a win percentage of 0.909. The team is currently undefeated in the American Midwest Conference (AMC) (10-0) and is on its way to clinching the regular season conference title with two regular season games left against conference opponents Park University and Hannibal LaGrange (Mo.).

The No. 9 Pirates come into the match ranked ninth in the nation with a current 20-6 record and possess a win percentage of 0.769. Park's only loss in AMC play (6-1) was against Columbia College (Mo.). The Pirates also possess the 2014 AMC and NAIA Championship titles.

The Spartans lead the way in the rivalry with a record of 8-6 and a 29-22 record in sets won since 2009. Since 2011 each team boasts a win streak of five wins apiece as the Pirates hold the current five game win streak.

In the last regular season meeting, the teams met in St. Louis with a capacity crowd for the NAIA Game of the Week in which the Spartans became one of two teams that took a set from Park in the regular season.

The teams met on the hardwood again in post season during the AMC Championship match in which the Pirates swept the Spartans and became the 2014 AMC Champions.

"To lose to Park it's always pretty bitter cause you want win them all," says Esser. "Those matches we win I think clarify to who's on the team that they are beatable that there's this tough team here, we can beat them and we've done it before its just reproducing those results."

The teams will go head to head in what will be likely one of the most exciting and intense matches that these teams have seen yet this season. As tensions mount and excitement grows, the teams will prepare to face each other in the Breckon Sports Center at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Oct. 29.

CLICK HERE for interview with Head Coach Chris Nichols

CLICK HERE for live stats and video of the match (broadcasted by Park University)