

2012 VOLLEYBALL SEASON OVERVIEW



Altavista junior Sydney Morris spikes into a Brookville block in last week's loss. Morris is one of the area's top returning hitters along with Nelson County's Emily Stotmeister, LCA's Jen Garrett and Morgan Horne, E.C. Glass' Sarah Thomas, Brookville's Kaily Weiss and Jefferson Forest's Taylor Tibbs.

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Glass, Altavista, LCA among favorites

Brookville, Nelson County, VES set to challenge in Seminole, Dogwood, BRC races, respectively

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Area high school gyms have been echoing with the sounds of volleyballs hitting the hardwood and girls cheering on their teammates since the season tipped off last week.

Here's a glance at some of the teams and players to watch in the Seminole, Dogwood, Blue Ridge District, Blue Ridge Conference and VACA this fall:

Seminole District

After losing a tie-breaker to Rustburg for the regular-season title, beating the Red Devils in the Seminole District tournament final and losing to them in the Region III championship, **E.C. Glass** could be the outright favorite this year.

In its opener last week, the Hilltoppefs swept returning VIS Division I state runner-up Liberty Christian Academy, the team it lost to and Rustburg beat in non-district contests that served as the tie-breaker last season.

Glass features five seniors who played significant roles on the team that lost to eventual champion Cave Spring in the Group AA quarterfinals — third-year starting setter Paige Riley, middle hitter Sarah Thomas, outside hitters **Cristina Good** and Katherine George and third-year libero Ali Johnson.

"This is our senior year [and] I'm excited to see how it will go," Riley said. "We've been working really hard for the past eight months. All of our hitters are really strong this year. As long as we're running our system ... and we get a pretty decent pass, we should get it down most every time."

Junior middle hitter **Kelsey Plankeel** is also back, complementing Thomas, who is versatile enough to play anywhere on the court.

"She's improved a whole lot and we look for some big things from her," coach David Cardwell said.

Hitting-wise, the Hilltoppers don't have a lot of height, but they make up for it in other ways.

"Katherine's not a real tall outside hitter, just like **Cristina's** not, but both of them rely on their quickness and shot selection and we're pretty good at that," Cardwell said. "We're pretty good at finding the gaps in the block and hitting around blocks."

He said Cave Spring's quickness in its defensive schemes and on the blocks took Glass out of last year's state quarterfinal match.

"We've worked on speeding the offense up a little bit, keeping the sets down and trying to find the holes in the defense," Cardwell said. "We're pretty balanced and we try to mix it up. We really don't have a weak hitter out on the floor. I feel like we can mix it up so if a defense tries to shut down one, we'll go somewhere else, or we'll move them somewhere else."

Glass's biggest threat to the district title this year might be **Brookville**, which defeated 2011 Group A, Division 1, runner-up Altavista in four games in last week's opener.

The Bees also boast a strong core of returnees, led by senior right-side hitter Kaily Weiss, who's backed up by sophomore **Kelsey Lester**, as well as five juniors — outside hitters **Jordan Pfau** and Lauren Swan, middle blockers Carsen Baldree and Morgan Bruce, and setter Leah Porter, who's younger sister Taylor is an outside hitter.

"We do have the majority of the team back from last year, and Kaily's our only senior," fourth-year coach Ashley Wilson said.

"They came on strong at the end of the year last year and I look for them to be very competitive this year," Cardwell added.

Jefferson Forest underwent a rebuilding year last fall, going 8-16 and finishing fifth in the district race. But it returns an experienced squad that is ready to challenge for the title, as it did in 2010.

"We've got a great balance this year," coach Steve Mill's said, noting he has six seniors and four juniors back, complemented by four sophomores and two freshmen. "We've got some really good 10th graders and a heckuva ninth grader, Jessica Pascadlo, a middle hitter. She's going to be a good one."

The Cavaliers are running a 6-2 offense

this year with senior Jasmine Callahan and sophomore Kalya Goumas serving as setters. Callahan also hits from the right side along with Ryan Martin.

"We've got a 10-player rotation right now," Mills said. "We're not used to using that many [but] we're able to put our top hitters and blockers on the front row and stronger defenders on the back."

Senior Taylor Tibbs returns as a much-improved outside hitter.

"She's hitting the ball real, real well and blocking like crazy so far," Mills said.

Hollin Wirt also is back for her senior season at libero.

Rustburg graduated three-time Seminole District Michelle Heath, now playing at William & Mary, and will be without one of its most experienced players, setter Brie Miller (sprained ankle), for the season's first three weeks.

The Red Devils will rely on senior third-year starting outside hitter Skyler Wood and senior middle hitter Chenoa Blodgett, who shifts over from the right side. However, with Miller out, Blodgett has had to assume the setting duties for the first part of the season.

"Hopefully, by the time we get into district play, we'll have all of our players back and healthy," coach Kristen Hardie said.

Heritage returns coach Kelly Bryant, who had planned to step down after last season, but few players with varsity experience. The Pioneers are young and athletic, with newcomers Morgan Pannell and Chelsea Sadler stepping up at the middle and outside hitter positions. But they are inconsistent on offense so far, with losses to Timberlake Christian and Staunton River.

Senior outside hitter Katie Wilson is Heritage's strongest hitter and biggest offensive threat, Bryant said.

Defensively, the Pioneers have promise, with libero Jasmine Brogdon coming up with 25 digs against the Tornadoes and the front line loaded.

"I have a huge block," Bryant said. "I've got four girls who are great blockers. We've just got to learn timing and learn to stay out of the net."

Amherst and **Liberty** both have new coaches, Jennifer Hall and David Peirce, respectively.

Hall, who came over from Staunton River, has a solid crop of seniors to work with, even after the Lancers graduated standout Nia Chiles.

Junior setter Megan Taylor returns to run the offense.

"She's doing a very nice job," Hall said.

"We move the ball around a lot and have the potential to attack from any position, including the back row."

Cassie Maddox anchors the defense as a senior libero.

"We're showing daily we're making improvements in our passing game and I feel that's going to be a great strength of ours," Hall said.

The Lancers open their season Saturday in a tournament at Monticello.

The Minettes are trying to regroup from an 0-19 season under new direction from Peirce, who coached for 16 seasons in western Massachusetts.

"We're trying to build it from the ground up," he said. "We only have two seniors and a lot of young talent. We're struggling to bring it together, but when they do, I think they're going to be very competitive."

Liberty's two seniors are outside hitter Cassidy Hensley and right-side hitter Kelsey Dooley. Junior Audrey McCombs has shown resilience at the setter position and junior Oksana Kittrell covers the back row at libero.

Peirce and the Minettes have set a reasonable goal to try to finish above .500.

"They thought it would be reasonable to try to win more games than they lose this year," Peirce said. "When you lose a lot, it stays with you. It's very hard to shake. Honestly, you're so used to losing, you don't know how to win."

"I just want to have the girls working as a unit, working together," he added. "I want them to understand what it means to be a part of a team, understand that it takes time to build a program."

The Minettes open play tonight at Staunton River.

Dogwood District

As has become a tradition over the past decade or more, **Altavista** and **Nelson County** again will be battling it out in the Dogwood this season.

The Colonels return nine of 12 players

from last year's state runner-up squad, including junior outside hitter Sydney Morris, who succeeds Rustburg's Heath and Nelson's Ashley Wells as one of the area's most athletic and powerful spikers.

She has an excellent setter to work with in Allison Mabry, and the sisters pair of Ryan and Sarah Hedgpeth working on the back and front rows, respectively.

"We are not a rebuilding team," said coach Debra Spencer, who led the Colonels to their lone state title in 2002. "We lost some players and we do have kids playing in new roles, but we've got a lot of familiar faces in the same spots. Our expectations are high."

"Our kids work hard, they play hard, they want to be successful," she added. "We have a lot of pieces that will allow us to do that. We just have to put it out on the court and improve with every game."

Vicki Crawford, in her 31st season at the helm, guided the Governors to their first Group A, Division 1, title in 2010. She has Nelson off to a 3-1 start after beating Fauquier County, Charlottesville and Dominion in a tournament last Saturday, losing only to Waynesboro.

Emily Stotmeister returns for her senior at outside hitter, replacing Wells, while senior Fallon Viar shifts over to middle blocker. Alexis Murphy, cousin of former middle hitter Jasmine Murphy, is a junior outside hitter up from JV.

"This team, I feel like we'll always have an attack in the front row," Crawford said. "That's pretty exciting for me. Emily's probably leading us right now, but people are going to be surprised when they see Alexis [who] has a lot of power. She's going to be a really nice asset to our team."

Ebony Crawford, cousin of former libero Brittany Crawford, is battling Savannah McGarry, Maria's younger sister, for the other middle blocker position while Caitlyn Saunders and Kaitlin Giles are platooning at right-side hitter.

They will finish assists from junior setter Lydia Fitzgerald, who returns to run the offense. Kayla Boone, a defensive specialist, is complemented by liberos Kelsey DeSibour and Bri Clarkson.

"I have 12 players, which is the biggest team I've had in a long time, but I think everybody can contribute in some way," Crawford said.

At **Appomattox**, Nicole Kane, who graduated from the school in 2006 and Liberty University in 2010, takes over after coaching the middle school team at Timberlake, where her father, Barry, is the varsity coach.

"There's a lot of talent with this group and they work very well as a team," she said, noting she is expecting big things from sophomore middle hitter Keyla Jones and junior setter Jenna Hamlett, a very versatile player.

Sunshine Martin returns to coach **William Campbell** for the first time since 2004, after taking an eight-year maternity leave from the sport. The Generals are still grappling with the loss of one of their top hitters, junior Shania Neighbors, who was seriously injured in a car crash right before practices started.

"The team's trying to rally around it," Martin said. "With that, we're having to learn some new rotations and we're trying to find a player who can shift into Shania's spot. The good thing is we're young and we can move people around and the girls are really flexible and they work hard wherever you put them."

Senior Mary Toms shifts from defensive specialist to the setter position with sophomore outside hitter Kelsie Sligh and middle blocker Kendall Haga two of her go-to targets.

The Generals lost their first three matches to Brookville, Randolph-Henry and Rustburg, but Martin isn't discouraged.

"We lost to Brookville in three games [but] we played with them," she said. "They didn't blow past us and we saw some things that have improved. We're making baby steps, but we're getting there."

Blue Ridge District

Staunton River finished third out of six teams in the district last year, and 11th-year coach Rich Northrup expects to repeat at that position this fall, behind Lord Botetourt and Northside.

The Golden Eagles return four senior third-year starters from a team that went 11-13, losing to Brookville in the first round of regionals. That includes Brianna Holdren, a first-team all-Blue Ridge player last year who hopes to eclipse former Staunton River player Caitlin Falls' state record of 232 consecutive serves without an error, and senior libero Jill Ferguson. Junior middle hitter Whitney Cawley is another hitting threat along with right-side hitter Addie Tuck.

Blue Ridge Conference

As usual, the BRC title runs through **LCA**, the defending champion that lost to Madeira in the VISVA Division I title match last year.

The Bulldogs are loaded with some of the area's most prolific spikers, senior outside hitters Jen Garrett and Morgan Horne and middle hitter Amanda Barrick, who combined for 32 kills in a sweep of Monticello.

Madi Clarke has moved from defensive specialist to libero, replacing Mary Grace Falls, while Rachel Morris has shifted from middle blocker to setter, with her younger sister Hannah, a freshman, serving as the other middle blocker.

"She's a very quick young lady," coach Bonita Roberts said of Rachel Morris, who's 5-foot-11. "She gets up well and she's a very good blocker on the right side," where Lauren Bunnell starts.

LCA (3-1) hosts Hidden Valley tonight before playing in the Monticello Invitational on Saturday.

Virginia Episcopal School is led by former **Holy Cross** coach Mark Haskew, who inherits plenty of talent, with six seniors on his 11-player squad. That's one more than he left behind with the Gaels.

The Bishops' top players are senior outside hitter Jenna Pierce, senior setter Christina Dietz, senior libero Alex Rapadas and sophomore outside hitter Katlyn Layman, who has a great topspin jump serve.

"We're looking to get into the state playoffs, and, barring injuries, we should have a very good shot of being there," Haskew said, noting they are also looking to win this weekend's fifth-annual VES Friendship Tournament with New Covenant, Timberlake Christian and Temple Christian, for the first time.

"We're working very well together, passing well, hitting well," he said. "We're trying to refine our offense and play very aggressive defense [with more] scrappiness in digging. I give them a lot of freedom to swing away on offense and just have fun with it."

VACA

Temple Christian coach Danielle Byrd has worked with the freshmen on her team since they were sixth-graders and holds them to a high standard.

"We will be extremely strong this year," she said, noting the Crusaders finished fourth in last year's state tournament. "It's a young team [but] we have very high expectations."

While she starts an eighth-grader, Adriana Eagle, at middle hitter, and two of her top players are junior outside hitters Kelsey Bryant and Casey Tomlin, she speaks highly of her three freshmen, libero Stephanie Carroll, setter Stephanie Hogan and middle hitter Sallie Robertson.

"Sallie Robertson and Kelsey Bryant are my two strongest hitters on the team and Sallie is one of my stronger blockers," she said. "I think we will definitely get back to the state tournament and come up better."

Since winning the National Association of Christian Athletics tournament in 2009, **New Covenant** has stayed in the upper echelon of the VACA and coach Tove Phipps expects that to continue this season, with six of her nine players back from last year.

"The players have matured and started to become more powerful and aggressive, which is fun to watch," she said.

The Gryphons showed toughness in rallying from two games down to beat Holy Cross in their opener on Friday. They get their first VACA test tonight against Timberlake before playing VES in Friday's tournament opener.

Laura Williamson is the team's only senior and one of its more powerful hitters with junior middle hitter Sydney Rucker showcasing increased hitting power and improved serving, going on an 11-0 run to open the third game against Holy Cross. Katie Grace Mayberry, a junior, is the team's third captain at setter.

"As a returning setter, she is definitely one of the biggest floor leaders on the court, directing the team," Phipps said.

Timberlake Christian graduated four of six starters from a team that went 14-10, returning only senior outside hitter Lauren Good and junior Addison Goodman, who has made a major move from starting setter to outside hitter this year. Ashlyn Whitt, an eighth-grader, takes over at setter with outside hitter Darian Finnelly and senior middle hitter Anna Tharpe two of her other targets.

"We have been expected to win our conference every year for the last four years," coach Barry Kane said. "This is the first year we're not expected to win, but I can see desire in these girls' hearts. Last year was the first time we did not make the [VIS Division III state's] final eight. We were ranked ninth. That's a goal for this year is to get back there."