

OPENING WEEKEND PROGRAMME



MAAREE WOMEN'S
SUPER
LEAGUE



19TH OCTOBER 2025
SIR DAVID WALLACE LOUGHBOROUGH



WELCOME TO OPENING WEEKEND

For those volleyball aficionados among us, Super League Opening Weekend is akin to being a child on Christmas morning.

After weeks of anticipation – the summer transfers, the training sessions, the team discussions, the social media posts and so much more – the wait is finally over.

Under one roof, we will finally get to see where all 16 teams are at for the 2025-26 campaign, after those extensive preparations, in what is always a feast of exciting volleyball across the weekend.

In some respects, the format of the weekend will be very similar to what has unfolded since it was introduced ahead of the 2023-24 season, with the men's matches being played on Saturday, followed by the women's on Sunday.

In others, however, the event continues to evolve and, we hope, making it more enjoyable for not just those participating, but also those watching in the stands and also from the comfort of their armchairs at home.

The single, biggest change for 2025 is the venue. After 16 years at the National Volleyball Centre in Kettering, Loughborough University is now our new home for our major indoor events.

The first event to take place on university grounds since the partnership was finalised was the U18 Super Series earlier this month. The top-class facilities the site boasts were well received by players, coaches, officials and supporters alike – and we'd like to thank the Loughborough staff for making us feel so welcome, so quickly.

The other major change is from 10 to eight teams each day as a result of the reduction in the number of Super League teams for 25-26. From an OW point of view, this allows a greater focus to be placed on each of the weekend's eight matches.

Those watching from home will also see some major changes in the way matches are live streamed... keep your eyes peeled on the Volleyball England YouTube Channel.

In person, there will be the chance to buy some Super League merch from our pop-up VolleyStore, partners MAAREE, kitround and Shoorah will be present and there will be the chance to have a go at sitting volleyball in our sitting showcase.

Finally, we'd like to send our heartfelt thanks to DYNAMIK (men) and MAAREE (women) for the continued backing of the Super League format, as well as our other partners, who embrace where we are trying to go in terms of professionalising the top-flight league.

Have a great time watching Opening Weekend.

Charlie Ford

Charlie Ford, Volleyball England's Chief Executive Officer



OFFICIALS

GAME 1



V



BRENDAN FOGARTY

FIRST REFEREE

DEBRA SMART

SECOND REFEREE

GAME 2



V



MARTIN SHAKESPEARE

FIRST REFEREE

FIONA COTTERILL

SECOND REFEREE

GAME 3



V



RICHARD BURBEDGE

FIRST REFEREE

CLAUDIU FLOREA

SECOND REFEREE

GAME 4



V



GIORDANO MARCHI

FIRST REFEREE

CHRIS TSUI

SECOND REFEREE

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please remember to support
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MAAREE
WOMEN'S
SUPER
LEAGUE



OPENING WEEKEND FIXTURES



SUNDAY 19TH OCTOBER

**DURHAM
PALATINATES**



11:30



**DARKSTAR
DERBYSHIRE**

**TEAM SIDEOUT
POLONIA**



13:30



**LIONHEARTS
VINARIUS**

**MALORY
EAGLES**



15:30



**NEWCASTLE
KNIGHTS**

**ESSEX
REBELS**



17:30



**LEEDS
GORSE**



MAAREE

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MAAREE WOMEN'S
SUPER
LEAGUE



DURHAM PALATINATES

HEAD COACH: Paul Welsh

ASSISTANT COACH: Ross Enfield

- 18 Alisa Ruffin
Setter
- 5 Chloe Thomas
Middle
- 8 Defne Cinar
Middle
- 19 Elena Bullemer
Libero
- 22 Elizabeth Schraeder
Outside
- 10 Isabel Decker
Opposite
- 23 Jenna Giambi
Libero
- 12 Jesse Szymanski
Outside
- 28 Maura Hayes
Outside
- 1 Niara Hightower
Middle
- 6 Sara Hall
Libero
- 11 Sonlya Kandrashuk
Outside
- 9 True McCollough-Pinci
Libero

DARKSTAR DERBYSHIRE

HEAD COACH: Maria Bertelli

ASSISTANT COACH: Audrey Cooper

ASSISTANT COACH: Aleksandra Agafonova

- 1 Hajar El Alouani
Outside
- 2 Lucille Leasure
Middle
- 3 Lindsey Legg
Libero
- 4 Rachel Murray
Libero
- 6 Morgan Donaldson
Outside
- 7 Alice Brand
Captain
- 9 Lauren Cadwgan
Outside
- 10 Tope Olusola
Outside
- 11 Brenna Crabtree
Outside
- 12 Jacey Neid
Middle
- 14 Viktoriya Glazewska
Setter
- 21 Oscar Smith
Outside

DURHAM PALATINATES

It's been something of an unusual summer for the Durham Palatinates, having failed to make the Final 4 play-offs on the back of a hat-trick of top-flight titles prior to last season.

That extra time sitting idle has brought plenty of reflection on what went wrong for a side with such high expectations, but the club believe they have recruited more wisely this time around.

As ever at the end of a Palatinates season, the revolving door has been almost constantly in use, with a legion of new American scholars signed to replace those who have finished their university courses and departed.

England Talent pathway players Natasha Frost (Outside/Opposite), from Cambridge ARU, and Sylvie Poupaert (libero), from Urmston, have also joined as further reinforcements.

In all, Durham have formulated a cross-competition squad of 21 players, 14 of which will come together to form the core Super League group.

There is, however, a degree of continuity, with familiar faces Malea Stanton and Defne Cinar remaining on the programme.

Blessed with such an array of talent, Head Coach Paul Welsh admits the biggest problem could be keeping everyone happy in the fight for places on the MAAREE Super League roster.

"It's definitely going to be a challenge, but what we've got this year, as we do every year, is some fantastic personalities," he said. "The girls know the competition for places is high, which drives them to perform.

"Everyone in the teams get on unbelievably well. They're so close knit already, a few of them have played with each other before, and we have built on that in our pre-season."

KEY PLAYER Chloe Thomas

The Opposite from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) was named MVP of the 2023 Global Challenge in Croatia, and her signing for the Palatinates was kept tightly under wraps to fend off rival interest.

With 920 career kills at UNLV, she arrives in Durham as a proven offensive threat — one that opposing Super League teams will need to prepare for.

ONE TO WATCH Ali Ruffin

An Outside who grew up in a military school and possesses a steely determination and will to win.

With over 1,500 kills for The Citadel in her four years at the university, the American is not to be ignored, having also racked up more than 150 blocks while at college.

It is hoped her on-court fire will help bring out the best in her teammates.



Durham enjoyed some highly-competitive matches against Darkstar last season, winning 3-0 at home before losing 3-0 in the East Midlands return fixture. On both occasions, the set scores made them harder battles than the overall outcomes suggested.

An even tougher encounter came in the National Cup where the Derbyshire side came back from losing the first set to run out 3-1 victors, taking the final set 33-31.

The Palatinates will be determined to see things swing back in their favour when the two meet this weekend.

DARKSTAR DERBYSHIRE

While their pre-Christmas showing in 24-25 was something of a disappointment to all at the club, Darkstar's rejuvenated form in the New Year enabled them to secure their MAAREE Super League status.

A run of six victories from their final eight matches was enough to lift them out of the drop zone and into an April play-off with NNL Division 1's second placed team, London Giants, which they won in straight sets.

That strong end to the campaign means Coaches Maria Bertelli and Audrey Cooper have opted for evolution rather than revolution over the close season.

Most of their experienced performers have been retained, including England international Alice Brand, who was reportedly the subject of interest from former club Durham, as well as influential Belarussian Setter Viktoriya Glazewska.

They have also added a talented Libero in Lindsey Legg and Opposite-cum-Outside Brenna Crabtree, both from the United States.

While the first target is survival in the top echelon of English volleyball, Bertelli is not ruling out a Final 4 push if things go well and last season's momentum can be recaptured.

She said: "Everyone is thinking this is going to be a really competitive league this year and we're going to have to be on it to make sure that we stay in it. Eight teams, I think, is good for the league in that respect.

"It just means that everyone's got to work harder and it'll be interesting. It's an opportunity to challenge ourselves as players and coaches, which is what you want.

"I think we've got the potential to be stronger than last year, but we'll have to see."

KEY PLAYER Hajar El Alouani

Integral to Darkstar's recovery in the second half of last season, the Italian Middle Hitter, averaged 14 kills a game in 24-25.

Remarkably, after moving to England because of her father's work, she initially gave up playing competitively for four years, but was enticed back to the court and now studies at the University of Derby while she plays.

ONE TO WATCH Jacey Neid

The Canadian Opposite, who studied at Vancouver Island University, is expected to become increasingly influential as the season progresses and she finds her feet in Super League.

Having played in North America for her whole career prior this season, she will be looking to bring her strong hitting, experience and American style of play to the East Midlands side.



Darkstar's competitiveness in the second half of last season will give them huge hope as they embark on the new campaign, especially as their links with the University of Derby have allowed them to add some new blood.

They can also point to two wins out of three against the Palatinates in all competitions last season - though the North Easterners' side this time around will be completely different.

Whether the Derbyshire side come out on top or not at Opening Weekend, they are likely to improve as the season goes on, as their performances in 2024-25 underlined.

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TEAM SIDEOUT POLONIA

HEAD COACH: Mark Kontopoulos

ASSISTANT COACH: Sam Sorsky

BENCH PERSONNEL: Hai-Binh Ly

- 2 Sarah Elnozahy
Setter
- 3 Merve Akin
Middle
- 5 Carla Mulli
Middle
- 6 Yohanna Biavati
Liberò
- 7 Anastasiia Konovalova
Outside
- 8 Maeve Eilise Davitt
Liberò
- 9 Anna Rantala
Outside
- 11 Kambridge Van Der Veur
Outside
- 13 Kennedy Snape
Liberò
- 14 Kasey Bell
Middle
- 15 Jana Parmova
Liberò
- 21 Alima Kaliyeva
Outside
- 25 Valèria Busquets Esteve
Middle
- 47 Alexis Diaz-Infante
Opposite

LIONHEARTS VINARIUS

HEAD COACH: Lulama Musti-Degennaro

ASSISTANT COACH: Turbo Cheng

ASSISTANT COACH: Jerry Cheung

TEAM MANAGER: Cristina Ticchi

- 1 Diane Ewane
Opposite
- 3 Alexandra Safryghin
Outside
- 4 Kersti Sorra
Middle
- 5 Maria Sviridova
Outside
- 7 Nicole Witmer
Outside
- 10 Camilla De Tomin
Liberò
- 11 Lyubomira Atanasova
Setter
- 12 Elena Visilean
Opposite
- 17 Gloria Francalanci
Captain
- 18 Anna Pahl
Setter
- 21 Rosa Quere
Liberò
- 22 Danna Cheung
Outside

TEAM SIDEOUT POLONIA

There was no doubting the talent that the Team SideOut roster possessed last season - as a third place finish at Final 4, after victory over Lionhearts Vinarius in the bronze medal match - indicates.

Nevertheless, as head Coach Mark Kontopoulos readily admits, there were moments when the team lacked on-court leadership when the going got tough – something they hope to have addressed with their summer recruitment.

There is certainly a strong base for Polonia to work from to mount a title challenge in 25-26, with a number of players retained from the only team to match Malory's achievement of beating all the other Final 4 teams during the regular season.

Among the new recruits are Russian Outside Anastasiia Konolova, who has moved north of the river from London Giants, Libero Maeve Davitt, who was a key part of London Lionhearts' successful run to Final 4, and Egyptian setter Sarah Elnozahy.

Leading names to be leaving the club are American Abby Russell and Yulia Tokarenko, the latter having moved out of capital and expected to play for Team Essex in NVL Division 1.

Sydney Busa, a former Volleyball England Player of the Month, could also make a return to action during the season after a long-standing injury.

Kontopoulos said: "You get that buzz at the start of the season that's a bit like fresher's week, when you're looking forward to getting started and wondering how good each team is going to be.

"The best part of Opening Weekend is getting everyone under roof, with supporters maybe coming for one game, but sticking around for the others to create a crowd and an atmosphere.

"I'm really looking forward to going to Loughborough. it's been a long time since we used to go there for the BUSA (now BUCS) finals and Cup Finals in the early 2000s, and there were England internationals played there too – lots of history – so it's quite fitting to be going back."

KEY PLAYER

Alexis Diaz-Infante

Signed from Essex Rebels, SideOut hope that the American's big personality and on-court presence can bring the missing ingredient that will lift them from challengers to MAAREE Women's Super League winners.

With her experience already proving pivotal in last season's Essex Rebels team, she will be looking to make an even bigger impact at SideOut.

ONE TO WATCH

Kennedy Snape

A Libero who has played in the Volleyball Nations League (VNL) for Canada in the past.

She is returning to the club after playing in Austria and spending a year out travelling, and will add know-how and leadership to the team.

With her depth of experience, Kennedy will be looking to keep the team on track when the crunch points come.



A repeat of the Final 4 bronze medal match from last season will see two London rivals go head to head, with SideOut coming out on top all three times they faced each other last season.

The newly-reinforced SideOut squad will look to push for a place in the gold medal match this season, which has eluded them last time out after semi-final defeat to Essex Rebels.

After victory over Darkstar Derbyshire on Opening Weekend in 2024, SideOut will be heading into their first game of the season confident of another strong start.

LIONHEARTS VINARIUS

The undoubted surprise package last season, Lionhearts went from relegation survivors to top four finishers on the back of some smart recruitment which added an extra slice of know-how to a squad who were better adjusted to life in the MAAREE Super League.

They will hope to match that achievement in 2025-26, but will have to do so with a new Head Coach. Davide Tiberti is still at the club but in a Sporting Director role, with former Italian international Lulama Musti de Gennaro now at the helm.

A good sprinkling of players remain from last season - including the likes of Diane Ewane, Elena Visliean and Kersti Sorra - though stalwart Middle Mallory Porcher has returned home to the US, Maeve Davitt has moved to SideOut and Maggie Steward has also departed.

Newcomers include American Libero Madoka Wheldon from Essex Rebels and fellow countrywoman and Outside Nicole Witmer from London Giants, while another Libero, Italian Camilla de Tomin, is back in the frame after taking time out to recover from an ACL injury.

"One of the things that convinced me to take over was that in 20 years of playing in Italy, I had only one female coach and most of the players I have played with have said the same," said Rome-born Musti de Gennaro, who played as a Middle.

"It's going to be a challenge, but I was very competitive as a player and am still that way as a coach, so I want us to finish as high up as possible."

"Being in the top four again is the aim and, if we can do that, then we want to try to do better than last year at that stage."

KEY PLAYER Maria Sviridova

The Russian was named as MAAREE Women's Super League Player of the Year in 2023-24 while with SideOut and was instrumental in helping Lionhearts clinch a top four place last season.

She has kept busy over the summer taking part in a range of UKBT events, finishing second at the Grand Slam Finals in Bournemouth in September.

ONE TO WATCH Mira Atanasova

The Bulgarian – who studied for a degree in Sport and Exercise Rehabilitation at Middlesex University – is one of the youngest players in the squad, but made light of her relative inexperience to thrive as the starting setter last season.

She has previously played for London Inter Orcas and learned her volleyball at CSKA Sofia in her homeland.



After an Opening Weekend defeat to Cambridge ARU last season, The Lionhearts will be looking to make a mark on their first fixture of the 2025-26 season when they take on London rivals Team SideOut Polonia.

With the Shoreditch-based club bringing in a new Head Coach in Lulama Musti de Gennaro, the players will be keen to make an early impression in front of her.

After plenty of hard work in pre-season, and some healthy summer recruitment, the weekend will be the time to test how much progress the team has made.

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VOLLEYBALL ENGLAND CLUB FINDER



MALORY EAGLES

HEAD COACH: Carol Gordon

ASSISTANT COACH: Jefferson Williams

ASSISTANT COACH: Ian Legrand

BENCH PERSONELL: Andrew Omoshebi

BENCH PERSONELL: Patricia Co

- 1 **Stephanie Coroi**
Middle
- 2 **Gabriella Nóbrega Grissi Cardoso**
Setter
- 3 **Ari Sierra**
Libero
- 4 **Chloe Allen**
Captain
- 15 **Ava Kutilek**
Middle
- 6 **Jaden Scott**
Middle
- 7 **Briana Domino**
Universal
- 8 **Emily Feller**
Setter
- 9 **Mckenna McCool**
Universal
- 10 **Sophie Szyszko**
Outside
- 11 **Elizabeth Kellum**
Universal
- 12 **Johanna Kruize**
Outside
- 14 **Zsafia Palánkai-omoshebi**
Opposite
- 17 **Viola O'Neal**
Universal

NEWCASTLE KNIGHTS

HEAD COACH: Sam Shenton

ASSISTANT COACH: Jodie Amor

- 14 **Jodie Amor**
Captain
- 7 **Lexi Applebach**
Libero
- 13 **Daisy Boardman**
Outside
- 4 **Isabelle Hogan**
Setter
- 6 **Amber Jarecki-Meyers**
Middle
- 25 **Kylie Koontz**
Universal
- 28 **Katerina Knezevic**
Outside
- 29 **Caroline McMahon**
Libero
- 2 **Katie Olley**
Universal
- 5 **Harriett Philp-Edwards**
Setter
- 16 **Lauren Tensen**
Middle
- 10 **Jenna Vaske**
Opposite
- 15 **Maddie Monteiro**
Opposite

NEWCASTLE KNIGHTS

The Knights enjoyed a dream 2024-25 campaign, storming through NVL Division 1 and earning promotion to the Super League for the first time in club history, losing just one match all season, despite a number of long trips across the country.

Head Coach Sam Shenton built a side with purpose — not just to win, but to develop a core capable of competing at the highest level for years to come.

“We wanted to build sustainably,” Shenton said. “The goal wasn’t just promotion; it was about giving our English players valuable experience alongside strong international talent.”

With the Super League now reduced to eight teams, the pace of the season will be relentless. “It’s a sprint,” said Shenton. “Every game and every set matters. We need to be efficient and fearless.”

After seeing the Knights men reach the Final Four last season, the women’s team will be eager to make their own mark, focused not only on survival but on challenging the established Super League sides and proving they belong among the elite.

The calendar for the team will be packed, with the squad also competing in BUCS Premier North, but that, they say, only adds to the energy and camaraderie around the programme. With both men’s and women’s teams sharing the court and supporting one another, visiting sides can expect an intense and passionate atmosphere in Newcastle, especially on double-header weekends.

Shenton also takes pride in the development of young English players such as Daisy Boardman and Harriett Philip-Edwards, who are both entering their second year at university. “It’s brilliant to see them grow into leadership roles and help new players settle into life in the North East,” he said.

With momentum, unity and ambition on their side, the Knights women are ready to embrace their biggest challenge yet.

KEY PLAYER Jenna Vaske

A dynamic left-handed Opposite who will be central to the Knights’ Super League campaign.

Her powerful attacking presence and competitive edge give Newcastle a reliable scoring option in high-pressure moments.

Head Coach Sam Shenton has praised her as “explosive, intense, and a natural finisher”... exactly the kind of player who can turn a close match.

ONE TO WATCH Harriett Philip-Edwards

The up-and-coming English player, who plays as a Setter, will look to continue her growth in her second year at Newcastle University.

Securing her first Senior cap for England at the Five Nations earlier this year, she has also competed for her country at U22 level and in NEVZA competitions, and has won multiple National Cup titles at Junior level.



V



It’s straight into the firepit for Newcastle Knights, as the Division 1 champions take on last year’s Super League and National Cup winners, Malory Eagles.

The teams faced off against each other in the National Cup last season, with the Eagles easing to a commanding 3-0 victory as the Knights took on Super League opposition for the first time.

After a commanding performance in Division 1 last year, however, the Knights will be keen to upset the current top dogs this time as they make their MAAREE Super League bow.

MALORY EAGLES

The defending MAAREE Women's Super League champions beat Essex Rebels in straight sets in April's Final 4 Gold Medal Match - their first national crown since the 2009-10 season - and followed that up by winning the National Cup later that month as well.

The difficulty is always following up on an all-conquering season and the Londoners will have to do so without the services of Georgia McGovern, the England setter who was so influential after joining for the second half of last season, but who has now signed to play professionally for SV Oythe in Germany.

That said, they have retained a strong core of the team that lost only one match in 2024-25 (to Team SideOut Polonia), with Chloe Allen returning as captain and arguably the league's best Libero in Aro Sierra once again available, backed up by experienced England middle Steph Coroi (née Boyce), fresh from her summer marriage.

With a number of other American signings, it means Malory could still be rocking their famous victory dance come the end of the season, should all go to plan.

Eagles Coach Carol Gordon - who stepped up to take on the Head Coach role of the England Senior Women's team on an interim basis earlier this year - is certainly looking forward to the challenge.

She said: "It felt like we had been working towards what happened last year for a couple of years - it felt special - but for any club it's hard to sustain that.

"We have sustained a team in the top-flight for many years and that will still be an aim, along with finishing in the top three or four, but this year is different, as is every season, with the usual ins and outs.

"We never underestimate anyone, especially in the first game, you can't afford to, whether it's a Durham, or a Division 1 team who have just come up, like our opponents this weekend, Newcastle Knights."

KEY PLAYER Chloe Allen

Last year's captain led from the front with her powerful all-round game as well as leadership qualities and the American Outside will once again be pivotal in both the Eagles' attack and defence.

She previously played in the US at UC Santa Barbara Gauchos, while her sister, Emily, was also playing college volleyball with University of California at Davis.

ONE TO WATCH Claire Kellum

A universal player, predominantly as a Setter or Outside, who is renowned for her tenacity, never say-die-attitude and ability to keep her team pumped up on court.

With the former Elizabeth City State University student having the ability to play in a range of positions, it will allow the Eagles to run some interesting offensive routes, which will keep teams guessing.



V



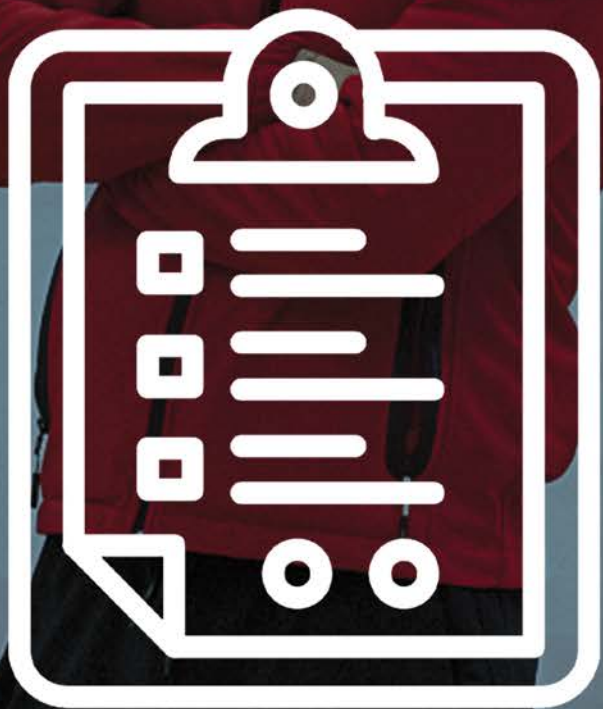
As defending champions, Malory enter this match as clear favourites after an almost flawless 2024-25 campaign but won't be taking anything for granted as they step onto the court for the first time this season against Newcastle Knights.

With one of the deepest and most versatile squads in the league, Head Coach Carol Gordon will have the luxury of rotating her line-up to find the right balance between offensive firepower and defensive stability.

With both teams expecting to do well over the coming months, expect a tough battle.

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ESSEX REBELS

HEAD COACH: Alex Chinery
ASSISTANT COACH: Benjamin Merry
BENCH PERSONELL: Oscar Curzon-Hall
BENCH PERSONELL: Kate Mitchell
STATISTICIAN: Josh Holdsworth

- 9 **Makena Smith**
Captain
- 2 **Heidi Bright**
Middle
- 3 **Kate Fundafunda**
Outside
- 4 **Catherine Tolley**
Middle
- 6 **Tara King**
Opposite
- 7 **Lilla Whittaker**
Outside
- 10 **Lea Borovec**
Outside
- 11 **Marli Cetinch**
Opposite
- 13 **Savannah Spitzer**
Middle
- 14 **Elayna Duprey**
Outside
- 17 **Hannah Cole**
Setter
- 22 **Haley Gilfillan**
Middle
- 8 **Scarlett Parkhurst**
Libero
- 27 **Kathea Schamblin**
Libero

LEEDS GORSE

HEAD COACH: Stephen McKeownt
ASSISTANT COACH: Elaine Brown
BENCH PERSONELL: Chary Gonzalez-Latham
STATISTICIAN: Penny Speers

- 1 **Folasade Aladese**
Middle, Opposite
- 2 **Charlotta Macinska**
Outside
- 5 **Liliana Kowalska**
Middle, Opposite
- 6 **Krystina Ngatcha**
Libero
- 8 **Lauren Thorn**
Setter
- 10 **Rejoice Eghianruwa**
Middle
- 11 **Daniella Tchandeu**
Universal
- 13 **Abigail Wong**
Outside
- 15 **Olivia Cuthbert**
Outside
- 30 **Tamara Alahendrage Don**
Libero
- 29 **Holly Tempest**
Libero
- 9 **Perfection Uwagboe Akuetiehme**
Universal

ESSEX REBELS

Like their men's side, the Rebels fell at the Final 4 final hurdle, losing to Malory Eagles in the Gold Medal Match, having recorded a comeback victory over Team SideOut Polonia in the semi-final.

While the roster will be much changed for this season, Head Coach Alex Chinery is nevertheless excited by the tools he will have at his disposal, with a mixture of experienced international undergraduates and fast-developing homegrown talent.

Out have gone the likes of American Chelsea Simmons and Julia Haynie, while Madoka Wheldon has joined Lionhearts Vinarius and Alexis Infante-Diaz has moved to SideOut Polonia.

In their place are a clutch of new international players, including highly-rated US Setter Makena Smith and Middle Savannah Spitzer, the latter who has a strong beach pedigree and has been a Division 2 All-American playing indoors.

One of the Rebels' form players of the second half of last season, Thea Schamblin, has also been retained, and is expected to drop back into the Libero position, from Outside, for 25-26. Coatian Outside Lea Borovec is also available again.

Essex are also keen to push their Brit Pack to the fore, with Tara King set to be the team's starting Opposite and Lilla Whittaker also poised to earn meaningful game time.

"This is the loudest, most energetic group I have ever worked with, full of high character human beings and with a leadership greater than we had last year," said Chinery.

"I think there will be six really good teams in the league again this season and it's going to be tough every game... I think there is definitely the potential for some surprises.

"We want to get the points we need to be at Final 4 and then look to peak at Final 4. We are not scared of anyone and we want to play against the best teams."

KEY PLAYER Elayna Duprey

The American is expected to be among the top players in the MAAREE Women's Super League in 2025-26 as someone with an explosive leap and hitting ability, who can pass well and is renowned for staying composed.

After leading her college team, Virginia, in kills in the 2024 season, she will be a big asset as the Rebels look to make it to a third consecutive Final 4.

ONE TO WATCH Haley Gilfillan

After a spell playing professionally in France, Croatia and Hungary, the Canadian Middle makes her return to the MAAREE Women's Super League after playing for the Durham Palatinates in the 2021-22 season alongside fellow Super League players Sydney Busa and Alice Brand.

The Middle came through the programme at MacEwan University before moving to Europe.



V



Having dominated at home last season, the Essex Sport Arena has been a fortress for the Rebels, with only one loss coming at their home court duering that time.

They will hope to carry that kind of momentum into their first match of the new campaign at the neutral venue of Loughborough University against a team they beat twice last year in Super League.

Last year's Opening Weekend fixture between the two teams saw a commanding display from the Rebels in a straight sets win that set them firmly on the road to Final 4.

LEEDS GORSE

The retirement of influential performers Eva Borrowdale, Sarah and Molly Van Essen and Virag Farkas, plus the departures of Alessia Garnero (moved abroad) and Misi Kalinu (studying physiotherapy in London), have left a big hole in Leeds' roster.

But new Head Coach Steve McKeown - taking over from Elaine Brown, who will still be involved but has taken a step back to focus on the juniors - sees it as an opportunity.

Gorse have made the decision not to actively recruit from outside their existing membership and are instead looking to promote from within and give court time to the crop of talented youngsters who have won Cup Finals at more than one age group in recent seasons.

Nine of their 16-strong squad is under the age of 18, with all but one player eligible to play for England, and many having already represented their country at U18 and U20 level.

With a number of their players juggling playing with their studies, the aim, McKeown says, will be development, while trying to remain competitive in Super League.

"We're excited about the talent that that is emerging through the programme and we want to get those players, most who have British passports, as much opportunity as possible to develop by getting them the experience to help them fulfill their potential," he said.

"They're on a journey, not just a sporting journey, but a journey through the early part of their lives - and we like to think that the programme is contributing to that personal development and individual development."

Leeds have retained just one senior player from last year, Holly Tempest, and she has been named captain for the 2025-26 campaign.

KEY PLAYER

**Elizabeth Perfection
Uwagboe Akuetiehme**

The talented teenage Opposite rose to the challenge in the MAAREE Women's Super League last year and played for Spain in this summer's Women's U19 FIVB World Championships.

She will also be a continued presence in the Leeds squad in the U18 Super Series, where they hope to go one better than reaching last season's final.

ONE TO WATCH Lauren Thorn

The setter played a key part in Leeds Gorse 2's April promotion to Division 2 North, via the play-offs, and continued her volleyball education playing for England at the NEVZA Youth Championships in Bridlington this summer.

She will have recently returned from England duty at the U17 NEVZA tournament, which took place in Denmark earlier this week.



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Leeds Gorse were able to find a stunning victory against Essex Rebels in the National Cup, but could not repeat the trick in the MAAREE Women's Super League.

A week later, Essex travelled back to the Ruth Gorse Academy and conquered in the league fixture in impressive fashion, booking their Final 4 spot in the process.

Like in 23-24, Leeds again narrowly missed out on a place in the Final 4 last year, but their target this season, given the changes in personnel, will be more modest. A win over the Rebels this weekend would certainly help.

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