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By Dennis Garcia

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ASHEBORO - The Randleman High School and Uwharrie Charter Academy varsity volleyball teams, two of the top programs in the region and former conference mates, did not schedule one another this regular season. But that doesn't mean they are going to go through the entire season without seeing one another.

Their incredibly successful seasons has led both teams to the East Regional championship match, which will be held Tuesday at UCA. The winner gets a berth into the NCHSAA state 4-A title match, which will be held either Friday or Saturday at either the Joel Coliseum in Winston-Salem or in Reynolds Coliseum at N.C. State.

RHS coach Kerry Mitchell and UCA coach Lee Kennell are veterans and have led their teams through difficult non-league schedules before dominating the Central Carolina Conference and Four Rivers Conference respectively. Both went undefeated in their leagues before winning tournament championships and beginning their playoff runs with first-round byes.

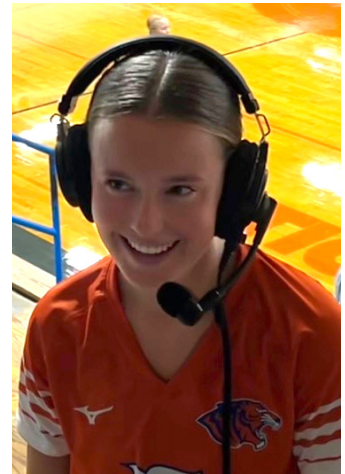
The Tigers advanced to the regional final with playoff wins over Clinton (3-0), North Lenoir (3-2) and Southwestern Randolph (3-1).

"(SWR coach Darby Kennedy) and I and probably Lee, too, all saw it coming," Mitchell said of the three teams from Randolph County advancing to the East Region semifinals. "The very first thing we saw on the brackets, it would come down to us. It was a big bonus for us, something exciting for us. All three of these teams are so strong and Randolph County is such a strong area volleyball-wise. That's something to be proud of for the county and the area for all the schools."

Randleman (23-4) is led by a back row that features senior libero Kadie Green, senior setter Natalie Roach and sophomore Olivia Ashby. The hitters are led by sophomores Karrington Jones and Lilah Covington, senior Lexi Vaughn and junior Kaylee Phillips.

All had big contributions against the Cougars in the regional semifinal win. Jones had 21 kills, Vaughn had 13 and Covington chipped in 10. Phillips had four kills, Green 28 digs, Ashby had 18 digs and Roach had 17 digs and 43 assists.

Covington's contributions were key.



*Senior Kadie Green.*



*Senior Natalie Roach.*

"It gives us a boost of confidence and she gets so excited in the game and it gives everyone else around us energy," Jones said of Covington.

Green has been a stabilizing force all season.

"She's all over the place and she just wants it," Mitchell said of her defensive specialist. "That heart and that mindset and toughness radiates across the team."



*Senior Nyasia Wharton.*

There has been a lot radiating from the Eagles all season long. UCA hasn't dropped a set since falling to Union Pines on August 19. That means the Eagles have won 23 straight games and 69 straight sets.

"I coached some of those girls in JO," Kennell said of the upcoming battle with Randleman. "It will be tough. It's going to be a battle for sure. They are good. If it was Southwest or Randleman, we know each other."

Last year, Randleman won both regular-season meetings with the Eagles, but the Eagles earned the Piedmont Athletic Conference Tournament championship with a win over the Tigers.

"Not seeing them in the regular season like we used to, we were kinda bummed, especially the senior group," said UCA setter Emory Johnson. "It's a big game for us and we're going to come in and give it our best shot."

The Eagles are loaded with front row power, led by junior Caroline Way, senior Nyasia Wharton, junior Carly Rush, senior Sydney Hayes and junior Alyvia Spinks. The defense is led by Johnson, senior libero Sadie Upchurch and senior Gracie Smith.

UCA rolled through Washington, Ledford and East Duplin to reach the East Region finals.

Regardless of the outcome, Randolph County will have one representative in the state 4-A championship match.



*Setter Emory Johnson.*