State title still Cabrillo’s focus

Coach Houston has veteran team believing repeat is possible

By Juan Reyes

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APTOPS | Just before heading into the gym for another two-hour practice session with the Cabrillo College volleyball team, coach Gabby Houston said there was one thing she told the team before the start of a new season: “Anything is possible.”

It took 12 years for a Northern California community college volleyball team to be crowned state champions, but last year Houston led the Seahawks to their first state ti-

three sets (25-17, 25-8, 27-25) on Wednesday night. That also stretched the Seahawks’ winning streak to 43 straight matches, dating back to last year’s undefeated championship run.

“Right now we’re just taking it one game at a time,” said sophomore Kelsey Shaver, a Harbor High product. “Just working really hard in the gym, keeping our eyes on the prize the whole time. We really try and focus (on) trying to take it match by match because we know that every team is going to give us their best game.”

Houston said the team is compelement with the No. 1 ranking it received at the start of the season but noted that Cabrillo hasn’t done anything yet to earn the top spot. In other words, this year’s group wants to build its own legacy.

“They were very committed to proving that this team was earning something and that they didn’t want to just ride on the coattails of last year’s success,” Houston said. Cabrillo did lose five key starters to graduation, however, such as Bri Morgan and Kaitlyn Connolly. But Houston said she’s certain that her second-year players, especially Shaver and the incoming freshmen, will step in just fine.

One of the first year players emerging as a leader for the Seahawks is another Harbor alumna Patrice Williams, who played with Shaver during their senior year with the Pirates. Williams tried out for Cabrillo last year but didn’t make the cut because of “minor differences” between Houston and her, according to the fifth-year head coach.

Williams got a second chance to try out for this year’s squad and Houston noted that the freshman middle blocker is better for the break. Taking a year off helped improve Williams’ attitude and appreciation for the game, helping her churn out 36 kills and 18 blocks this season.

“It’s a dream come true,” Williams said. “I love playing volleyball and I couldn’t ask for a better group of girls. It’s the first time in my life that I’ve been friends with my teammates. I can say they’re my friends first and then my teammates.”

When it comes to the playoffs, though, the Seahawks will be thankful for the experience of their eight returning players. They include setter Tyler Gasoga, right side Carly Craig and Alex Flores, middles Madi- son Beech and Morgan Matias, defensive specialists Cassie Cowington and Grace Ryan. And of course there is Shaver, the state tournament MVP who is an all-around player with a team-high 233 kills to go along with 115 digs, 11 aces and 25 blocks (14 solo).

“Being able to be back playing with her, she’s definitely improved and she’s gotten so much smarter with everything that she does,” Williams said. “Kelsey is the most disciplined player, she’s so tech- nical. It’s so awesome to watch her and thrive off of her positive energy.”

During last year’s CCCAA championship round, Houston posted hundreds of neon colored Post-it notes throughout the entire locker room with short quotes and questions for the team, using them as a motivation tool. This year Shaver and her teammates decided to bring in their own quotes to practice and use them to focus on what they need to work on for that week.

"(Houston) does a lot of mental things with us,” she said. “Just helping us know that we do have that target on our backs. She’s just so motivated that it definitely carries through to us.”

The Cabrillo College volleyball team huddles up before the start of Thursday afternoon’s practice session.

Cabrillo setter Tyler Gasoga and Cabrillo look like they will have a good chance at defending their state title this season.

Cabrillo is now on a quest to re- peat the feat.

Houston said it’s no mystery other teams will be gunning for her team this year, especially during Coast Conference play, which the Seahawks began last week with a win over City College of San Francisco.

“I knew we had the target coming in on our back for sure,” she said. “When you look at your team and you look at your players, you’re like ‘Can we do this? Can we not do this? What’s the reality of it?’ And the reality is we have a really good team and we have a good chance.”

Cabrillo, ranked No. 1 in the state and NorCal, is off to another hot start. The Seahawks improved to 13-0 on the season by defeating Gavilan in 3 sets (25-17, 25-8, 27-25).