

Published March 15th, 2023

Lamorinda Volleyball hits new heights

By Jon Kingdon



Acalanes volleyball vs Bishop O'Dowd (33) Joseph Costelli, Liam Hill and Douglas Roberts (white) Photo Jon Kingdon

With Acalanes starting off strong, Campolindo coming off winning the NCS and a new coach at Miramonte, things are looking up for the Lamorinda volleyball teams, each in their own unique way.

Acalanes

Despite a 9-13 record last season, Acalanes made it to the semifinals in the North Coast Sectional tournament. With the departure of coach Mark Passalacqua, Alexis Hammer, who was the Dons JV head coach last year, has carried over the late season success of the team to this season.

After losing their first two games, the Dons have won their last seven games, six of them under tournament conditions. The energy and the commitment of the team is what Hammer most appreciates. "I've learned that if I have even one little lull in practice, they're going to go crazy and just start hitting balls back and forth," Hammer said. "So, they have to be constantly moving, which is a really good thing to have as a coach. For example, if I tell them to go get a water break, they'll say no, let's do hitting lines."

Hammer, a longtime volleyball player, played at Alhambra High School and Simpson College (IA), is currently a student teacher at the Stanley Middle School and has had no problems in transitioning to the varsity. "I coached a lot of players on the JV team last year, and I assisted with the varsity at times with Mark, so I've

coached all these boys before in one way or another," Hammer said. "The boys have been amazing players and have been super respectful so it has always been fun coming in the gym and being able to coach them to improve their game."

Hammer makes it a point to reward the players' efforts with playing time: "If they put in their full effort during practice, then that's going to come in during the games, so we practice the way that we're going to play in a match," Hammer said. "I want aggressiveness and confidence in my players. If they're confident then it's going to translate into the games and everything else will fall into place."

Seniors Joseph Castelli, Aaron Alvira and captains Liam Hill and Liam Stancik have been leading the offense. "Castelli is a solid player that plays outside and in the front and back row, Hammer said. "Hill is also an outside player that plays all the way around. They're both extremely strong hitters. Stancik is our middle and nothing can get by him. Aaron is a solid setter with great hands, jump and timing."

Douglas Roberts, a junior, is the team's libero. "If a ball is coming anywhere near him, it's going to get up. He's a fantastic defensive player," Hammer said. "Justin Law is also a defensive specialist. He is very good at getting the consistency down with his passing. We still need to improve our serving and receiving and hitting. Our communication is a little bit off but as soon as we get that clocking, then we're going to be unstoppable."

Campolindo

With the loss of nine players to graduation and three others for various reasons, repeating as NCS champions is not going to come easy for Campolindo. As is his wont, head coach David Chen has set up a difficult pre-league schedule for the Cougars, having played in the Sanger tournament. Campolindo has an 8-5 record and will be heading to Las Vegas for another competitive tournament.

"At the Sanger tournament, we played teams like Jesuit, Clovis and Carlmont who were really tough teams," Chen said. "We're trying to take the guys through the wringer. It's been tough but the guys have been doing a great job."

The Cougars are still familiarizing themselves with each other but the unity of the players is facilitating the process. "The players understand that this is a different year from the past but the camaraderie and the bond is closer than it's been the past couple of seasons," Chen said. "The team understands that we're at a

point right now where we really have to play well as a team. We have good pieces, but good pieces don't make up how well a team plays and performs. Ultimately it's having a lot more positive communication and reinforcement while making sure that we always put out our best effort."

The offense is led by senior Andrew Pak who was a setter but was moved to the outside and juniors outside hitter Will Balassi, and middle blocker Will Marusich. Graham Volk has moved from opposite to setter and senior Diego Davila is the team's libero.

"Volk is running the offense and has been getting a lot of assistance from Pak who was our setter the last three years," Chen said. "We're still trying to figure out the pieces that work and where we can maximize everybody's strengths."

Andrew Hanhan, a freshman defensive specialist, has been a pleasant surprise. "Andrew is a very hard worker," Chen said. "There's something about his hunger to learn. He came to the summer open gyms, putting in the time and excelled and showed constant improvement."

The season is more of a marathon than a sprint to Chen. "Ultimately our number one concern is to continue to develop our chemistry and culture, and being in a positive learning environment where success is not necessarily based on wins and losses," Chen said. "We're making short-term goals and I hope the players see the success in that."

Consistency has been the operative term for Chen. "We need to continue to work on our overall consistency, consistency in terms of the basic skills, passing and hitting consistently and being aggressive and building our volleyball IQ," Chen said. "The strongest part of our group is their connection with each other right now. At the end of the day, they still enjoy each other's company and that's going to help propel us when we're successful and when we're not successful. I think right now that's our big push."

Miramonte

After a number of disappointing seasons, Miramonte hired Andre Badillo, who has come over from the Bay Area Volleyball Club (BAVC). This is Badillo's first time coaching a high school varsity team. "At BAVC, I shadowed some great coaches," Badillo said. "At the recommendation of some parents, I interviewed for the position with Sean Hennessey, Miramonte's athletic director and that's how I got the job."

It was clear to Badillo what needed to be addressed immediately. "I learned that the team was missing a lot of structure and it was kind of a culture shock for the players to have me come in with guns blazing," Badillo said. "I'm a very strict coach and I believe it builds character that will help them get ready for the real world where you have to be on time and come prepared for everything. With that structure and the right coaching, maybe not this year or even next year, but soon after that, we will become a legitimate force in the boys' volleyball world here in Orinda."

The players have taken quickly to Badillo's system and in two games have matched their win total from last season. With just a varsity roster, the team has one freshman, six sophomores, seven juniors and six seniors. "The willingness to learn from the upperclassmen has been great to see in that every day they come to practice, it's heads down," Badillo said. "I'm trying to perfect my formal drills and with the guys that have club volleyball experience, they're being really good leaders and they're making their voices heard."

Badillo is taking advantage of the size on the team. "We have a few players over 6'2" which affords me the opportunity to run a slower offense, with a number of beginners on the roster. Right now my focus is getting our passing down so we can pass high and that allows our setters to set their feet to the ball really early. Once they get their footwork down, we can run a faster offense and it should look pretty good by the end of the season."

Leading the offense is senior captain John-Marc Mosher who also plays for PacRam Volleyball Academic and is battling a knee injury but still playing as hard as he can. Sophomore Pierson Smith and freshman Ryan Balonick are also standing out. "Smith is an up-and-coming player that has shown a lot of dedication," Badillo said. "He just needs to keep working on his defense. Balonick has been a force offensively and has shown the ability to step up as a secondary setter. Elliot Boyd and Gavin Terry have also been used as setters."

Badillo is not allowing himself to look back: "I go into every practice and game thinking that our players are going to learn a lot. Every day they've been even more motivated than they were the day before. Nothing's going to be given to us but if we can come out being competitive and aggressive and transformed from beginning to end, that will be a win in my book."

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA