WCAGulloey place in state lore

Hawks could be 1st in NorCal to win in 36 years

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APTS — Forget a thin line, the Cabrillo College women’s volleyball team is practically walking a tight rope since this season’s NorCal collegiate state championships at Foot- hill College in Los Altos.

The Seahawks lead of the platform back on Sept. 10 when they were 2-0 in the four-game opening matches over Modesto and American River, the opener of the Delta Classic Tournament. Now, three weeks, 26 matches and no slips later, they’ve nearly completed their journey.

In fact, they’ve just three steps away from history. And the last one: It’s going to be a doozy.

They focused and balanced and Cabrillo could record the first undefeated season in program history. More significantly, it could become the first Northern Californian team to win the state title in 36 years. Cabrillo won its first and only state title in Division II (small schools) in 1978. This year, the California Community College Athletic Association combined the large- and small-school divisions to create one all-encompassing state championship, and no NorCal school has won since.

I think we’d like to believe that we’re going to do it. We’ve been talking about it all year,” said Cabrillo coach Cahill Harrison.

“Definitely have the potential. We know the teams that got to state are good too. We’re definitely good, but I think the No. 1 team and the SoCal teams are legitimately good too. I think each game is going to be a 25-25 sort of thing."

Cabrillo, the top-ranked team in the state and in NorCal, opens at 2 p.m. Saturday against Grossmont College, ranked No. 2 in Southern California and No. 4 in the state by the CCAA. On the other side of the bracket, Irvine Valley, the SoCal No. 1 state and No. 2 team, which is also undefeated at 25-0, takes on NorCal No. 2 American River College, ranked No. 3 in the state. The winners of those matches meet at 7 p.m. Saturday with the victor going straight to the state final.

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Sunday’s 3:30 p.m. championship, while Cabrillo is steadily pushing toward both an undefeated season and the state title, the two aren’t mutually exclusive.

Cabrillo can lose one match during the double-elimination state tournament and still strike away with the state championship trophy Sunday afternoon.

“When in the record they have right now, there’s probably some pressure to win, but I think that they’re going to have to go to not focus on that so much and just play,” said Santa Rosa College coach Katlin Ferguson. Though this is her first year at the Bear Cals’ helm, Ferguson has extensive experience at the state tournament. She assisted on the Santa Rosa team that reached the state final in 2009 and 2013 and played in the state tournament in 2007.

“It’s been done before,” LA Pierce, 2010,” Ferguson said of the SoCal powerhouse that went undefeated in 2000. “You have to go into contact that this is our track record so far and have the confidence that comes with that rather than a we-have-to- win-and-not-mess-up mentality. If you do lose, you get another chance to turn around in the next match.”

Of course, all of the roster paths to the championship, that one is the most treacherous. Lose in first match and Cabrillo might need to win as many as four straight matches to claim the title. And that course has been a dead end for the team in the past. Cabrillo also reached the state tournament in 2009 — as the first NorCal team ranked No. 1 in the state — and 2013, and both years it lost its first two matches.

In fact, the Seahawks reached the state tournament seven times without bringing home any hardware. But that’s the past. The Seahawks have been focusing on the future — namely reaching the state tournament, and have been putting one foot in front of the other to get there. That they’ve done that without losing a match is only a sidebar — almost one they’d like to maintain.

“It’s always our goal to go undefeated in conference, win never in season. It just become that,” Houston said. “It’s always been, ‘Go to 25-0’ or ‘Get a good seed.’ (Going undefeated) was special. That happened to win another title before Cabrillo took over the No. 1 state ranking.

Griffins middle hitter Simonna Henderson leads the state’s 1st percentage, converting more than half her attempts into points and averaging more than three kills per game. She also has the seventh-most blocks in the state with 84, 27 of which were solo.

The other SoCal representatives, Irvine Valley, at 25-0 shares Cabrillo’s burden of being undefeated. The Lasers, the Orange County Empire Champions, feature freshman middle Annie Mitch, who loads the state blocks (42 total, 45 solo) and who has been rumored to be considering playing for the University of Hawaii next year.

Finally, there’s American River College, which Cabrillo swept in both their meetings this season. Yet the Bear Cals shouldn’t be overlooked, warned Ferguson, whose Bear Cals competed with ARC in conference play. She said she remembers assisting in the 2011 state tournament with a Santa Rosa team that had also lost to Cabrillo that season. Those Bear Cals turned around and beat the Seahawks in five games in the opening match.

“We talked about the matter of the memory from the beginning of the season and infused that with belief,” she said. “We’re who are you’re playing for rather than playing for myself. We have to recognize that you’re playing for your school and team and really reflect in the moment and just kind of enjoy that moment.”

Cabrillo seems to have been in the zone all season. Many of the players hail from local high schools and have been growing up playing volleyball together, which has done wonders for the team’s chemistry. In any given match, the Seahawks may be led in kills by Hawaii-Hilo transfer and SoCal State title Brit Morgan, Harbor alumnus Kelsey