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ASHEBORO - It was September 10 and the Asheboro High School volleyball team had just lost its second straight Triad Area Athletic Conference contest, this one to Southeast Guilford in a five-set battle. Sitting 0-2 in league play and 5-6 overall, having dropped six of the past seven matches, the season was already reaching a critical junction.



Then things began to click. The defense was better, the serving was better, the serve receiving was better and the offensive attacks came at a more successful rate. Sets that perhaps would have gone the other way, began turning in favor of the Blue Comets and AHS rode that wave all the way to the third round of the NCHSAA 6-A state playoffs.

The No. 7 Blue Comets, who finished second in the league and received a first-round bye before disposing of No. 10 Asheville in impressive fashion with a three-set sweep of the Cougars, will face No. 2 seed Watauga this afternoon in third round action. AHS will take a 17-8 record into its match with Watauga, which is 23-3 this season and 50-5 over the past two seasons.

The Blue Comets are coming off a 25-19, 25-20, 25-14 win over Asheville, another win that featured a balanced attack, an attack that has given the Blue Comets 12 wins in their past 14 matches. The only losses have come to Northern Guilford, who was 19-4 heading into third-round playoff action tonight against Sun Valley.

One of the key reasons for the turnaround has been the play of setter Kailey Brown. Brown, a two-year starter after spending her first two years at Providence Grove High School, has given AHS a steady performer who excels at much more than just setting up attackers.

"She has been a huge asset since she's been here," said AHS coach Kelly Smith, who has guided the Blue Comets to a 68-34 record in four seasons. "She is a pivotal piece of our team and in her leadership of guiding the young ones. She is such a great leader and the other girls follow her. We can't say enough good things about Kailey Brown."

Brown has recorded an incredible 777 assists this year, which has brought her total at AHS to 1,072. Add her sophomore year at PGHS and she has recorded 1,338 assists in her high school career.

"She is a great athlete who makes great decisions," Smith said. "She's a phenomenal athlete, but as you saw tonight (against Asheville), she's just as dynamic as much of a threat running that 5-1 where she is setting all the way around."

Brown isn't the only player excelling. The Blue Comets have received incredible contributions from everyone who steps on the court. Against Asheville Tuesday, Adalyn Scherer, Roxanne Davis, Cora Little, Maliyah Brady and Madeline Hodge led the offense, while Emma Ingold, Lily Hunt and Brown sparked the defense. Brown finished with 31 assists, four kills, 13 digs and four aces.

Brown said she's noticed a vast difference from the start of the season.

"A completely different team," she said. "It took a while to build that connection and now, everyone knows everyone on the team and knows their strengths and weaknesses. We all bring out the best in each other."

The team looked crisp against Asheville. Brown was all over the floor and provided an incredible no-look, behind-the-back push kill to go along with three others.

"Knowing we hadn't made it past the third round in a while, I think we all had that 'We have to win this, it's not optional' attitude," Brown said. "We knew they were a good team. Everyone had to bring their best."

Of the eight losses this season, three have come to Northern Guilford and one to SEG with the other four coming to Randolph County teams. AHS dropped two matches to Uwharrie Charter Academy, one to Southwestern Randolph and one to Trinity, teams who are all playing in third-round action tonight in their respective classifications.

"We see a lot of high-level volleyball," Brown said. "Being in those games makes you play so much better. The speed of the game is quicker and good players rise to that and play quick as well."

Brown and the Blue Comets have certainly risen.



*Asheboro setter Kailey Brown.*