

Lamorinda girls volleyball teams look to continue their success from last season



Photo Ann Murphy

5 Amber Chu, 88 Nicole Tuszynski, 20 Kaylin Ishizu and in front Kaitlyn Roach

By Jon Kingdon

Coming off last season where Acalanes, Campolindo and Miramonte all made the playoffs, each of their coaches are approaching the season with feelings ranging from cautious optimism to outright confidence. There has been mixed success early as the teams are utilizing the early non-league games to work out the kinks and develop the necessary chemistry so vital in league play.

Miramonte

After head coach Leslie Ray's first season, the Matoradors were ranked 448th in the state. With a 17-5 record last season which included four post-season victories, Miramonte concluded the season ranked 91st in the state.

Despite the loss of six players that played big roles to graduation, there are still a number of key players that have returned led by league MVP and co-captain senior Amber Chu, the team's leading scorer last season.

Along with Chu, there are a number of last year's backups that have stepped up into starting roles. Senior co-captain Annika Blas-Cedeno has moved from libero to the front line along with seniors Bella Yun and Kaitlyn Roach

and her sister, sophomore Amanda who will play in the middle.

Leading the defense is junior co-captain libero Nicole Tuszynski and the omnipresent Chu and backup libero senior Adriana Pureco. "Nicole has stepped up in her role as the libero and she runs the back line," Ray said. "Everything goes through her, and everyone gets out of the way when she calls for the ball."

Last year's setter Julia Berg who led the team with 299 assists last year is out this season due to an injury so Kaylin Ishizu, who was fourth on the team in assists last season, will be running the team's offense.

After opening the season with a loss to California, Miramonte rebounded with a 3-0 win over Berean Christian. "Since that loss, we've been really going at it and I've been breaking it down to make them see and to remind them how we had started off slowly last year as well," Ray said. "We've learned to let that loss go and move forward. Now it's building our team dynamics with the same common goal - making it out of the league where everyone has gotten better and more competitive. We have a lot of work to do but

as long as we believe in what we do and stick with our system, we'll be fine."

The key for Ray is to have everyone working together on the court. "It's a team sport but when all those bits and pieces get used on the court together, that's when it becomes special," Ray said. "If the girls come together on the court, it will be hard for any team to beat us. If we play good defense, we can play and outwork any other team and that's our No. 1 goal."

Having only played two games so far (1-1), the Matoradors will be playing in the Dougherty and Stockton tournaments later in the season.

Campolindo

This is the season that John Vuong has been waiting for since the onset of the COVID crisis. Not only are the Cougars a talented team but after two years, there was finally a normal offseason. "This is the first season without having to deal with any aspect of the pandemic," Vuong said. "There were a lot of uncertainties as to how the kids were developing and what their capabilities would be the last two years. Coming into the season, I know what we have now and I'm very happy with what we've got and it's just exciting."

With a 4-2 record, Vuong is particularly pleased with his front line despite the losses of Brittney Soun who opted to focus on beach volleyball and sophomore Emily Knutson who is out with a knee injury. The group is led by senior Charlotta Bell, sophomore Aveya Stone and freshman Makenna Crosson.

"This can be the best group of pin hitters I've had at Campolindo," Vuong said. "Charlotta is one of the best if not the best player in our league and can play defense and is a great passer. Aveya did not play much her freshman year due to an injury and has shown she is going to be a big contributor. Makenna's the only freshman on the team. She has good height, has been playing well and has a high volleyball IQ." (Crosson comes by that honestly as her father is the head coach of the women's volleyball team at the University of California.)

The setters are seniors Olivia Woo and Anna Dendinger. "Olivia is a return-

ing starter and we converted Anna to the setter position this year and they will be running the team this year." Rachel Andre who played JV last season should also see playing time and gain experience for next year.

Vuong is also counting on the leadership of the team's captains, Wiseman, Dendinger, and Bella Montero. "They've been around the program for a long time and understand our culture so the underclassmen really respect them," Vuong said.

With a competitive non-league schedule, it's a matter of the team coming together. "For us to be successful we have to play every point like it's the last one and that's the mindset we have to operate under," Vuong said. "We're just trying to figure out the right combinations. "We have what it takes to be competitive and successful. They just need to learn how to play with the player next to them. I'm very excited for this year and the future is great with the underclassmen we have coming up."

The 4-2 Cougars will learn where they stand nationally by competing in the Durango Fall Classic (Las Vegas) on Sept. 16 and 17. The tournament will be made up of 64 teams, most of whom are ranked nationally with each team playing 4 to 8 games over the two-day period.

Acalanes

For the first time in her four years at Acalanes, head coach Haley Walsh has a roster that has been coached exclusively by her and her staff. "It's been good getting to this point and knowing that everything you taught them is instilled in their play," Walsh said. "Many of them have been playing together for as long as six years with high school and club teams so you can tell they're very comfortable and trust each other."

With a 6-5 record, the strength of the team is in the front line which has a lot of depth with Ryann Jones (59 kills), Katelyn Olin (50 kills), Hanna Hageboeck (39 kills), MaeLin Mason (35 kills), and Apple Walton (15 kills).

"We really try to push running the right side in the middle as much as we can so that the outsides don't have as many blockers in front of

them," Walsh said. "They're all really strong hitters along with Ava Bunton who also has been working on outside who will be a great addition as she continues to learn from the players ahead of her."

At this point of the season, the goal is to figure out which lineup provides the most chemistry and togetherness and who can be relied on the most on offense, defense, serving and other skills. "We've been focusing on running a lot of plays now that we're comfortable with the girls and likewise, which we hadn't been able to do in the past," Walsh said.

Walsh has been running a 6-2 offense with two setters senior Mara Korzeniowska and sophomore Emma Seelenbacher. "Both of them are doing very well so we've been able to get more hitters in," Walsh said. "Emma is also new to the sport, but her raw potential is phenomenal. It's just a matter of her trusting in her skills because she is a good setter, and the players enjoy hitting off her."

Senior Georgia Winkles is the veteran on defense and is joined by juniors Mika Bocobo and Ava Bunton. "Georgia led the team last year in digs," Walsh said. "We expect strong numbers out of Mika who has elevated her game in making the transition to the varsity." Backup libero Jade Profilio, Jones and Hageboeck will also be factors on defense.

Lyanne Wang, after suffering a broken hand last season, is the starting libero. "Lyanne and Jade Profilio have been dominant in the back row in as either liberos or defensive specialists," Walsh said.

It's the little things that Walsh is looking to address. "We're looking forward to getting better in closing out our matches," Walsh said. "Last season we were not good finishing. We've really been emphasizing following all the way through on all of the points in every game and in each match. This is such a great, goofy group so sometimes it's hard for them to concentrate or rein it in. But if we can focus, we've proven that we're a strong team that will keep up with the top teams."

SMC's Chase Jones drafted by NOLA in Major League Rugby

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Still, the ultimate highlight for Jones was not the end result but the process in getting there.

"The biggest takeaway that I'll keep with me for the rest of my life was embracing the suffering," Jones said. "If you want to be really good at some-

thing, you're going to have to go through the hardest struggles and you're going to have to just put your head down and say, 'You know what? I'm going to get through it.' Tim taught us how to control our body when we were suffering the most, pushing us all to the point where we were on the side of the hill thinking we're

going to be sick, feeling dehydrated and physically exhausted. But we were with our brothers, and it just shows that support through hard times creates a bond that is unbreakable."

O'Brien did not argue the point. "There is a bit of shared suffering for sure," O'Brien said. "Chase is one of those

guys that's all about it. He had some days when he needed support and wanted to understand what was occurring. As long as he was clear as to why we were doing things a certain way, he was fine."

It's never easy for a coach to lose a player of Chase's caliber to graduation. "Chase's graduating is a big loss for us,

both as a player and as a person," O'Brien said. "I will miss his personality and his contributions on and off the field. You could see playing is a joy for him and he is a good dude to be around."

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