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ASHEBORO - The Southwestern Randolph High School volleyball team has had some very deep runs in the state playoffs of late. After capturing the 2021 state 2-A championship, the Cougars advanced to the regional semifinals last season, finishing with an impressive 26-4 record, including 11-1 in the Piedmont Athletic Conference.

The way to prepare for those long playoff runs is to play high-caliber competition during the regular season and the Cougars are using that philosophy once again, packing their non league schedule this year with volleyball powers.

"It's kinda heavy because I feel after last year, we kinda got shocked in the fourth round of the playoffs because we hadn't seen hitters like we saw," said veteran coach Darby Kennedy. "We had to chase that competition so we are prepared for it."

Last season, the Cougars opened the state playoffs with sweeps of Surry Central, East Davidson and North Stanly before running into Brevard, which ousted SWR in five sets. Featuring strength and depth at the net, Brevard proved just a little too tough for SWR, so Kennedy prepared for this season by playing as many volleyball powers as possible. She found them.

The Cougars opened the season August 15 with a game at Watauga, a team that finished 23-3 overall last year, won the Northwest Conference for the seventh straight season and advanced to the fourth round of the state 4-A playoffs. SWR fell in three sets to open the season, but there were plenty of lessons learned.

"We played at Watauga and competed with them," Kennedy said. "We have new faces on the right side and they are going to be important. I really feel if we hadn't played Watauga, we would have gone into that tournament in Chapel Hill and lost to Grimsley and Orange. We learned a lot of lessons."

That showed at the tournament in Chapel Hill as the Cougars met Grimsley (20-6 a year ago), winning in four sets, and then the Cougars recorded a straight-set win over Orange, which was 19-11 a year ago. SWR dusted off host East Chapel Hill in four sets and fell to Carrboro, which is undefeated this year and was 21-6 a year ago.



"We are in a culture of winning and have a winning program," Kennedy said. "We return some kids and added some new ones and these kids know they can compete. We lost to Watauga and Carrboro, but no one had scored 16 points on Carrboro and we scored 19 the first game and lost 28-26 in the third game. They want to battle and see how far they can push themselves."

The latest non league affair was a straight-set win over Bishop McGuinness, which was 25-6-1 a year ago.

"We talked about that even before we went into it," Kennedy said of the team starting in a deep hole. "We talked about the potential of going 0-6 and keeping our heads on straight. I don't think we ever started 0-1 before. There was a lot to be learned."

Starting 4-2 overall was a definite win.

"The way we competed, I couldn't have asked for a better outcome," said Kennedy, whose team had not played a 2-A team all season. "If we don't play Watauga, we are not ready for that tournament and it could have been a complete flop. You have to be ready and challenged."

The Cougars return to action next week with a match against Asheboro before opening the PAC against Providence Grove and Trinity. But PAC teams aren't the only ones who are waiting. The Cougars still have non league games scheduled against East Surry (24-4) and state champion McMichael (37-3) later in the season.

"The girls were really excited when the preseason poll came out," said Darby of the Cougars' 10th place showing. "It was a big deal to achieve that and even harder to maintain. You have to compete all the time."