

Preview

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dox and they're playing their best ball right now. When you're playing teams like that, you have to be prepared for anything."

Aberdeen Central

If O'Gorman is the poster child for offense in this year's state tournament, the Golden Eagles are the poster child for defense.

"Our focus is on defense most of the time," said Golden Eagles head coach Dennis Northrup. "We might not take a big swing because we are setting ourselves up for a better opportunity."

Kendall McDaniel (289 digs) and Brianna Kusler (252 digs, 46 blocks) lead the defense. Maddie Goetz (176 digs) and Lauren Schumacher (159 digs) have also posted big back row numbers. Megan Kingsriter (59 blocks) and Paiton Burchard (43 blocks) have top numbers at the net.

Goetz has 635 assists on the season, as well as 49 kills, to spark the offensive attack.

"Maddie is good at seeing the floor. She really makes good decisions," Northrup said. "She's probably one of the better all-around players. You might see her in our serve-receive and hitting this weekend."

Kusler has a team-best 320 kills and 51 ace serves. Kingsriter (33 kills, 29 aces), Burchard (118 kills), Goetz (44 ace serves) and McDaniel (34 ace serves) have also been weapons.

The Golden Eagles run a 5-1, but may flash some variations.

"We try to get a few little tricks in there," Northrup said. "We like to keep opponents off balance."

Aberdeen Central opens against Roosevelt, a program that has played for a state title in four consecutive seasons, winning in 2012.

"They know what is going on," Northrup said of the Rough Riders. "We played them late in September, and they are a much better team now."

For the Golden Eagles to make a tournament run, they need to keep from over-complicating things.

"We need to do the basics better than everyone else," he said. "You can run all the fancy offenses, the jump serves, that you want, but it comes down to execution."

Watertown

The Watertown Arrows my only have two seniors on their state tournament roster, but that doesn't mean that the third seed lacks experience.

"We have a lot of juniors that saw playing time last year," said Watertown head coach Kim Rohde. "This



P&D FILE PHOTO
Aberdeen Central's Brianna Kusler serves a ball during a match earlier this season. The Golden Eagles take the second seed into the tournament.

group is very talented and athletic."

Defense has been a mainstay for the Arrows, who boast two passers with over 400 digs on the season: Macy Denzer (414 digs) and Tatum Hemiller (406 digs), the younger sister of University of South Dakota basketball player Tia Hemiller. Danielle Duncan (199 digs), Sydney Dale (195 digs) and McKenzie Werner (164 digs) also have solid passing numbers. Danielle Gottsleben (48 blocks) and Mikaela Stanley (45 blocks) lead the net defense.

"Our defense has been really good," Rohde said. "They are quick enough to get into defensive position to dig or block."

Dale (708 assists) serves as setter, with Denzer (319 kills), Werner (262 kills) and Gottsleben (166 kills) serving as main weapons.

"Our setter distributes the ball well," Rohde said. "Macy and McKenzie have been the strongest. We also have a middle, Danielle, who has hit well."

Werner (37 aces) and Denzer (31 aces) lead the Arrows' service game. Duncan (25

aces) and Gottsleben (24 aces) also average better than one ace serve a match.

The Arrows face Harrisburg for the third time this season. Watertown swept the regular season matchups, 3-1 on Oct. 4 and 3-0 on Oct. 28.

"(Harrisburg coach) Ronette (Costain) has developed a good team. They have adjusted well to AA," Rohde said. Harrisburg is in its second season in the state's big-school class. "She has put together a very competitive team that we can't take lightly."

As with many things for the Arrows, the keys to success revolve around their defense.

"Our defense has to be the number one thing we rely on. We're going up against some tough teams, and our defense has to help us," Rohde said. "Also, we need to come out intense and focused, and not make mistakes."

Huron

The Tigers were tough to tame in the regular season, winning their final 12 regular season matches and winning 14 of 15 entering the state



P&D FILE PHOTO
Watertown's Danielle Duncan tips over a defender during a match earlier this season. The Arrows earned the third seed and face ESD rival Harrisburg in the opening round.

tournament. Coach Shelly Buddenhagen hopes her squad can ride that momentum throughout the tournament.

While the Tigers' roster sports five seniors, the squad came into 2014 with plenty of holes to fill.

"We had a relatively new team. Nearly everyone who is back is in different positions because we had to replace first-team all-state hitters and a setter," she said.

Among those changes was moving Lexi Eckmann to setter, a move made part-way through the season. When the change was made, Eckmann (583 assists, 149 kills, 44 ace serves, 219 digs) actually led the Tigers in kills.

"This was her first season as a varsity setter," Buddenhagen said of Eckmann. "She stepped in and has gotten better every match."

Seniors Jacey Hupp (248 kills, 341 digs, 26.5 blocks, 31 ace serves) and Sami Zell (261 kills, 46 blocks) have become leaders for the squad, according to Buddenhagen.

"This will be their fourth state tournament, but they had been in supplementary roles," she said of her top two hitters. "This year, Jacy, Sami and Lexi have provided great leadership."

One of the other major changes the Tigers made during the season was taking Bailey Rathjen, who cracked the starting lineup as a back row player, and moving her to an offensive position.

"Bailey started with us late — she missed the first five matches — and she started out at libero," Buddenhagen said of the junior, who has 104 kills, 310 digs and 35 ace serves on the season.

Also for Huron, Sarah Carr has 134 kills, 132 digs and a team-best 45 ace serves. Cenzi Glanzer has 196 digs and 28 ace serves. Cameron Schroeder has 126 digs.

The Tigers beat Stevens, their first round opponent, 3-2 on Oct. 17, and Buddenhagen expects another tough match from the Raiders.

"They are a good team. I expect them to come out with a little added motivation," she said. "They are tall at the net, block well and run an up tempo offense. They do a lot of the things we would like to do."

Huron needs to focus on the moment to give themselves a chance, Buddenhagen said.

"We need to look at things one match at a time, one play at a time," she said. "Our goal right now is to play a good match, leave it all on the court and hopefully be satisfied with the effort."

Stevens

Coach Kylie Voorhees that balance, both in offense and in attitude, have been key to the Raiders' success.

The Raiders had a two-week stretch in which they went 3-5, something she attributes to a lack of confidence.

"There were times throughout the season when we lost because we lost confidence in ourselves," she said. "We made some changes for state, and we feel good about those changes."

One thing that has helped the Raiders rattle off 22 victories has been its balanced attack. Mount Marty College recruit Brooke Bennett (326 digs, 42 ace serves) has a team-high 203 kills, but Cassidy Steele (192 kills, 78 blocks), Taylor Molstad (168 kills, 214 digs, 35 blocks), Kelsey Hendrickson (164 kills, 92 digs, 56 blocks) and Andraya Hawks (116 kills, 58 blocks) are all in the offensive mix. All but Hawks are seniors.

"One of the advantages we have is that we never settled for the first lineup we worked with. We knew the caliber of hitters we had," Voorhees said. "We do not have one big gun, but we have a lot of great hitters."

Sydney Daane (117 digs, 55 ace serves, 65 kills) has had the responsibility of distributing the ball to those weapons.

"I don't give her enough credit sometimes," Voorhees said. "She understands what it takes to run the offense, and she does a good job of disguising what we are doing."

Senior Leslie Carsrud (46 ace serves) has anchored the libero spot for the Raiders, notching a team-best 476 digs. Sydney Bodensteiner (179 digs, 29 ace serves) and Natalya Bracewell (110 digs, 29 ace serves) have also been key contributors in the passing game.

"She has done a nice job, and she is doing a better job of reading hitters," Voorhees said. "She tries to keep our back row in sync."

Voorhees knows the

Raiders have their hands full in trying to turn the tables on Huron, who scored a 3-2 victory just over a month ago.

"They are a good team with very aggressive serves. They have some big guns that mix it up a lot," she said. "It comes down to mentality for our team. If our girls come in with the right mental approach, they can do anything."

Harrisburg

Even though the Harrisburg Tigers are newcomers to the Class AA state tournament, they have been preparing for this moment for years.

"The Big Sioux (Conference) was a big help. In Class A, the teams that come out on top in the Big Sioux usually end up placing first or second," said Harrisburg head coach Ronette Costain. "A big part of it was the kids realizing that volleyball is volleyball. If we work on skills individually in the off-season, then come together in season, we will improve."

Since volleyball switched to the fall, teams from the Big Sioux — which has since merged with the Big 8 to form the Dakota XII Conference — have played for the title in 10 of 12 seasons, including winning the last four titles. Sioux Falls Christian and Dakota Valley, both from the Dakota XII, are considered the favorites to win again this season.

The Tigers also beefed up its schedule in preparation for the move to Class AA in 2013-14.

"Credit (former athletic director) Scott VanDerMillen for getting us playing tough opponents before we made the switch," Costain said. "We have been playing Sioux Falls Lincoln for four years now."

Sophomore Sami Slaughter (236 kills, 85.5 blocks) and senior Haley Bruggeman (229 kills, 27 ace serves, 373 digs) have led the Tiger offense, with junior Brittan Murphy (141 kills, 198 digs, 23 ace serves) and sophomore McKenna Mathiesen (122 kills, 30 blocks) also in the mix.

"Haley has been our leader on and off the court," Costain said of the University of South Dakota track and field recruit.

Freshman Avery Thorson

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P&D FILE PHOTO
The Huron Tigers celebrate a point during a match earlier this season. The fourth-seeded Tigers hope to have plenty to celebrate as the tournament continues.

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