

Published November 13th, 2019

Campolindo and Acalanes Girls Volleyball teams head to state tournament after reaching NCS Finals

By Jon Kingdon



Maddie Risch

Despite losing in the championship games in the NCS Divisions 1 and 3 respectively, the Campolindo (24-6) and Acalanes (19-7) Girls volleyball teams have to be happy with how their seasons have evolved. Despite losing to Bishop O'Dowd, the No. 1 seeded team by scores of 25-18, 25-22 and 25-23, Campolindo will still be going on to compete in the state tournament. Acalanes will also be competing in the state tournament after coming up short against Branson (Marin) in three sets as well, 25-20, 25-17, 25-21.

Acalanes first year head coach Haley Glass took a team that had been 17-14 the prior season to the NCS finals for the first time in 40 years, though the Dons did win the state championship in 2016, after losing to Miramonte in the NCS semifinals that season. Prior to the Branson game, the Dons had defeated Hercules (3-0), Moreau Catholic (3-0) and Tamalpais (3-1) to make it to the championship game.

"I would call it a successful season," said Glass. "Anytime that you have a new coach, there are a lot of question marks so to see how the girls handled it the way that they did and to see that type of growth in addressing the challenge in tackling that type of adversity was pretty awesome."

Glass took over a veteran team that was comprised of 15 seniors and juniors and only one sophomore (Aly Kirke) on the roster. It was the maturity and experience of the players that Glass relied on this season: "This wasn't the first time that they have been in these matches and I've been holding them to a higher standard, in preparing them for college and pushing them to be even more mature than they have been and to be good examples for the underclassmen."

Glass worked to inculcate a new attitude among her players with a more aggressive attitudes and instilling confidence in themselves. Maddie Risch once again led the team in kills this season but it was Kennedy Cornish that took to heart Glass' coaching: "I was pleasantly surprised with Kennedy, stressing to her that you're not out there to make friends, you're out there to make enemies, being aggressive and attacking. Let's attack and be really aggressive, which is something that she embraced and it shows in the number of kills that she had and how she has been a wall at the net. Erin Meade also really came out swinging and she showed that desire to want to get better."

Sydney Sowarby stepped in as the team's libero and Lane Webster were second and third on the team in digs behind Risch. "Sydney made a lot of diving saves into the stands. I wanted the players to learn that feeling when you get that ball up when no one thinks you can do it. That's one of the best feelings in volleyball. It's awesome to see how Lane played. We worked hard on her digs and she really embraced it."

It was the growth of the team during the season that Glass most appreciated: "The biggest challenge was having confidence. They were very tentative at the start of the season and they really matured with an attitude that when we were in a tough spot, we're going to do what we have to do to get out of a tough situation."

Acalanes did not lose more than two matches in a row all season which epitomized the attitude that Glass was looking to instill: "The matches that we lost were learning experiences. You can either accept it or we could take the losses and learn from them and show the Don's way to play."

Campolindo head coach John Vuong expressed his concern prior to the season regarding the Cougars being moved up to Division I with schools having far larger student bodies. Still, when you have the MVP of the League Audrey Pak returning along with all league players, Sophia Newman and Erin Thomas, the Cougars remained a force to be reckoned with. The Cougars defeated Heritage (3-0), San Ramon Valley (3-1) and James Logan (3-0) to make it to the finals against Bishop O'Dowd.

"What's special about this team is that they believe in each other," said Vuong. "They really support each other on and off the court. That has really helped at this level of the game. In this new league, we did not know most of our opponents and that took a lot of scouting and studying. Our top players all played to their potential to prove a point." Junior outside hitter Molly Mitchell also drew praise from Vuong: "Molly really rose to the occasion. She is a very calculated hitter."

Junior libero Brianna Lee had a similar perspective of the team: "The chemistry on this team is really amazing. We all get along well and it's a lot of fun play for each other. We know it's Audrey Pak's last season and so there is a special emphasis on every point in the game and we worked really hard to extend the season as far as possible."

Lee also gives credit to Vuong and assistant coach Dave Chen: "They really prepare us so well for the games. We knew where the hitters would open up and where the key shots would go to. They bring so much to practice with their drills and perspective on what we need to look for with our different opponents and everything else, which helps so much. They also see things during the games that might not be what we are seeing on the court. We play for ourselves and know what we can control which is our side."

Pak also has seen this season as being especially satisfying for her and the team: "Every person on the team has been really dialed in and you could tell in practice and when we watch film. Everyone is playing a huge part. It just feels really special and super invested this year. We're not that physical but we make up for that with our defense and just every single person working hard and doing their job."

On to the state tournament for Campolindo and Acalanes.

Miramonte's first year head coach Lindsay Ray was a young coach with a young team and is using the team's 8-16 record as a learning experience. "A lot of things went well," said Ray, "but it was definitely a rebuilding season for us."

The Matadors will be graduating five seniors and 10 underclassmen, which includes two freshman, outside hitter Amber Chu and setter Julia Berg. Juniors defender Haley Lim and libero Jenna Foster will be the foundation for next year's team.

Ray singled out Audrey French among the seniors that will be missed next season, but saw real potential and growth in the team as the season progressed: "Once the team realized that they were getting better, they began to work even harder, pushing each other and holding each other accountable. The girls played really hard all season, particularly against Campolindo and that was a proud moment for me and my sister (assistant coach Leslie Ray)."

It was a learning year for Ray as well as her team: "This was my first season coaching players that were younger than 17. I had a lot of young girls on my team and in also coaching the freshman team, I learned a lot about patience and look forward to next season."



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