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ASHEBORO - Winning the state championship is the goal of every high school sports team when the season begins. Reaching the pinnacle of a sport is something that can never be taken away.

But what about the next season? Dealing with the proverbial bullseye on its back isn't easy and can sometimes overwhelm a team. Not so at Southwestern Randolph High School.

The girls volleyball team, which captured the state 2-A championship last season, is off to a fast start this season, taking an 8-1 record into late-week action. Led by veteran coach Darby Kennedy, the Cougars are coming off a year in which they finished 28-5, including an undefeated Piedmont Athletic Conference season, playoffs sweeps over Forbush, Patton and West Stanly, a 3-1 win over McMichael, a thrilling five-set win over East Surry in the state tournament semifinals and a four-set win over Camden County for the title.

SWR opened the conference season this year with a win over Providence Grove Tuesday night, but Kennedy said her team must be ready for every match.

"Everyone has us number one on their list as who to take out," Kennedy said after a tough, three-set win over the Patriots. "We have had some tough competition since the first game and we always get everyone's best, which is fine because we get pushed."

That also forces this year's team, which features a number of new players and players in different positions, to adjust quickly.

"The off-season we had was very interesting," Kennedy said. "Our seniors last year were just so special and they were in the gym making sure all the new kids were getting reps. They came to workouts until they had to leave for school. Having Payton (Shiflet), Josie (Allred) and Molly (Strider) in the gym was really fun."

A number of players have returned, but with the graduation of three key players, some of their roles may have been changed or most certainly increased.

Sophomore Riley Key is among those providing strong play at the net.

"She has really opened up this year," Kennedy said. "Last year, she was more of a defensive player, but she has come to life offensively and had some very strong kills. With every game she's gaining confidence."

Junior hitter Madelyn Smith continues to grow and has shown great strides defensively. She had eight kills in the win over PG on Tuesday.

There may not be a better duo in the back then Carleigh Whitson and Coley Shiflet.

"They are a force for any team to handle," Kennedy said.

Raegan LeRoy returns as a setter and Kennedy said she is not only excelling offensively, but on defense as well.

Gracie Hodgkin is providing strong offensive play as is Julie Johnson among others.

"We knew the county and the conference were going to be tough," Kennedy said. "Randolph County is on the right track to be a powerhouse area."

Which means challenges for the Cougars every time they take the floor, like Thursday against Trinity, which defeated Wheatmore in its conference opener.

"We have a good chance to make a good run at it," Kennedy said. "They are working hard. Building a new dynamic is hard. We know there are no 'gimmees' this year and we're going to have to earn every game."

So far, so good.