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ASHEBORO - There are some who believe the best way to teach a young person to swim is to throw them in the deep end. Not quite sure what Southwestern Randolph High School varsity volleyball coach Darby Kennedy's thoughts are on that matter, but when it comes to volleyball, she threw her team into the deep end right at the start of the season.

The Cougars completed a grueling pre-conference schedule and they are hoping all that was learned will pay dividends when they open the Four Rivers Conference Tuesday against county-rival and co-league favorite Uwharrie Charter Academy.

The two, along with Randleman, have been at the top of the Piedmont Athletic Conference for years, but with SWR and UCA now in the FRC and Randleman the only Randolph County team in the new PAC, the sights for UCA and SWR are now firmly placed on one another.

The Cougars readied themselves for the new campaign with matches against perennial powers such as Cornerstone Christian, Watauga, East Chapel Hill, Jordan, West Stanly and Oak Grove. SWR came out of its pre-conference season at 5-6.

"Our non-conference schedule, I have said it for years, let's go battle the monsters and see what we can do," Kennedy said. "By the time we get into the conference, we've found ourselves and figured out where we need to be. This group of girls has done exactly that."

The Cougars started the season with just one win in their first five matches, but the lessons learned during those battles will help the team along its bid for a FRC title and a deep run in the state 4-A playoffs.

"We started out with some really tough games right off the jump with Cornerstone Charter and some teams in the Chapel Hill Tournament," Kennedy said. "We definitely are finding ourselves. We got some people in different positions that they are not used to and they are learning and we've had some injuries. We want to win, but if we don't win, we want to grow from it and we've done that."



The Cougars got on a roll after their tough start with wins over West Stanly, North Stanly and Oak Grove. They stretched that to four before falling at Oak Grove Thursday.

"They are absolutely resilient and open minded," Kennedy said of her team, which is led by seniors KInlin Hulin, Hailey Kennedy, Bailey Blackmon, Madilyn Baker, Macie Baker and sophomore Cheyenne Dixon, who battled a season-opening injury. "They are students of the game and they are learning so much so quickly. Even in some of our early losses against some of these bigger teams like Cornerstone and Watauga, the first sets were rough and we had to catch up to the speed. But by the end of the game, there were so many positives coming out of it."

Most recently, the Cougars won a thrilling five-set win over West Stanly and suffered a tough setback at Oak Grove.

"Now we are definitely finding our groove and finding our way with each other," Kennedy said. "And the girls are really putting in the extra effort and the extra work. Our goal this non-conference is to be our best selves and get to a place where we are really confident going into conference games no matter who we're playing."

The FRC also features North Moore, Northwood, Eastern Randolph and Jordan-Matthews.

"What we have learned is if we can compete with these people, win or lose, they can compete with anyone we have to play," said Kennedy. "We went after big hitters and big blockers and teams who are really fast on defense so we can learn how to adapt." With the schedule SWR has played, adapting is a must.