

Title game rematch fuels Lady Cats' fire for another state run



Members of the Louisburg High School volleyball team run onto the court to celebrate their sub-state championship last Saturday in Louisburg. The Lady Cats open the Class 4A state tournament against defending state champion Rose Hill this Friday in Hutchinson.

Throughout the offseason and into this season, the Louisburg volleyball team has always had last year's state championship match fresh in its mind.

The Lady Cats lost by two points to Rose Hill in the state title game last season, and the loss has been a driving force in their success this season.

"It is just the worst feeling and it still burns," senior Carson Buffington said. "It is definitely motivation for us and it started right after we lost to Rose Hill. We knew that the next year that we are going to come out and win a state championship, and that is what we plan to do."

Louisburg won its seventh sub-state crown in the last nine years last Saturday in its 2-0 win over Eudora in the sub-state championship game, and on Sunday found out who it was going to play.

The Lady Cats (32-8), which earned the No. 5 seed, won't have to wait that long for their rematch with Rose Hill. They face the No. 4 seed Rockets (31-6) in the first match of pool play at 8:30 a.m., Friday in the Class 4A state tournament at Hutchinson Sports Arena in Hutchinson.

"When we found out Rose Hill was going to be in our pool, I think that just fueled our fire even more, especially with it being our first match of the day," senior Anna Dixon said. "Hopefully we can come out and have a lot of energy. Everyone has been pretty motivated. We have been watching a lot of film and scouting other teams. We have been incorporating their habits into our practice to prepare us for what we see on Friday."

What Louisburg will see Friday is several difficult opponents. Not only will the Lady Cats square off with the defending state champion in Rose Hill, Louisburg will also face No. 1 seed Independence (37-2) and No. 8 Topeka-Hayden (21-17), who is a three-time defending state champion in the former Class 4A-Division II.

The Lady Cats will meet Independence at 11:30 a.m. and follow it up with their match against Hayden at 12:30 p.m.



Carleigh Pritchard and Anna Dixon combine for a block Saturday during the sub-state tournament.

No. 2 Chanute (33-6), No. 3 Andale (32-6), No. 6 Wichita-Trinity (22-15) and No. 7 Bishop Miege (21-16) are in the other pool. The top two teams in each pool will advance to bracket play at 10 a.m. on Saturday.

"We were a little nervous when the seedings came out, but yet excited at the same time," Dixon said. "Rose Hill ended our season last year in the championship game and we have the opportunity to send them home after day one.

"We also have the No. 1 seed and another defending state champion in Hayden. We know we are going to have to play them eventually if we want to win the whole thing, so we might as well get it done the first day."

The first match of the day against Rose Hill could be a pivotal one for the Lady Cats as they want to get started strong and not have the pressure of playing from behind to make sure they get to Saturday.



Senior Carson Buffington celebrates a point last Saturday during the sub-state tournament against Iola.

“The first match sets the tone for the day and you have to come out awake and ready,” Louisburg coach Jessica Compliment said. “The players are smart and they know how the system works and they know how important every match is. Each set is important and we haven’t dropped very many when we have won matches, so it will be important for them to come out ready to go.”

The Louisburg-Rose Hill match-up brings even more intrigue as it will feature two of the best hitters in the state of

Kansas. Dixon, who will attend K-State next season, will go up against Rose Hill's Gracie Van Driel, a University of Kansas commit.

Dixon and Van Driel were selected as Co-Players of the Year in Class 4A by the Kansas Volleyball Association and the Louisburg senior is excited for the matchup.

"I love playing against Gracie," Dixon said. "We have been good friends since middle school. Our dream was to always play together, but I have enjoyed playing against her and it is always fun to go up against a good team and trying to defend big hitters like her."

Dixon herself has had another good season for Louisburg and currently has a team-high 510 kills on the year. She is also second on the team with 45 aces and 276 digs as an all-around player.

However, all of the Lady Cats have taken a step forward this season, especially when it comes to their setters. Going into the season, Compliment decided to run a 6-2 offense, and handed the reigns to two freshmen setters in Rinny McMullen and Davis Guetterman.

Compliment asked Buffington, who served as the team's setter the last two seasons, to move to an outside hitter position and the change has worked out well for the Lady Cats. McMullen currently leads the team with 558 assists and Guetterman has 391.



Freshman setter Rinny McMullen rises up for a serve last week.

Both players are also among the team's best servers. Guetterman is third on the team with 44 aces and McMullen has 35 on the year.

"I don't think a lot of people realize that both of them are freshmen," Compliment said. "I've had people come up to me, even at sub-state, and say 'Your setters are freshmen? You can't even tell.' You can't tell that when you watch them play and that is kudos to those two and the experience they had coming in.

"Also, as the season has progressed they have gotten more and more comfortable adjusting on how to run things and getting to know their hitters. They have done a really good job of figuring out strengths, weaknesses, what works and what doesn't. I am just proud of both of them and they have gotten

stronger as the season goes on.”

The Lady Cats also take pride in their defense, which changed up from last season. Reilly Ratliff-Becher took over the libero spot from Riley Kallevig and Kallevig moved on to play all six rotations.

Kallevig leads the team with 296 digs on the season, while Ratliff-Becher is third on the team with 274. Kallevig also has a team-high 69 aces and both players are key in the back row with Dixon, along with McMullen and Guetterman.

“I think everyone knows this, but defense wins game,” Ratliff-Becher said. “Being a libero, I have to be the loudest in the back row, especially for this tournament. Defense is hard, but it is all about your mindset. If you don’t think you can play defense, the ball is going to come right to you. You have to have the confidence to go get it.”

Louisburg has also improved at the net throughout the season as junior Haley Cain and sophomore Carleigh Pritchard have emerged as big hitters in the middle, and also on defense. Cain is second on the team with 169 kills and Pritchard has 119. Pritchard also leads the team with 45 blocks.



Junior Haley Cain goes up for a kill during the sub-state championship match against Eudora.

On the outside, Buffington, Kallevig and junior Erin Lemke also give the Lady Cats good hitting options as they have combined for more than 300 kills on the season.

Even with all the success and big wins they have posted this season, the Lady Cats realize the stakes are high and are hoping to bring home the school's first state volleyball title. They just need to have the right frame of mind.

"When they just unload, unleash it, don't hold anything back and just have fun, they are a very tough team to beat," Compliment said. "That is what we have done all season long. Some of the matches we have lost is when we have played it safe and over-analyzed everything, rather than just playing aggressive. For Friday, we just need to play the way we know how and have fun. When they have fun, I think these girls are

unstoppable.”