Cabrillo ready to repeat feat

One of three undefeated teams, Seahawks hoping to have mental edge

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APTSO Coach Gabby Houston-Neill set the stage for a return to the state championship on the Cabrillo College women’s volleyball team’s first day of practice this summer.

When the players entered the gym, it was dark with only the Seahawks logo illuminated on the hardwood floor. Houston-Neill asked them to lay in a circle on the floor and close their eyes. And then the voice of motivational speaker Les Brown boomed out of the sound system:

“All I want you to do when you look into your own eyes is say to yourself, ‘It’s possible...’”

The Seahawks have proven that to be true. One year after finishing the first NorCal team to win the California Community College Athletic Association state title – a dry spell that spanned 36 years – they are in position to repeat the feat.

On Saturday, Cabrillo, ranked No. 1 in the state and in NorCal since the season’s start, will.

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open the CCCAA state tournament hosting a match against Grossmont at 2 p.m. On the other side of the bracket, Feather River will play Irvine Valley at 4:30 p.m., with the winners of both matches advancing to a 7 p.m. showdown. The victor in the late match will advance directly to the title tilt, scheduled for 3:30 p.m. Sunday.

It’s the path of least resistance, and it’s the one Cabrillo followed last year during its status quo-shatter- ing championship drive. It had been such a drought for NorCal teams – no team had won since the CCCAA combined its divisional championships into a single title in the late ’70s – that it almost seemed like winning the community college state title couldn’t be done.

Now that they’ve experienced first-hand that it can, Houston-Neill wants her squad to know a repeat is possible. That’s why she has been having the squad watch a four-minute YouTube video montage of Brown’s speech before and after every practice. The video features Mohammed Ali and emphasizes that thousands of people have run faster than a 4-minute mile since Roger Bannister accomplished the once inconceivable feat in 1954.

The message: Anything is possible, even if you think it’s not.

“We’re going to watch it until we believe it!” Houston-Neill said, only partially in jest.

If Cabrillo players truly believe they can repeat, it may be one of the few advantages they’ll have against a stacked field. It won’t be like 2013, when ignorance was bliss for the Seahawks, who entered the tournament as considered underdogs. They are now the favorites. And for the eight sophomores on the 14-player roster, all of whom contributed to the previous championship, that has made this journey much different from the last.

Among them is Harbor High graduate Kelsey Shaver, whose clench performance last year earned her the title of tournament MVP.

“It’s like a whole new trip. Everything here is different,” said Shaver, who has already earned an AVCA All-American selection. “The energy, everything about this year’s team. We’re not riding on the back of last year’s team.

“It feels like such a different ride. We know what it takes for them to get a team for you.”

It takes plenty of hard work, focus and persis- tence, though it doesn’t seem like it looking at the Seahawks’ record. They breezed through the season with a 30-0 record, putting away all but three of those matches in the minimum three games. It took them four games to get past Foot- hill in Tuesday’s NorCal fi- nal, and that was the first time they dropped a set in 21 matches. They haven’t lost a match in 61 straight chances after also going un- defeated last season.

But they’re not alone in trying to keep their record unim- plicated. For the first time, three of the four teams in the CCCAA tour- nament are undefeated. Grossmont, the No. 2 SoCal seed, is 26-0 and top SoCal seed Irvine Valley is 24-0. Both also competed at state last year, with Grossmont battling back through the consolation bracket after an opening loss to Cabrillo only to lose to the Seahawks in the championship.

Feather River (25-2), the NorCal No. 2 seed, took its only losses from Cabrillo (3-2 and 3-0) early this sea- son.

“Now one knows how to lose yet,” said freshman Nikki Miyashita, an Aptos graduate who played two years of beach volleyball for Hawaii-Manoa before transferring to Cabrillo for this sea- son. “Teams are definitely going to go on all out. Words just can’t describe it.”

With such talent on the floor, wins and losses are going to come down to how well players handle the pressure, especially in win- or-go-home situations. The Seahawks showed that’s an area where they can im- prove after they tensed up in Tuesday’s NorCal final al- most to the point of letting Foothill rally back and force a pivotal Game 5.

But that’s why Houston-Neill has been asking her team to believe.

“Anything is possible,” Miyashita said. “Cabrillo does a lot of that for us, to try and show us that things are pos- sible and that it’s within us and we have to bring that out of each other.”

After hearing it almost 200 times since the start of the season, the message seems to sinking in – just in time for the Seahawks to defend their crown.

Tyler Gasloga sets the ball for Cabrillo Tuesday night’s four-set victory over Foothill.

Cabrillo outside hitter Kelsey Shaver stretches to save a ball for the Seahawks during Tuesday’s four-set victory over Foothill.