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TOP STORY

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## NPA volleyball impresses in first win of season

NATHAN ECKER Special to the Daily Sun

Aug 31, 2023



The Northland Prep Academy volleyball team huddles during a match against Tuba City Wednesday at Northland Prep  
Nathan Ecker, courtesy

The Northland Prep Academy volleyball team stepped onto the court on  
Wednesday against Tuba City with the hopes of securing its first win of the season.

The team had dropped its season opener at home the day prior to Holbrook in five sets. Now, a young Northland Prep squad was tasked with making sure history did not repeat itself from last season, when it lost consecutive games to the same schools.

Led by senior setter Brooke Turner and sophomore hitter Zillah Wildblood-Crawford, the Spartans found a second gear after a difficult third set and finished off Tuba City confidently to notch their first victory.

The Spartans won 25-17, 25-22, 23-25, 25-18.

What most impressed coach Corie Murphy was her team's determination in the final few sets. Northland Prep boasts a roster with six seniors, after having only two outgoing players last season. However, injury and illness limited Murphy and fresh faces were asked to accept larger roles.

“Our young kids played really well tonight,” Murphy said. “Typically on young teams they struggle to finish off a game, and after that third set I was worried that our energy had dropped off, but we focused back in on details and got through the end of that match.”

One of those players, Wildblood-Crawford, was a catalyst in the Spartans' win. The youngster notched 10 kills on 35 attack attempts, a team high. Her night also included an ace late in the fourth set to extend the lead 21-14. The ace was one of four total she compiled.

Wildblood-Crawford impressed on the court, though she also understands that winning is just as much mental as it is physical. The sophomore noticed in their opener, a loss, how bad momentum has the potential to carry.

“We got down a lot and when we would miss a couple points that was the end of it for us cause we could not bring our heads back up,” she said.

Just a day later, Wildblood-Crawford and her team were able to make adjustments to put themselves in a situation to come out on top. The third set especially proved to be a tough task for the Spartans. Neither team could pull away or sustain a lead and the score stayed even until Tuba City rattled off consecutive points after a 23-23 tie to take the set.

“We got tired and just stopped focusing on details,” Murphy said. “We were moving slow in defense and transition, we were not really focused on getting the point done.”

A taxing set became an early test for Northland Prep as its leadership regrouped.

“We come into the middle, we take a deep breath and then we just go out and it’s a new point every single time,” Wildblood-Crawford said. “We don’t think about whether we just lost or won a long rally, we are just carrying our momentum forward no matter how we did before that.”

The Spartans eventually did send Tuba City home in dominating fashion, ending with a quality final set. Wildblood-Crawford knocked down three kills early and senior Noe Rhon extended the lead 16-10 with back-to-back kills. Rhon finished with nine kills and also came down with the final slam to put away the Warriors for good.

On top of the composure Northland Prep showed, the team believes it's improving its skill.

“Our serving was very consistent, our hitters were doing good things with the ball, playing smart and not just hitting it at their face,” Turner said.

The senior is aware of the level of play the Spartans will need to live up to if they are to make another playoff run. Last season the Spartans found themselves at the end of a 13-match win streak going into the playoffs, which included an 11-game shutout streak.

Doing that again will not be easy. Rather than trying to live up to that level of play, the Spartans are trying to perform as well as possible against the teams they have on the schedule.

“We’re playing harder teams to start, so we are not going to play down to their level or any other level later,” Turner said.

If Northland Prep is to succeed, it is expected that players both young and old will need to mesh together to create a formidable unit. Senior defensive specialist Bella Berardi showed on Wednesday that her skill and energy are pivotal to the Spartans’ back line. Freshman blocker Mackenzi Parkinson and setter Makenna Murphy are also sure to see improvement as the two become regulars in the Spartans’ starting lineup. Sophomore Karlie Zeglin also appears to have promising potential. The second year player recorded four kills on 28 attack attempts -- the second most attempts on the team behind Wildblood-Crawford.

The Spartans have talent, but how much they achieve will depend on how well the young guard meshes as the season progresses.

“A lot of it is them taking leadership roles on the court,” Murphy said. “Knowing when to take the big swing, knowing when to put the ball in a safe spot and then just learning how to play together on the court.”

The Spartans (1-1, 0-0 Central) were set to play in an exhibition tournament at Payson High School beginning Friday.

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