

Wildcats begin the hunt

A league title favorite, West Ranch knocks off the seven-time defending champs in opener



Valencia's Sydney Striff (19) hits the volleyball as West Ranch's Tani Slauson attempts a block Tuesday at West Ranch High.

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When the girls volleyball season began, many people pegged West Ranch as a team that could end Valencia's seven-year reign atop the Foothill League.

If Tuesday's league opener is any indication, those predictions are right.

Led by senior outside hitter Allison Summers' 21 kills, the Wildcats beat Valencia 3-1 on Tuesday at West Ranch High.

"This was our first time ever beating Valencia in our program's history for varsity," said Wildcats head coach Nate Sparks.

West Ranch (12-3, 1-0) won by razor-thin margins of 25-21, 21-25, 25-21 and 25-22.

"It did give us a lot of confidence," Sparks said of the win. "However, we know Valencia is a great team ... when we meet them again, they're going to be 4-1, ready to take that game away from us."

The last time the Vikings lost in Foothill League play was 3-2 to Canyon on Oct. 24, 2006, the same year it shared the league title with Hart.

"We have work to do," said Valencia head coach Ray Sanchez. "We are not as good a team as we'd like to be. We have all the

potential to be a great team still. It's only the first game in a 10-game league, so all we've got to do is win our matches and we'll be fine."

In the first game, the Wildcats went on several runs early to extend the lead to 10-4, but the Vikings battled back to narrow the gap to 23-20. It was as close as they would get.

Valencia responded in the next game with a 25-21 win, powered late by senior outside hitter Katie Hank, whose thundering kill brought the lead to 24-21.

On the ensuing point, West Ranch's return went long and the Vikings tied the match at one game apiece.

Hank finished with 19 kills and 12 digs.

"Katie did a nice job, but the other girls didn't do enough," Sanchez said.

The Wildcats bounced back in the third game.

Down 19-18, West Ranch went on a five-point run, highlighted by two aces from junior outside hitter Hannah Orlandi.

Orlandi totaled four aces for the match to go along with nine kills.

And with another powerful kill from Summers, the Wildcats closed out the game.

"She's knows the game well and knows how to motivate the team," Sparks said of Summers, who

will play volleyball at the University of Georgia on scholarship next year. "She's a four-year varsity starter. She knows how to carry this team and she did a phenomenal job tonight doing it,"

In the fourth and final game, the two teams kept pace and tied the score nine times before a four-point run gave the Wildcats the advantage.

Strong play at the net and mistake-free play down the stretch lifted West Ranch 25-22.

For the Vikings, sophomore outside hitter Sydney Striff was second on the team with six kills, while junior opposite Emily Elias had five and senior middle blocker Nicole Delange had three.

Teammate Brooke Dawson, a junior libero, led the team with 13 digs and junior setter Brianna Earley posted 21 assists.

On the other side of the net, junior middle blocker Bree Braucher had 10 kills and two aces for West Ranch, while junior setter Tani Slauson recorded 42 assists and junior libero Shelby Kunz totaled 15 digs.

"We remained cool," Sparks said. "We didn't get anything in our heads. Our servers, they did a great job at keeping their cool, playing their game and not getting down on themselves from the first point to the very last."