

CCCAA STATE VOLLEYBALL TOURNAMENT

Seahawks search for redemption, state title

Cabrillo's Summer Mitchell soars in front of the home crowd to push the ball over the net during the Seahawks' victory over Delta on Tuesday. SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL



After faltering in tourney last year, Cabrillo players are more determined than ever

By JULIE JAG

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Sierra Clark looked miserable as she sat on the sidelines while the Cabrillo College women's volleyball team's state title aspirations went up in flames last December.

The Seahawks had reached the final four of the California Community College Athletic Association state tournament for the first time since 1997. As the top-ranked team in the state, they had a realistic chance at becoming the first NorCal team to win the CCCAA title since it

TUNE IN

FINAL FOUR

TODAY: Cabrillo vs. El Camino, 2 p.m.;

Pierce vs. Santa Rosa, 4:30 p.m.;

Elimination match, 7 p.m.

CHAMPIONSHIP: 3:30 p.m. Sunday

ON THE NET: Live at www.cccaasports.org

became a single-division tournament in the 1980s.

Instead, they were swept in both their matches and were the only team not to

reach the second day of the tournament.

It's bad enough when your team loses. According to Clark, it's downright unbearable when you're unable to do anything about it because your left leg has been locked into a heavy-duty brace following knee extensive surgery.

"That was one of the toughest things I've ever had to do. That was miserable having to sit there and watch," Clark said. "There was nothing I could do about it as much I wanted to."

That's why the 6-foot-2 middle block-

SEE SEAHAWKS ON B2

SEAHAWKS

Continued from B1

er and her Cabrillo teammates plan to make the most of their second chance this week.

The Seahawks [28-1] won the Coast Conference and blazed through the NorCal playoffs to qualify for their second straight state tournament. As the No. 1 NorCal seed, they play SoCal No. 2 El Camino [24-2] at 2 p.m. today at Shasta College in Redding.

If they win, they advance to play Sunday morning and then possibly in the 3:30 p.m. championship in the double-elimination tournament.

The other two teams in the tournament are SoCal No. 1 Los Angeles Pierce [30-0], which handed Cabrillo its first loss at state last year before going on to win the entire tournament, and NorCal No. 2 Santa Rosa [28-2], which beat the Seahawks in their second match of the season.

"She's a huge, huge part of the team," Cabrillo coach Gabby Houston said of Clark, who tore her ACL and MCL in the first game of conference play. "Being here last year... we didn't do very well and she had to watch that. That was really hard for her and she really wanted to get here again."

Clark is leading the team with 1.7 blocks per game this season — the 12th best average in the state — and has the second-most kills [201] behind sophomore outside Tori Bozzo [275].

Yet Clark isn't the only one seeking redemption from last year's playoff debacle.

Fellow San Lorenzo Valley



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Coach Gabby Houston has brought the Seahawks to the brink of an historic state championship.

High graduate Brooke Carroll, the team's setter, and sophomore outside Summer Mitchell were on the court when Cabrillo came unraveled at state. Carroll has the fifth-best assist average in the state at 10.69 a game, while Mitchell has tallied 160 kills this season for third-best on the team. Defensive specialist Alekxis Mondragon [271 digs], a Watsonville High product, was also on the bench alongside Clark last year after suffering a hip injury late in conference play.

Houston said those players packed lessons from that experience with them for the seven-hour drive north.

"It helps them a lot because they realize what happened. When you're in it, you don't really realize what's going on," Houston said. "Now they're taking a step back and

saying 'We will never let that happen again.'"

The players seem to agree that the main hiccup last year was their lack of teamwork at state. After playing as a unit all season, they reverted to individuals with the title on the line. This year, Houston said, the team is taking the opposite route. After playing somewhat as individuals during the season, the players started coming together as a team down the playoff stretch.

For examples, look no farther than Cabrillo's NorCal semifinal and final matches. In the semifinal, the Seahawks trailed 24-22 in both Game 2 and Game 3 before rallying back to win both and sweep Sacramento City College. In the final, they pulled together to overcome a first-game loss and a Game 2 rally by Delta to clinch their second straight

NorCal title.

"In the end, it's like it's always about the teamwork," said Houston, who coached the Mount Madonna School girls team to a state title in 2007. "This team has been very, very successful all year long, but they haven't always been the tightest team. But now that we're moving into playoffs, they are coming together as a team."

"We're peaking at the right time. That's really rewarding for me as a coach. Where we are now, we are so much more together as a team, and I think that's what's going to pull us through."

That, and a desire to do what the team couldn't last year.

"Everyone is so, so, so excited," Clark said. "Words can't describe how much the team wants it."