

# State title game loss fuels Lady Cats for upcoming season



Louisburg senior Anna Dixon, the Class 4A-Division I Co-Player of the Year last season, returns to lead the Lady Cats as they embark on what they hope is another trip to the state tournament.

As the Louisburg High School volleyball team went through its summer workouts, visions of watching Rose Hill storm the court and hoisting a state championship trophy was a constant in its mind.

Last October in Salina, the Lady Cats were just one point away from winning their first ever state championship. Instead, Rose Hill rallied to take the match in three sets and left the Louisburg players with a hollow feeling the last 10 months.

It is that feeling that has fueled the Lady Cats over the summer, and now into the start of practice for the upcoming season.

“I think the nerves really got to us,” senior Anna Dixon said. “I think we had the physical ability to win a state title, but we didn’t have the mentality to win it there in the moment. That is what we have been working on in practice. I know for me, hitting it into the net at game point there – that hurt a ton. I know that each point matters and that is what we are focusing on – every point and every play.

“Every practice we always think about losing that match. We have had a lot of teams at Louisburg get second, third, fourth and I think we were the closest to ever win it. Hopefully, we can put it together this year.”

That focus is evident in practice as the players have returned with a renewed emphasis on getting better.

“We just want to go out and become a better team,” senior Carson Buffington said. “There are some people that don’t think we are going to be as good as last year, but I think we can even be better than last year. We are further ahead right now than at this time last year and I feel we are little more focused.”

Buffington and Dixon are the lone seniors on this season’s team that returns several key players from last year’s state runner-up performance. In fact, six players are back that saw time in the state tournament.

Although many of the same pieces are there, they are going to fit a little differently this year according to head coach Jessica Compliment.



**Carson Buffington sets up teammate Haley Cain for a kill during last season's state tournament. Buffington, a senior, will make the move from setter to outside hitter.**

Louisburg has switched to a 6-2 offense, which will run two setters. Buffington, who was the team's setter a year ago and a second team all-state player, has moved to outside hitter, while freshmen Corinna McMullen and Davis Guetterman will each take turns at the setter spot.

"Carson ran a 6-2 her sophomore year and has some hitting experience in her past," Compliment said. "She is a great vocal leader and someone I knew the team needed on the court. Switching her to a right side hitting position made sense and it was apparent during the KU camp that Carson fits in well there. The transition to the new 6-2 with Davis and Corinna is going well, and all of the players are working well together."

Another change is in the back row as junior Reilly Ratliff-Becher will take over as the team's libero. Last year's libero, Riley Kallevig, will take to the role of becoming a six-rotation outside hitter as the Lady Cats try and replace the production from Sophie McMullen – a first team all-state player that is now currently playing at Northwest Missouri State.

Junior Haley Cain also returns as the team's middle blocker and will be joined at the position by sophomore newcomer Carleigh Pritchard. Junior Erin Lemke is also back as a right side hitter.

"I stress to the players in the program to know multiple positions because it makes them versatile and easier to place on the court," Compliment said. "I also talk to them about being the type of teammate that's willing to adjust for the team and play where they will most benefit the team."

However, one thing that won't change for the Lady Cats is the presence of Dixon on the court. The returning Class 4A-Division I Co-Player of the Year, Dixon put together a strong season for Louisburg as she led the team with 613 kills and 61 blocks . The 6-foot-3 outside hitter was also third on the team with 58 aces and 329 digs.

Dixon, who will play at Kansas State next season and is currently ranked the 46<sup>th</sup> best prospect in the nation according to prepvolleyball.com, will be focal point for a lot of what the Lady Cats do this season.

"This will be Anna's fourth year as a starter on the squad," Compliment said. "She brings in a lot of experience. I'm sure she'll have a strong season and continue to lead the team vocally and by example."



**(From left): Carson Buffington, Reilly Ratliff-Becher, Haley Cain, Riley Kallevig and Anna Dixon celebrate a point during last season’s state tournament.**

Although a state title is the team’s ultimate goal this season, the Lady Cats still have several boxes they would like to check off before they get there. Louisburg, which is currently ranked No. 3 in the Class 4A preseason rankings, has been working hard to get that accomplished.

“The difference with this group is we are motivated right from the start,” Dixon said. “It took us halfway through the season last year for us to get the confidence that we can compete at state. After what happened last year, now we know we can do it and that we have the tools to do so. We just have to work hard from the start and we have been doing a good job doing that in practice.

“Our biggest goal right now is just going after the teams in

our league. We have a few new teams, so we want to get a league title and get a good record going into sub-state.”

Louisburg will kick off its season at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday when it hosts rival Paola for a Frontier League dual match.

It will be the first of many matches the Lady Cats hope to turn into a win this year as they try and erase the heartbreaking images from Salina.

“We think about it a lot,” Buffington said. “It has motivated us to come back determined and ready to take it this year. It has really bugged us. We see pictures of Rose Hill winning it last year and they are already saying they want a 3-peat, so we can’t let that happen.

“We just want to go out and become a better team. There are some people that don’t think we are going to be as good as last year, but I think we can even be better than last year.”

The Lady Cats would also like to finish what they started a year ago.

“Placing second at state is a huge accomplishment and something the team is proud about,” Compliment said. “Few teams have the opportunity to play for a state title, but considering how close we were it left everyone feeling like we had some unfinished business. It’s definitely added some extra fuel this season.”