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RANDLEMAN - Greatness usually begins with mediocrity. Sometimes even less than mediocrity. When Kerry Mitchell began her Randleman High School varsity volleyball coaching career, that first year in 2013 fueled a hunger to never experience that type of season again. A long, grueling high school volleyball season that results in just three wins can do that.

"I told all our underclassmen that year, I looked them in the face and I said this will never happen again," said Mitchell, who still raises her voice a bit when recalling that year. "You cannot allow this to happen and I cannot allow this to happen again."

Oh how far the RHS program has come since then.

Seasons in which the Tigers posted 6, 11, 14 and 9 wins suddenly took a giant leap in 2018. That RHS squad, led by Ceci Carter, Chloe Hildreth, Aubrey Maness, Karley Hughes and McKenzie Green among others, finished 17-8 and 9-3 in the conference and the Tigers have never looked back.



Tigers Kadie Green (5), Camryn Vickery (4) and Mollie Hall (14). Photo provided by Ortiz.flicks77.



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This year's version is as talented and exciting to watch as any RHS team from the past. Led by Camden Scott, Kadie Green, Haley Hinshaw, Natalie Roach, Camryn Vickery, Kaylee Philips, Ava Jones, Mollie Hall and others who provide positive contributions, the Tigers were 11-1 overall, and a perfect 6-0 through their first rotation in the Piedmont Athletic Conference. The first of three games next week is a rematch with Northern Guilford, the only team to record a win over the Tigers. "It's been a lot of using our strengths from the past couple of years from current seniors who had a lot of experience and blending them with the juniors and sophomores," Mitchell said of a team that has seen them record a 35-4 advantage in set wins over the season, including 22 in a row heading into Monday night's battle with NG. "We had to find that identity."

They found that identity once the pieces were put into place. With Vickery having an outside shot to surpass the 2,000 assist mark, Natalie Roach switching to a defensive specialist position and the Tigers getting a boost from sophomore Phillips as well as the senior leadership from an eight-member class, the Tigers identity has been to be simply dominant.



Randleman's Haley Hinshaw (8) attacking against SW Randolph. Photo provided by Ortiz.flicks77.

"We're responding more maturely in tight situations," said Mitchell, who has led the Tigers to a 109-45 record since that 2018 season. "We're competing more maturely than we had previously. They are not letting things affect them as much as they used to. Our younger players aren't hiding. They are competing and enjoying the pressure to compete."

Building chemistry is key to any team in any sport having a successful year, and with the volleyball team re-emphasizing a program entitled "Bigs and Littles," that all-important chemistry has received a boost. Each senior (a Big) is responsible for two or three players (Littles). The Bigs are there for the Littles in whatever capacity is needed, whether it is related to volleyball, school, after-school activities or any part of their lives. Vickery, Hinshaw, Ally Long, Claire McCain, Jones, Hall, Autumn Dixon and Scott are the Bigs

"It shows me things I had to go through in my younger years and us being there for them shows how the seniors provide that leadership for the younger girls," Vickery said. "We have definitely grown because of that."

Mitchell said it's a program that has plenty of benefits.

"It doesn't necessarily show up with volleyball skills, but with team chemistry," she said. "They understand the importance of roles and buying into the vision of the program. They can all lead at different moments."

Understanding their roles has been key, especially for the ones who have seen their role change this year. Roach had always been a setter in the program, but has switched to defensive specialist in an effort to give her team a boost in that department. She has thrived.

Chemistry, talent and understanding roles is a recipe for success and as long as the Tigers continue on that trek, they should continue to shine.

"That's where I think we are strong," Mitchell said. "We are not just one player. We have stronger rotations and weaker rotations, but every position across the floor we have girls who can execute. Chemistry and communication has helped us. We need to trust each other. This group has done that better."

They certainly have.



Randleman's Camden Scott attacking. Photo provided by Ortiz.flicks77.