Forest Park's returning volleyball letter-winners are (from left) Maria DeMuri, Abby Sommers, Lexi Gussert, Mindy DeNell, Kendra Campbell and Gina Graff.

CRYSTAL FALLS—Each year, Coach Kim Bjork has a tough task in front of her. This fall's challenge is one of the hardest: How can Forest Park possibly match last year's volleyball season, let alone top it?

The Lady Trojans, after all, won their district, won their regional, won in the quarterfinals and went all the way to the state Class D semifinals in Battle Creek.

Grads gone: Trouble is, four of last year's starters have graduated: Audrey Sholander, Tanner Bartczak, Ana Cornelia and Kaitlin Shamion. "They were our core," said their coach.

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But the other two—Lexi Gusssert and Mindy DeNell—are back, and Coach Bjork has four other returning letters eager to play a bigger role on the team: Gina Graff, Maria DeMuri, Abby Sommers and Kendra Campbell.

Gussert and Campbell are juniors—the others are seniors. Gussert was a first team Skyline Conference pick last year—the only honor last year's seniors didn't claim.

"It's going to be a struggle to fill those spots initially," said the coach. "But by midseason, we should be raring to go." She didn't sound too worried.

New faces: Trojan fans will see a freshman as setter. But it's not as if she is new to the team.

Maria Stankewicz has been the team's manager for years. "Probably since fourth grade—fifth grade?" said Coach Bjork. "Just being around the gym, seeing what the girls do, is a big help. You pick up stuff from other players."

Another freshman on the varsity is Michaela Steiro, who will work in the front row.

Coach Bjork also expects strong play at the net from junior Sam Nylund. "Hopefully, she will help us in the kill department.

The team has 14 on the varsity team plus another 14 on the JV team, coached by Ashley Metz.

"That's a big squad for us. Two doesn't seem a lot more, but it is when you've got six girls on the floor and eight sitting next to you …"

On the floor: Gussert, of course, will be the Trojans' king pin in the middle, with Steiro occasionally spelling her. To the left are Nylund and Campbell, and to the right are DeNell and Stankewicz, who will set in a 5-1 alignment.

In the back row, Graff again will serve as libero. "We've got a lot of depth at front row, so if a girl is off, we can put another girl in and we'll do OK."

That's how it is every year: "You load up with different girls," Coach Bjork said. "It's just a matter of time before they break through and start performing like they're supposed to.

"It's going to be a little bit of a struggle to start the year, but by midseason we'll be in good shape."

Coming up: The Lady Trojans won't have a pre-season scrimmage and may not need one: They played in the Kingsford Invitational Aug. 18 and are at the Great Eight tournament, also at Kingsford, Aug. 25. FP hosts Carney-Nadeau in its first dual match Aug. 23—Thursday evening.

Bjork: "We'll be busy before school even starts."