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ASHEBORO - In order to be as successful as the Southwestern Randolph High School volleyball team has been over the past decade or so, there has to be a plan.

Sometimes that plan deviates just a bit, but there's always a plan, "It's a new year because we have a bunch of kids coming up from jayvees," said veteran coach Darby Kennedy, who led the Cougars to the 2021 state championship and two fourth-round state playoff appearances in 2022 and 2023. "We definitely this year have a big group of players who were the core of the jayvee team, a very successful team, who are moving to varsity and they have to find that experience. We have a lot of kids stepping into big roles filling shoes from last year. We have to get them experience in as short a period of time as possible."

It hasn't always been that way.

"Generally we have a slow gradual learning process into varsity, but this year we have to find that experience, a year's worth in eight games," Kennedy said.. "Our strategy has changed in that we have to focus on things we haven't had to focus on in the past. For example, our defense has been kind of comprised from the same family of kids for four or five years. Now we are focusing on the kids learning how to work with each other and finding their comfort levels. They are thrown into big games where they haven't had a choice but to figure it all out."



*Southwestern Randolph volleyball coach Darby Kennedy.*



*Coach Kennedy with her team during a recent match against Watauga High School.*

Big games? The 2-A Cougars are going through a gauntlet to begin the 2024 season. They opened with 3-A power Oak Grove, losing in five sets. They followed with a 3-1 loss to 4-A West Forsyth and a 3-1 win over 4-A East Chapel Hill. A 3-2 loss to 3-A power Carrboro and a 3-2 win over 4-A Southern Alamance preceded a 3-2 loss to 4-A Watauga.

"When they (the NCHSAA) went to RPI and not just your win-loss record to determine playoff seedings, we went after the monsters to compete against," Kennedy said. "Yes, we are going to take some losses, but they are losses that are full of learning."

We have to get that experience in a short period of time and there's no better way to do that than facing the best. We are going to be so much more prepared when our conference season begins and it's going to be a great conference, having already seen the hitters and the blockers."

Some of the players wouldn't have it any other way.

"I love our schedule, I love playing competitive teams," senior Gracie Hodgin said. "It does benefit us. The last two years, we've made it to the fourth round. Yes, it's difficult if we're losing, but it sets us up for the long haul. We're still getting used to playing with each other and we're growing so fast. Playing these 4-A teams, we're going to five sets with them so we're competing with them. It takes repetition."

The Cougars have been competitive despite the fact that younger players are being counted on and older players have switched roles.

Kinlin Hulin was on the team as a sophomore, but saw little action. She has been asked to step into a starting front line position this year.

"We lost a lot of people from last year," the now-junior Hulin said of players like Lillian Payne, Molly Smith, Coley Shiflet, Madelyn Smith and Raegan LeRoy. "I was on varsity as a sophomore, but not getting a lot of playing time and to go from that to starting is a huge role change. It changed how I view the team. I'm like the person who is looked up to now and not a person who looks up to another person. I have to step into that role."

Senior Jade Matias has switched from the middle to the right side. That incorporates plenty of adjustments for her personally, but she is still focused on the team concept.

"I have to be more of a leader this year," she said. "There's more pressure on me to make things happen and that's a big difference. Madelyn Smith has shown me what a true leader is on the court. We have to give our younger kids confidence. They can be confident, but when you hear it from an older player, it might mean more."

Confidence, Kennedy said, is going to be the key this year as the 2-4 Cougars are set to battle West Stanly and PAC foes Providence Grove and Trinity next week.

"We talk a lot about mental focus and how we have to talk ourselves through this," Kennedy said. "You have kids who have been in supportive roles and they are now stepping up into big moments. You have to get them in the mindset that they are capable of performing just like they could in any other role they have been in so far."



*Cougar senior Gracie Hodgin.*