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## News and Features

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### Youngs and Branagh sent home early Number two seed finishes in seventh

By Monique Moyal / AVP.com

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — After three days, they lasted longer than any qualifying seed in Louisville.

And 21st qualifying seed Tara Kuk and Kim Whitney leave the Derby City with one of the highest finishes for a qualifying team this year, in ninth place. For both ladies, individually and as a team, the nine-spot is the best finish for each of their careers.

"I think they had a great tournament, they're scrappy, they have good serving, good ball sets and they're great," said Nicole Branagh, who with Elaine Youngs, handed the pair its ninth-place finish.

Kuk and Whitney surprised No. 12 Lauren Fendrick and Brittany Hochevar early Friday morning, after having battled their way through the qualifiers the day before. Kuk and Whitney won their first match of the day 18-21, 21-17 and 15-13 to move on in the winner's bracket.

After falling victim to No. 5 April Ross and Jen Boss in the winner's bracket, however, the qualifying seed was forced to try its luck from the other side of the board. They continued to win on Friday and opened up their first Saturday play with a match against Branagh and Youngs.

Branagh and Youngs demonstrated in the first game why they are the No. 2 seed, and sent home Kuk/Whitney 21-9, 21-14.

"I think the level of play has improved for all of the top teams, therefore, the qualifiers are improving," said Youngs. "I just think with the AVP growing, there's a lot more money out there for the girls to make. I think it makes more players actually hang on and tough it out on the beach. Like Nicole, she went through a year of the qualifiers — so these girls, they're good."

Prior to this finish, Kuk notched three 13th places in 2006, playing with Whitney half of that season. As for Whitney, her next-best finish is four 17th-place marks which came in 2006.

**Tough sledding:** Youngs and Branagh lost, 18-21, 16-21, to Tyra Turner and Rachel Wacholder on Saturday to place seventh for the tournament. It was not only their lowest finish of the year but the first time this season they haven't advanced to Sunday.

Since winning the first tournament of the year in Miami, Youngs and Branagh have two second-place finishes, a third and a fifth but they haven't advanced past the semis since reaching their third of three straight finals in Huntington Beach, which also awarded them the \$100,000 Cuervo Gold Crown bonus.

Youngs had not finished this low in a domestic tournament since 2000, when she placed seventh in the USA Volleyball tournament in San Diego with Liz Masakayan.

**Down by the river:** Men's No.1 Todd Rogers won the Louisville Open in 1999 with Holdren but recalls a tournament he played here in 1997 even more.

"We played a two-day qualifier here, and there were 77 teams," Rogers said. "You started at 8:00 a.m. and it was just game after game after game in mid-July. I felt like I was in an oven. At the end of the day that Sunday, every play was a time out. Guys were literally in the middle of the match: side out, grab the house, side out, grab the house. My head was spinning."

**Cut shots:** Jenny Pavley's seventh in the Louisville Open is her highest this season. ... All four men's qualifiers went 0-2 in the tournament. ... Through 10 games, Mike Lambert has 10 blocks. ... Fred Souza had 12 aces in nine games. ... Alicia Polzin finished the tournament with 15 blocks in 14 games.

*Mike Scarr contributed to this report*

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Nicole Branagh (left) and teammate Elaine Youngs suffered a disappointing seventh-place finish in Louisville. (Holly Stein / AVP.com)

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