

The champs have some challengers

After seven years on top of the Foothill League, Valencia High is no longer the favorite for a title

By Paul Putignano

Signal Staff Writer
pputignano@the-signal.com
661-259-1234 x536

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Valencia, the reigning Foothill League champion for the last seven years, has a stumbling block ahead in 2009.

According to Vikings head coach Ray Sanchez, this season's favorite is West Ranch.

"I think the last time going into the season we were co-champs with Hart maybe three or four years ago. I think that was the last time — that was the only time I can think about where we were the underdogs going into the season," he said.

West Ranch returns senior outside hitter Allison Summers, who had 267 kills last season, sisters Kayley and Bree Braucher and Courtney Cessna from the 2008 Foothill League second-place and CIF-Southern Section Division I-A second-round team.

The Wildcats lost 25-18, 25-20, 25-18 to Dos Pueblos in the playoffs.

"This year's team chemistry and overall play is much higher than it has ever been at West Ranch," said Wildcats head coach Nate Sparks.

Though regarded as well-rounded by the rest of the Foothill League, Sparks pinpointed specific strengths in his team.

"Our serving and passing will be the main factors for us," he said, noting that the team's offense is continually improving as players become more efficient at connecting with the setters.

Sparks expects big things from top newcomers junior libero Shelby Kunz, a team captain, junior setter Tani Slauson and junior outside hitter Hannah Orlandi, especially after losing Sophie Burns and Megan Futch.

Burns was a member of the The Signal's All-Santa Clarita Valley first team, and Futch was on the second team.

Summers was also on the first team.

"In crucial times we know who to go to and she has always gotten it done for us," Sparks said of Summers, one of the Wildcats' three team captains this season.

She will also be key if West Ranch wants to dethrone Valencia.

The Vikings head into league play still trying to find their groove.

"We are struggling a little bit, to be honest with you," Sanchez said. "We are trying to find a way to get all those kids on the same page."

But Valencia can still contend for a league title.

With returning talent such as senior outside hitter Katie Hank, junior opposite hitter Emily Elias and senior middle blocker Nicole Delange, Valencia still ranks among the elite teams in the Foothill League according to rival coaches.

Those players are joined by such newcomers as junior setter Breanna Early and sophomore outside hitter Sydney Striff.

And with the influx of strong talent at the freshman and junior varsity level, Sanchez is excited about the future.

"Obviously with the juniors coming back, next year looks good for us," he said. "We have a tremendous freshman class. I don't remember ever having this many young talented players in the

program. This year looks good. Next year looks even better. Three years looks spectacularly good. ... Wow, the pipeline is just stocked."

With standouts such as Christina Worth, Megan Lavo and Shelby LeDuff gone to graduation, those young players will have to step up to build off last season's CIF-SS Division I-A quarterfinal loss to Santa Barbara, a 3-0 setback.

Early takes over for Worth, while junior setter Brook Dawson looks to fill the void at libero left by Lavo.

Meanwhile, Hart returns an experienced team which includes six seniors, three of which are in their third year on varsity.

Middle blocker Breena Beckett, libero Allison Toledo and setter/opposite Casey David are instilling an aggressive, resilient, goal-oriented approach on their younger teammates, according Indians head coach Mary Krisan.

"Some of our strengths have actually been defense and serve-receive," Krisan said. "In fact I've had several coaches come up to me saying we have really great ball control."

Krisan believes that Hart should be in the hunt.

"I absolutely do," she said. "I definitely think so. Hart kind of seems to get left out more than I would like. Valencia and West Ranch, they have strong hitters and sometimes that dominates as the main aspect to winning games."

Hart lost 3-0 to Marymount of Los Angeles in the first round of the CIF-SS Division I-A playoffs last season as a Foothill League at-large team.

Toledo, the school's record-holder for digs in a season with 491, and Beckett, who holds the Hart record for blocks in a season with 94, are joined by fellow seniors Jennie Long, who plays opposite, outside hitter Amber Olson and defensive specialist Kailey Giordano, as well as sophomore outside hitter Brittani Elser.

Krisan also said to keep an eye on newcomers Anne Baker, a junior opposite, and junior setter Paulina Hechavarria as well as up-and-comer Anissa Robinson, a junior middle blocker.

"I think we are getting to a point where the girls are ready to make an impact this year," Krisan said.

Saugus is another team with a lot of young talent.

"Every starter except one will be back (next season)," said Centurions head coach Zach Ambrose. "In fact, every starter except two will be back for the next two years."

Senior opposite/setter Taylor Schubert returns to lead a starting lineup which also features one freshman, four sophomores and one junior.

One of the aforementioned sophomores — outside hitter Jaclyn Clark — is back to build off her record-setting debut season.

"Just a talented kid," Ambrose said. "She's our best offensive weapon. She broke the team record for digs in a season last year a freshman."

Clark had 280 digs last season.

The Centurions welcome standout newcomers such as sophomore middle blocker Sarah Blomgren, a transfer from Frazier Mountain High School, and freshman setter Ashley Guthrie. Saugus is looking to build off last season's third-place finish in league.

Gone are outside hitter Katie Estes and setter Alyssa Terwall, whom Ambrose identified as the key losses from last year's CIF-SS Division I-A playoff team, which lost 3-1 in the first round to Serrano of Phelan.

Though the future looks bright for the Centurions, Ambrose said the present could be unpredictable.

"With a young, talented team, you may win some games that people don't expect you to win and you may drop a couple games that people expect you to win," Ambrose said.

Another program looking toward the future is Golden Valley.

First-year head coach Jeff Cody takes over for the Grizzlies after five years as co-head coach at Canyon.

"Our specific goals are just to get better this year — to have some consistency throughout the entire program from varsity down to freshman," he said. "Hopefully not so much looking at how

much can we win this year, but how much more can we improve so that next year we can hit the ground running."

With senior libero Pinar Sayin back for her senior season, junior middle blocker Sam Holcombe recovering from an ankle injury and a trio of standout newcomers, Cody said the team is improving and helping build an interest in the sport throughout the school.

Freshman libero Hanna Acree, sophomore setter Erin Kelley and junior outside hitter Maddie Hardestey will serve as the incoming core of players that Cody believes will help drive the sport's popularity at Golden Valley.

"We have a long way to go, but it is really great to see that I have these three players," he said. "We would just like to have a competitive season where we can walk away from each game and see how much we have improved from the beginning of the season."

And after five years watching Cody work, Canyon head coach Brian Ingino believes his former colleague is the right man for the job.

"I'm glad he got his own program," Ingino said. "He will do a great job. I can only say the best things about that guy."

The Cowboys return senior outside hitter Courtney Longshore and senior outside hitter Brittani Spackman.

Longshore is battling an ankle injury and is expected to be out for another three to four weeks, Ingino said.

"She knows how to win and I hope that she can teach the other girls that mentality," he said of his three-year varsity starter. "She is definitely our leader and our captain."

One of the team's top newcomers is junior middle blocker Sam Kaul, who is also suffering from an ankle injury.

"She is very aggressive at the net," Ingino said. "She is very strong. She is probably averaging about five blocks per match, so she is our go-to girl right now."

Junior setter Christina Guerrero joins Kaul as another impact newcomer for a team that lost Liz Renfrow and Paige Posthumus to graduation from last year's team.

With only nine players on the team, Ingino said his squad is learning to play all the positions.

"I would say basically our goal is to get the experience from playing these higher-level teams and for the program to strive to hit that level. Or get back to that level I should say," he said.

With talent spread across the valley, Ingino said every team can be dangerous and no one should be overlooked.

"I think anything is possible this year," he said.