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Preparing for a high school sports season is difficult enough, but preparing for a high school sports season in the middle of the pandemic brings with it a whole new set of questions and problems that must be dealt with.

The Randolph County high school volleyball coaches not only had to get their teams prepared for the start of what is expected to be the first prep season of any kind since last March, but they have to do it while dealing with county, state and national restrictions.

It hasn't been easy, but teams are slated to begin the new season this week as school officials keep a close watch on what is happening concerning the coronavirus.

"Nothing is normal now," said Trinity High School coach Rodney Kirby. "You didn't have the normal summer and some of us have been shut down for a couple of weeks."

Randleman and Southwestern Randolph high schools competed in a scrimmage on Thursday, the day the NCHSAA sent a memo to all schools stating it was mandatory to wear a mask during practices and games.

"Kids tend to be a little more resilient than adults," said RHS coach Kerry Mitchell. "It's not ideal, but if we want to play, we will do anything they ask us to do. We are all learning how to handle adversity. I told them they have to start playing with the mentality that every game is potentially their last game. You have to play with that intensity every single game. If you play with that kind of heart, whatever happens will happen."

"Their biggest complaint is they felt overheated," SWR coach Darby Kennedy said. "They felt hot and you could see it in their faces. They were turning red in their cheeks. We are going to have to watch and give them breaks. But I know they would rather wear them and play than not play at all."

No one has had an easy time as restrictions and personnel are changing almost daily.

"It hasn't been easy, it's been very difficult," said Wheatmore High School coach Sarah Beth Campbell, who has built the Warriors' program into one of the most successful state-wide.

"You not only have to get your team ready, but you have to be ready if someone was to miss because of being quarantined. I told our players they have to know every position on the court."

A number of teams have already lost players who have been quarantined due to the virus. Most have been around someone who has tested positive. Because of that, versatility has become a major plus for the players.

"It has proven to be more important than actual strength or having perfect skill," Kennedy said. "If you can play multiple positions, you're going to be on the floor."

Unfortunately, this virus has lasted so long, student-athletes are getting used to the restrictions.

"It's been an adjustment for all players and coaches,' ER coach Molly Kenyon said. "There have been moments of frustration, but overall, they handled it very well with maturity, understanding that this is what it is."

Adapting has been just as important as bumps, sets and spikes during preparation for the new season.

"We don't have a lot of practice times because we're in the one gym with one net and we have to do both jayvee and varsity," Asheboro High School's Karen Blanchard said. "You don't want to keep them together too long. We've spent more time on planning for all of this Covid stuff. Luckily, we have a fantastic athletic director (Steve Luck) who keeps us all informed on what is happening. We're just trying to get things sorted out."

Uwharrie Charter Academy opens Monday with the seven other teams beginning on Tuesday.

Here is a capsule of all eight Randolph County volleyball teams:



Asheboro Blue Comets

Head Coach: Karen Blanchard

2019 Record: 16-10 (9-3 in Mid-Piedmont Conference) lost in first round of state playoffs

Players to Watch: Diamond McDowell, Ashton Maness, Taylor Hildreth, Piper Davidson

Opening Game: Tuesday, Nov. 17 at home against SE Guilford

Coach Says: "We have to stay healthy and we have to be able to pass, it all starts with passing. The girls are super excited to play."

Overall: Maness, a transfer from Southwestern Randolph, is going to be a great addition and paired with McDowell and freshman Davidson, will give the Blue Comets a solid group up front. Kaylen Nance steps in for her sister, who graduated, at the setter spot. Caroline Langdon and Claudia Harrell will play key roles.



Eastern Randolph Wildcats

Head Coach: Molly Kenyon

2019 Record: 5-13 (3-9 in Piedmont Athletic Conference)

Players to Watch: Courtnee Carter, Kolby Snider, Addie Flinchum, Halie Abrams, Skyler Pugh

Opening Game: Tuesday, Nov. 17 at Providence Grove

Coach Says: "The girls need to work together as a unit, as one. There has to be collaboration and cooperation on the court. The girls have worked very hard since we started in June. I think we're going to have a good year."

Overall: With all the upperclassmen and experience the Wildcats return, they certainly have the opportunity to take a big step forward. This team will have good leadership.



Providence Grove Patriots

Head Coach: Tim Brown

2019 Record: 13-13 (6-6 in Piedmont Athletic Conference) advanced to first round of playoffs

Players to Watch: Jill Stern, Malea Ferguson, Aleah Batton, Emma Mazzarone

Opening Game: Tuesday, Nov. 17 at home against Eastern Randolph

Coach Says: "We lost two players who were the heart and soul of our team (Kaitlin Sexton and Kaylee Bowman). We just have to get some leadership. We are still young with both our setters sophomores, but we are going to be okay. We will be competitive.

Overall: The Patriots lost some talent due to graduation and need a couple of players to step up in those hitting/blocking/leadership roles. There will be plenty of challenges along the way, but the Patriots have the pieces to fight in the PAC 7.



Randleman Tigers

Head Coach: Kerry Mitchell

2019 Record: 18-9 (10-2 in Piedmont Athletic Conference) advanced to second round of the state playoffs

Players to Watch: Ceci Carter, Aubrey Maness, McKenzie Green, Hannah Hinshaw

Opening Game: Tuesday, Nov. 17 at Wheatmore

Coach Says: "Everyone has to stay healthy and we can't have any slip ups. Our goal the past couple of years has been to be an inside-first offense and if we can do that, it is going to help our outside hitters as well."

Overall: The Tigers, who return everyone from a year ago, are going to be without their top setter for the opener, but should return to full strength early on. Carter and Hinshaw are strong inside players and the entire team has experience.



Southwestern Randolph

Head Coach: Darby Kennedy

2019 Record: 25-3 (11-1 in Mid-Piedmont Conference) Advanced to third round of state playoffs

Players to Watch: Payton Shiflet, Anna Kat Schiebel, Josie Allred, Peyton LeRoy

Opening Game: Tuesday, Nov. 17 at home against Southern Alamance

Coach Says: "Communication will be our biggest challenge. We have a bunch of humble kids and they are very quiet. Add in wearing a mask ... And we are going to have to be quick on the offensive side. We have added some height at the net and we have good attackers."

Overall: LeRoy is a four-year starter who is set to reach the 2,000 assist mark very early in the season. The Cougars, like some teams, have lost some players early due to being quarantined so depth and versatility will be important.



Trinity Bulldogs

Head Coach: Rodney Kirby

2019 Record: 19-10 (8-4 in Piedmont Athletic Conference) advanced to second round

of state playoffs

Players to Watch: Gracie Ballard, Isabella Clem, Maddie Stevens

Opening Game: Tuesday, Nov. 17 at Oak Grove

Coach Says: "We are small, so instead of going big, we are going to go fast. We won't be able to jump over anyone. You can have a coaching style, but you have to change it to adapt to your team."

Overall: Kirby is using a philosophy of reloading, not rebuilding. The Bulldogs usually like to start inside offensively and work out and if they are to do that this year, Taylor Garrick and Sarah Johnson are going to have to contribute immediately. With only eight varsity players, everyone must do their part.



Uwharrie Charter Eagles

Head Coach: Lee Kennell

2019 Record: 20-7 (15-1 in Yadkin Valley Conference) advanced to third round of

state playoffs

Players to Watch: Gabi Greene, Carter Duggins, Maddie Mabe, Haedyn Hill, Bree Brooks

Opening Game: Monday, Nov. 16 at North Moore

Coach Says: "The key for us is going to be to compete. We know we are going to get everyone's best shot. There really isn't any pressure because last year was the first year we experienced that. We were used to being the underdog. These girls are experienced and have played together for six years."

Overall: The Eagles lose one player from a team that had the most successful season in school history. A scrimmage victory over 4-A Richmond late last week proves this team has the ability to go a long way this season.



Wheatmore Warriors

Head Coach: Sarah Beth Campbell

2019 Record: 27-3 (12-0 in Piedmont Athletic Conference) Regional finalist

Players to Watch: Carson Elliott, Natalie Dodd, Kelly Williams, Bailey Whiteford, Zoie Wyatt

Opening Game: Tuesday, Nov. 17 at home against Randleman

Coach Says: "They are working hard because they want it really bad, especially our seniors. They want to go out with a bang for sure."

Overall: The Warriors have a rich tradition and a great nucleus to work with. If junior Kara Moore or freshman Haley Greene can take over the setter spot successfully, this should be another outstanding season.