

Northwest volleyball set to host tournament

Rick Dunaway, St. Joseph News-Press
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Wherever she coaches, Northwest volleyball mentor Anna Tool likes to have a home tournament.

After last season, when her Bearcats had only six home matches and all of them with the same familiar conference foes, that desire got even stronger.

Tool gets her wish this weekend, when the Bearcat Classic gets under way.

"We're just excited to get this many nonconference matches on our home floor," said Tool, who brought in North Central Conference heavyweights Augustana (S.D.) and South Dakota, along with fellow MIAA member Southwest Baptist and Heartland Conference participants Texas A&M International and Newman (Kan.).

"Texas A&M International and Newman are both in that transition from NAIA to going into NCAA Division II, so there's a little bit more unknowns with them," Tool said. "But Augustana and USD have both been top quality teams, coming out of the North Central Conference and both are on very strong starts."

South Dakota finished the last week 9-0 and Augustana 6-2, while Newman and Texas A&M International have yet to notch a victory.

Tool said that it is easier to get teams from different geographical areas, such as Texas A&M International, to attend tournaments.

"It's harder to get diversity with just single nonconference games," Tool said.

Northwest plays South Dakota at 1 p.m. Friday, and follows with a 7 p.m. match against Texas A&M International. The Bearcats return on Saturday with 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. matches against Augustana and Newman, respectively.

Baby steps

Tool's team didn't fare any better in the win-loss column over the weekend in Austin, Texas, than it did the opening weekend at Nebraska-Kearney. Still, Tool sees improvement in her young squad.

"It was a stronger 2-2, because we were aggressive more consistently throughout the weekend, and we felt like we increased our level of play another notch."

The Bearcats defeated Arkansas-Monticello 3-0 and Southeastern Oklahoma 3-0 in the St. Edwards Classic, but lost 3-2 to Nova Southeastern (Fla.) and 3-0 to host St. Edwards.

Tool is happy with the team's ball control, and figures its quick-tempo offense is tough to stop, but she sensed in Texas an inability to slam the door once it had a team reeling.

Sophomore Alicia Johnson posted three consecutive double-doubles in earning all-tournament team recognition.

Rash decision

The women's soccer team had an unexpected open date on Sunday, when Wayne (Neb.) State postponed its match with the Bearcats and canceled its scheduled Saturday neutral-site match at Northwest against St. Cloud State.

Coach Tracy Hoza cleared the air on the reason the Wildcats backed out, explaining that a "contagious viral rash" had infected the team, making it inadvisable for Wayne State to make the trip.

The match against Northwest will be made up, but no date has yet been set.

O'Brien questionable

Northwest's leading women's cross country runner is listed as questionable for Saturday's season-opening meet at home after sustaining an ankle injury in training Monday.

"Anna O'Brien found the one hole I didn't get filled this summer," coach Scott Lorek said.

O'Brien was running on the newly designated Northwest cross country course. Lorek laid out the new 5,000-yard course on the west edge of campus over the summer.

The course saw its first competition last week at a meet hosted by Maryville High School meet, and will be in the spotlight Saturday when Northwest hosts the Bearcat/Spoofhound Invitational.

"It's a small meet, but it will be good for us, because at this point, we just need to have a meet and a good evaluation tool for our team," Lorek said.

Opener for men, too

The meet will serve as the official season opener for the men's cross country team as well. Last Saturday, alumnus Matt Pohren won the Northwest Alumni Meet, while Ben Chappell finished second, leading all current team members.

The Bearcat/Spoofhound Invitation begins with 9 a.m. high school division races. The university division races start at 10 a.m.

'Cats improve in second tournament

Marcus Meade, Northwest Missourian
Sept. 6, 2007

The record was the same. The placing was the same.

But for the Northwest volleyball team, the play was different. The play was better.

"We were more aggressive, and we were smarter," coach Anna Tool said about the team's 2-2 performance. "So, just our decision making improved a lot."

The 'Cats began their weekend with a win over Arkansas-Monticello 3-0, and showed their most consistent play so far this season. They tallied only nine hitting errors, a season-low, and had a 33.3 percent hitting percentage.

Outside hitter Rachel Nisi registered 13 kills with two errors while libero Paige Spangenberg added 11 digs to aid the team's ball control.

"If we're going to be successful, we have to have it (ball control)," Spangenberg said. "And when we do have ball control, everything else is a lot better."

The second match against Nova Southeastern (Fla.) would prove to be the most back-and-forth of the season. After winning the first two games, the 'Cats dropped the next three to lose the match.

After building a 25-20 lead and needing only five points to win the second match, the 'Cats were outscored 13-6 in losing game four 33-31.

"It's frustrating, but that's kind of a part of being a young team like we are," Spangenberg said. "It's just one of those things we'll overcome as we get more comfortable with each other."

The 'Cats appeared a little less aggressive at the net after the first two games of match two, Tool said. But she thinks experience will play a role in helping her young team close out games.

After a tough second match, the 'Cats bounced back with a 3-0 trouncing of Southwest Oklahoma. Johnson led the team with 11 kills and was eventually named to the all-tournament squad.

The 'Cats dropped the final match of the tournament 3-0 to St. Edwards, but kept every game close, losing by scores of 30-28, 30-27 and 30-26.

The team will continue tournament play when they host the Bearcat Classic this weekend.

"It's going to be a quality tournament," Tool said. "(South Dakota's) on a hot streak. I think they're like 9-0...Augustana's cracked the top 20...so I mean, it's going to be a challenge."

Tournament play begins at 9 a.m., Friday, in Bearcat Arena. The 'Cats take the court at 1 p.m. against South Dakota.

Bearcats split on classic's second day

Sam Robinson, Northwest Missourian

Sept. 6, 2007

A little over an hour after going five games with a ranked opponent, the Northwest volleyball team made quick work of a winless one to close out the Bearcat Classic Saturday night.

Northwest (6-6) lost to No. 17 Augustana (S.D.), 3-2, in the afternoon contest but salvaged a tournament split with a 3-0 win over Newman (Kan.) in the nightcap.

Coach Anna Tool didn't think the win over Newman was her team's finest hour, but was impressed with the team's resolve in playing through fatigue.

"We needed to step out on the floor and take care of this match in three and just finish the tournament with a win," Tool said. "We weren't quite as sharp. Granted we had a tough five-game match and that match didn't start until three. So we were off the court for only a short break before stepping on it again but I did feel like we persevered and pushed through so we could finish it in three."

The 'Cats breezed through games one and two over the Jets, winning 30-23 and 30-20. Game three proved to be a bit more difficult as Newman, who spent the majority of the first two games trailing by several points, battled Northwest early, forging a 9-9 tie.

Northwest quickly stopped giving the underdog false hope and went on an 11-3 run to take a 20-12 lead. Though the Jets would mount a late charge to cut the lead to one, an error on game point gave the match to the 'Cats.

Sophomore Alicia Johnson led the offense with 18 kills while Paige Spangenberg's 19 digs paced the defensive effort.

In the tournament's afternoon session, Northwest and Augustana faced off in a near two-hour duel that saw the Vikings nip the 'Cats in five games.

After winning games two and three, Northwest found itself on the verge of its biggest win of the season with a 30-29 lead in game four. But the resilient Vikings lived up to their ranking, scoring three straight points to win 32-30. Augustana took game five, 15-11.

Freshman setter Katie Swenson notched 66 assists while Sara Falcone had a .324 shooting percentage.

Johnson, who tallied a career-high 25 kills, was a bit frustrated her team couldn't close out the ranked opponent, but also said it serves as a building block for the season.

"We definitely could've taken them easily in any of the games," she said. "I think we did a great job playing with them and it gives us a positive outlook for the future and keeps us optimistic."

Northwest finished the weekend at 2-2 and opens conference play Wednesday against Southwest Baptist.

'Cats cruise in first home win

Northwest volleyball go 1-0 during Bearcat Classic

Marcus Meade, Northwest Missourian
Sept. 6, 2007

The 'Cats steam rolled Texas A&M International 3-0 during their second match Friday.

The win is the first home victory for the 'Cats after losing 3-1 to South Dakota.

"Our serving was aggressive so they had trouble with ball control," Northwest coach Anna Tool said. "...Hopefully, we're starting a (winning) streak."

The 'Cats set the tempo early with a 30-10 blowout win in game one. An aggressive attitude and superior ball control allowed outside hitters Alicia Johnson, Rachel Nisi and Sara Falcone to notch 12 kills each with only five hitting errors between them.

Their play wasn't as consistent against South Dakota, a team that put a better block on the 'Cats' hitters, Tool said.

"We need to cut down on our errors and play our game, and we can beat anybody in this tournament," Johnson said. "We need to play with a relaxed aggressiveness."

The 'Cats return to action at 3 p.m., Saturday, against Augustana (S.D.). Augustana is 8-2 and 2-0 in the Bearcat Classic.

Bearcats begin youth movement

Marcus Meade, Northwest Missourian
Sept. 6, 2007

The 2007 Northwest volleyball team will have a youthful look this year as coach Anna Tool fields a team of 10 players, half of which are freshmen.

This year's squad includes three new transfers, all of whom are freshmen or sophomores.

"We're looking for that consistent leadership from either a freshman or a sophomore right now," Tool said.

Graduation and the decision by some players to leave, caused the teams new look. The 'Cats have lost their top four scorers from last season.

To solve this problem, Tool brought in outside hitter Alicia Johnson from the University of Iowa.

"At the outside hitting position we've actually added some depth..." Tool said. "Alicia Johnson will be our go to player on offense."

Johnson, a 5-foot-9-inch sophomore from Tripoli, Iowa, isn't shying away from that burden either, but said she's ready for the pressure.

After two tournaments, Johnson is second on the team with 88 kills, but admitted that she needs to improve her hitting efficiency.

Hitting efficiency was one of the key factors in the 'Cats 2-2 performance in the Nebraska-Kearney Volleyball Classic. In their two wins, the 'Cats posted a combined 42 attack errors. In their two losses they had 67.

Hitting improved during the St. Edwards Volleyball Classic last weekend. The 'Cats notched 75 hitting errors in all of their matches, but still managed a 2-2 record over those four games.

The team's inability to remain consistent at all times could be contributed to inexperience, Tool said.

The 'Cats are inexperienced, but setter Katie Swenson thinks the youth movement will pay off.

"I think it does help that we're all around the same age," Swenson said. "We'll see though. I think it'll be good."

Along with the youth movement comes competition for playing time.

"My main goal with recruiting was to add depth and create competition," Tool said. "You have to have depth to succeed."

Success will be an uphill battle. The 'Cats face a schedule full of teams that ended last season ranked in the Top 25, including Truman State, Washburn and Nebraska-Omaha, according to

Ncaasports.com.

Northwest upsets Nebraska-Omaha

Marcus Meade, Northwest Missourian
Sept. 20, 2007

Upset or knocked off.

Either way it's said the words sound sweet to the Bearcat volleyball team after defeating No. 18 Nebraska-Omaha 3-1, Wednesday.

"I'm so excited," Nicole Wojtowicz said. "Games like tonight are fun."

Wojtowicz, a defensive specialist all year, was appointed to the position of libero early Wednesday-switching positions with Paige Spangenberg.

The switch was made to give Wojtowicz a chance to use her passing abilities more often, Northwest coach Anna Tool said.

Switching liberos wasn't the only change made before the game. The 'Cats' change in energy level gave the team its win, Tool said.

"We had a talk before the game about being more enthusiastic out there," Wojtowicz said.

After that talk, outside hitters Sara Falcone and Alicia Johnson struck 16 and 13 kills respectively, and setter Katie Swenson added 47 set assists.

Though they won in four games, Northwest struggled putting the match away in the game four.

"There was a time even in game four where they started to come back," Wojtowicz said. "I had this feeling inside like we weren't going to lose."

Northwest will play No. 5 Central Missouri in the last game of their home stand at 5 p.m., Saturday.

Records set in victory over Western

Marcus Meade, Northwest Missourian
Sept. 27, 2007

The Northwest volleyball team served their way into the record books during their 3-0 victory over Missouri Western, Tuesday.

The 'Cats crushed 18 aces-a Northwest record for a three-game match.

"Serving was crucial especially the third game, especially for Sara Falcone. They couldn't stop her serve," outside hitter Rachel Nisi said after serving three of the 18 aces.

A few Northwest players also enjoyed rekindling old rivalries, Nisi said. Both teams had players from the Omaha area who had played each other before.

"We played with a lot of them so we know them," Nisi said. "That makes the game more intense."

Winning this match of rivals meant spreading the ball around, Northwest coach Anna Tool said. Five players had more than five kills.

"We had a really balanced attack," Tool said. "They had a tough time keying in on one hitter."

Setter Katie Swenson aided the balanced attack with 40 set assists. Alicia Johnson had 12 kills while Amber Ryan and Nisi registered nine kills apiece.

The win over Missouri Western comes after a long stretch against ranked opponents that ended in a 3-4 record. All four losses were against top ten teams.

"I think those ranked teams really helped us, especially in the first two games against Western," Tool said.

Despite a schedule full of ranked opponents, the 'Cats, at 10-10, are only four games away from matching their win total from last season.

"I think that we could be great," Nisi said. "And since we're all so young, we have a lot of potential."

Though they had a record setting night, the 'Cats totaled 11 serving errors.

"I can handle the 11 errors if we get 18 aces," Tool said.

Northwest's next match comes against South Dakota at 7 p.m., tonight. The 'Cats lost to South Dakota 3-1 during the Bearcat Classic.

Hornets up first in MIAA tournament

Marcus Meade, Northwest Missourian
Nov. 1, 2007

As the MIAA tournament approaches, the Northwest volleyball team is happy with the task ahead of them.

The Bearcats face No. 17 Emporia State in the opening round - a match that Tool thinks could really help her squad.

"We have the opportunity to put ourselves higher in the regional rankings," Tool said. "Beating them could give us the chance to move up."

Right now, the 'Cats sit 10th in the South Central Region. The top eight teams from each region advance to the NCAA tournament. Luckily for the 'Cats, many of the teams they may face in the MIAA tournament are ahead of them in the region, which gives them time to impress the regional voters if they play well in the conference tournament.

Their first opponent, Emporia, defeated Northwest in a five game match on Oct. 9. Each game was close with a total of 10 lead changes throughout.

"We know we'll be right there with them," libero Paige Spangenberg said. "It should be a good game."

When looking at the upcoming match up, Tool noticed similarities between her team and Emporia.

"They have one older middle and one freshman middle just like us, and we play similar styles of play," Tool said.

While Emporia's style of play is similar, the Hornets have had more success with it this season posting a 23-6 record overall and a 9-2 mark in the MIAA.

In fact, the MIAA posts five of the top 18 teams in the country, but that doesn't bother Tool.

"It's what I knew was going to happen, and it's what I wanted," Tool said. "I think we're right on the bubble of that."

Despite Tool's optimism, Northwest hasn't fared well against ranked conference opponents this year, going 0-8 against them this season.

The 'Cats play Emporia on Nov. 6 in Emporia, Kan.

NW volleyball adds to depth chart with three recruits

Maryville Daily Forum

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The Northwest Missouri State volleyball coach Anna Tool announced the signing of three players for the 2008 season.

Minka Foster, Alex Hanna and Brit Bahr will all wear Bearcat green next season and provide depth to a young roster.

Foster, a native of Suffolk, Va., attends Nansemond-Suffolk Academy where they participated in the state championship this fall. A three-time all-state selection, Foster won Tidewater Conference Player of the Year her junior season. Foster has also participated in basketball, soccer and track.

"Minka is a very dynamic outside hitter with a big jump," said Tool. "She will push for time at the outside hitting positions and add much needed depth to that position."

Hanna attends Red Oak High School located in Red Oak, Iowa. Like Foster, Hanna is also a three-time all-state selection and has played for the Nebraska Elite volleyball club the past four summers. Hanna topped the 1,000 career kills mark this past fall and was a unanimous first-team All-Conference selection her junior and senior season.

"Alex has the potential to compete as either a middle or outside hitter at the college level," said Tool. "She hits a heavy ball and is expected to challenge for court time as a freshman."

The final signee, Brit Bahr, comes from Lenexa, Kan. and attends Shawnee Mission West High School. A three-year letterwinner, Bahr was an all-state honorable mention selection in 2007 and an all-league selection her junior and senior seasons. Bahr is also a four-year letterwinner in swimming and basketball and has won six state swimming medals.

"Brit has always played middle but will transition to the right side for us," said Tool. "She will most likely redshirt her first year to gain experience as a right side. She will add depth to our roster and has a very strong work ethic."

License to kill

Outside hitter rekindles lost love for volleyball

Marcus Meade, Northwest Missourian

Oct. 11, 2007

When Alicia Johnson steps on the volleyball court, she's hard to miss. As Northwest coach Anna Tool said she's the blondest blond in the room.

Platinum blond hair sits in a mess atop her head like an explosion of light. Her equally light smile leaves her, only for a moment, as she skies toward a ball before smashing it ferociously at an opponent. Even before reaching the ground, the switch flips, and the smile is back, showing a love for volleyball that has been blooming for over a decade.

That love got her where she is today. It kept her in the gym. It kept her in the weight room. And it brought her to Northwest after the roughest period in her athletic career.

The tag-along

For Johnson, a 19-year-old sophomore, the road to Northwest began in the gyms of northeastern Iowa in the shadows of her older sisters-Carrie and Heather.

"She was always sort of a tag-along," Carrie said. "It's been really great to see her become such a great volleyball player after being so annoying really."

Alicia's tag along nature brought her to high school volleyball three years early when she became the manager of Carrie's state championship team in sixth grade, former Tripoli High School coach Teresa Kehe said.

Kehe watched Alicia grow up and is still a close friend.

"She's one of those kids who's very competitive and always trying to do her best," Kehe said. "When she would go to club tournaments with her sisters, she always wanted to mix it up and pepper with the others."

As she got older, Alicia began to walk out of her sisters' shadows and make a name for herself, winning three state championships in a row during her sophomore, junior and senior seasons.

Accolades and recruiters came rolling in. Despite playing at a class 1A school, Alicia was named the Iowa High School Gatorade Player of the Year twice, and received attention from recruiters as early as her sophomore year.

"I guess it all became real when we'd be at the club tournaments, in the nationals, and you'd see all these college scouts there," Alicia said. "That's when it kind of became real when it's like 'They might be watching me.'"

After a remarkable high school career, Alicia faced a decision.

Unhappy Hawkeye

Alicia ended her high school with three state titles, numerous awards and a number of scholarship offers from Division 1 and Division 2 schools.

She chose the University of Iowa because of its proximity to Tripoli, and the challenge it posed, Kehe said.

At her coach's request, Alicia graduated a semester early, at age 17, to participate in spring practice.

"I graduated high school Jan. 12 and started there the 17th," Alicia said. "Tripoli, Iowa to the University of Iowa is completely different, and then to do it in five days is a little bit crazy."

The experience was at times overwhelming, but also fun, Alicia said. The head start also gave her a chance to learn the college volleyball game quickly and make a contribution in the fall.

Alicia played in all but one of the Hawkeyes' matches in 2006. She tallied 98 kills and 147 digs, which ranked sixth and fifth on the team, respectively.

But something was wrong.

"I just got to a point where I wasn't enjoying volleyball anymore," Alicia said. "I loved my teammates, so that wasn't it. It was just the overall atmosphere; it was just making me not enjoy volleyball anymore. That's when I knew there was a problem because I know I love to play."

Playing at Iowa, though a great opportunity, wasn't the right fit, Alicia said. That uncomfortable fit in addition to an unrelenting schedule and differences with the coaching staff caused Alicia to consider transferring.

After making the decision to transfer, Alicia was left with the task of telling her teammates.

"The hardest part of leaving was sitting in the locker room and telling my teammates that I was leaving," Alicia said. "I was trying so hard not to cry."

"Looking over at my teammates that I played volleyball with since I was 14 and telling them that I was leaving them, that sucked because they were in tears."

Alicia shed tears of her own over leaving her teammates behind, but through her sister Carrie, who played volleyball at Northwest, she's found a new home.

A New Beginning

A rebuilding movement awaited Alicia when she picked Northwest over other Division 1 schools like Butler University and the University of South Florida and Division 2 schools like Washburn.

She arrived in the spring of 2007 to once again begin practicing early with a new team.

"I get along really well with all of them," Alicia said of her new teammates, including Paige Spangenberg, the team's libero and Alicia's roommate.

One aspect that Alicia is enjoying is Northwest's family atmosphere, something that was a little lacking at Iowa, she said.

Alicia's high-comfort level and competitive nature have translated to big numbers so far. She leads the team in kills with 377, aces with 63 and is second in digs to Spangenberg with 294.

"I think she has huge potential to be one of the statistical leaders coming out of Northwest," Northwest coach Anna Tool said.

Tool was also a big part in Alicia's decision to come to Northwest.

"I respect her so much," Alicia said. "I think she knows what she's doing, and she understands what her players are feeling and what's going on with her players."

Because of Tool and a new atmosphere, Alicia has landed in a comfortable surrounding and regained her love for volleyball.

"Have I ever regretted my decision to leave Iowa?" Johnson said with a smile. "Never."