

# Valencia senior leading charge for girls' volleyball team

By Erik Boal, Special to the Daily News

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Katie Hank speaks softly, but always seems to know the right thing to say to a teammate.

The Valencia senior outside hitter isn't flashy on the volleyball court, but always seems to hit the right shot at the right time.

And despite being the Vikings' most consistent player, her value extends well beyond kills, blocks, digs and aces.

"She's amazing. She's such a rock for us. She's not a real vocal kid, but it's the little things she does that a lot of people don't notice that make a huge difference," Valencia coach Ray Sanchez said. "Not only is she a good ballplayer, but she's just a great kid. And even if she wasn't a good player, she'd still be a great captain because she does so many things so well. Whether it's in the weight room, at practice or off the court, she's so solid."

In a season that has seen plenty of flux in the Vikings' lineup, the leadership and production of Hank have remained steady.

Although she's made a successful transition from middle blocker to outside hitter, the four-year varsity athlete is still the central figure in Valencia's run to another Foothill League championship.


"I'm feeling comfortable and confident right now," Hank said. "I have the attitude that I need to put the ball away now and that I need to get a kill on this point. My mentality has definitely changed since the beginning of the season. I'm more aggressive and more focused than I was before."

Hank has been a

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part of the Vikings' past three championship teams, contributing to a run of seven in a row overall.

But with league MVP Shelby LeDuff and first-team honorees Megan Lavo and Christina Worth graduated, the majority of the responsibility fell on the shoulders of the 6-foot-2 standout to help Valencia extend its

legacy this year.

Although the Vikings can wrap up their eighth consecutive championship at 5:15 p.m. today at Canyon, their run to this year's crown has encountered obstacles along the way, especially with a loss Oct. 6 to rival West Ranch of Stevenson Ranch in the league opener.

"After we lost to West Ranch, I realized I don't want to have my senior year end (without a title). We knew we had to come to practice every day and work hard and work together to keep improving," Hank said. "There was definitely pressure. We had already won seven straight league titles and we didn't want to be the team to break the streak. We didn't want our senior year to be the year we didn't win league again."

In an effort to improve Valencia's fortunes, Sanchez decided to move junior Brianna Earley from setter to outside hitter and insert freshman setter Carly Carapella into the rotation.

Although it took some time for the Vikings' new lineup to develop into a cohesive unit, the switch has paid dividends, as Valencia is 11-3 since the West Ranch loss, with the only setbacks coming to Div. I-AA powers Lakewood and Redondo Union twice over the weekend at the Redondo Power Classic.

"Our passing is better, our defense is better, our serving is better, our middles are becoming a more valuable part of our offense," Sanchez said. "Bree can do a lot of things on the outside and Carly has an incredible temperament. The kids love her and they want to play for her."

Especially Hank, who has provided Carapella with timely advice to help assist in the setter's learning curve.

"The coaches have been very encouraging and Katie and Nicole (DeLange) are good leaders," Carapella said. "They've been encouraging me to do whatever I can do to help the team."

Perhaps the biggest assist Carapella has received is the on-court connection she's developed with Hank, resulting in exceptional performances from both individuals the past three weeks.

"Carly has definitely stepped up. Coming in as a freshman, I know what she's going through because I was a freshman on varsity too," Hank said. "There's a lot of pressure, so I've just tried to be there for her and let her know she's doing a great job. It was a big change in our lineup, but obviously it's been a good change."

In recent victories over West Ranch, Saugus and Hart of Newhall, Hank combined for 77 kills - including a career-high 31 on Thursday against Saugus - and Carapella amassed 119 assists. Hank had 35 kills Saturday in the Gold Division playoffs en route to all-tournament honors at Redondo and Carapella added 53 assists, as Valencia took third in the 32-team event.

"I watched all the outside hitters (at Redondo) and I don't know if I'd trade Katie for anyone of them. And she might be our most improved player too," Sanchez said. "She sees the line, she sees the angle, she has the ability to hit around the block, it's just remarkable. I'm really going to miss that girl."

With Hank, DeLange and Heidi Brown celebrating their senior night Thursday against Golden Valley, Sanchez knows there could be a change in the pecking order in league next year following their graduation.

But as long as Hank is still a part of the Valencia lineup, the Vikings are going to go as far in the Div. I-A playoffs as the Delaware-bound standout can take them.

"It's been a lot of hard work and dedication to get here. (Having an opportunity to be) four-time league champs, it's been a great experience," Hank said. "I just want to look back and know I did everything I could to make it a successful senior year."