

Young J-Hawks play for 'Mom & Dad'

Written by Tom Fruehling
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The Jefferson volleyball players call their coaches Mom and Dad. Which seems to fit just fine.

Married first-year co-coaches Amy and Will Norton, both 32, are like new parents raising a young family.

There are only two seniors on the 15-girl roster. Three freshmen are starters and all six ninth graders play prominent roles in the rotation.

The team leaders in kills, assists and digs are all in their first or second year on the varsity.

Yet even with a decidedly baby-faced lineup, the J-Hawks have more than held their own this year against arguably some of the best teams in the state.

An 11-13 record hardly reflects their overall consistent play.

“We’ve only lost to one unranked team,” says Will Norton. “The others have all been ranked in the top 15 in their class.”

Moreover, notes Amy, “We’ve pushed a lot of really good teams. Our record may not show it, but I think we’ve proven that we can play with anybody.”

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They'll be tested again Saturday when they host a star-studded 24-team tournament in the Westside Invitational.

No fewer than 15 of the teams are ranked in the top 10 in their class, including top-ranked West Delaware in 4A and West Liberty in 3A.

Class 5A powerhouses in the field include Ankeny Centennial (2), West Des Moines Dowling (3), Kennedy (6), Linn-Mar (7) and Iowa City West (10).

Also in the mix will be Class 4A second-ranked Marion and highly-rated squads from Davenport Assumption, Dike-New Hartford, Grundy Center, Mount Vernon, North Cedar, Solon, Tripoli, Dubuque Wahlert and Waterloo Columbus.

The young J-Hawks say they won't be intimidated, however.

"We're playing really well right now," says junior Lexi Moorer. "I think we'll shock some people."

There's no question that the Jefferson volleyball program is on the rise.

It had reached rock-bottom when, over a two-year stretch in 2011 and 2012, the team lost 64 of 70 matches. But new coach Mary Kay Van Oort quickly turned the team around two years ago.

She brought with her as assistants her husband Doug, a veteran at all levels of coaching, and Amy and Will Norton, who had both spent three years on the staff of highly successful Xavier coach Barb (Brunow) Sullivan.

The J-Hawks went 19-22 and 16-22 in Van Oort's two years and she was named Metro volleyball Coach of the Year in 2013.

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Just a week before this season began, though, the much-loved coach resigned to take on the newly created post as head coach of the Mount Mercy University men's volleyball program that will begin competition a year from now.

Also gone from last year's Jefferson squad are two of its best players, little 5-foot-3 libero Keke Pledge (now at Kirkwood) and 6-foot-3 big hitting all-stater Amanda Ollinger (who transferred to Linn-Mar).

With the Nortons taking over and Doug Van Oort staying on, however, the team hasn't missed a beat. The coaching philosophy is the same.

"We focus on the positive," says Will. "We want the girls to want to play at Jeff."

Adds Amy, "Kids do much better when they're treated with respect and have fun."

And it works.

"It was kind of a shock when Mary Kay left," says Sam Kitterman, one of two experienced seniors along with Abbie Ranschau. "But it's been a pretty easy change. We all get along so well, it's like a family. That's why we call Amy and Will 'Mom and Dad'."

For their part, the husband-and-wife duo credit the two seniors, as well as the stabilizing presence of Doug Van Oort, for a smooth transition.

"You couldn't pick two better leaders than Abbie and Sam," says Will, who along with Amy has taught at Wilson Middle School since both graduated from Mount Mercy in 2005.

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The few veterans are surrounded by youngsters.

Maddie Slagle, a sophomore who started last season, leads the team in kills with freshman Sydney Kloubec.

Ninth-grader Maddy Baxter is far-and-away the leader in assists. Baxter, Slagle and frosh Kaylee Donner have provided most of the defensive digs.

"We're a young team, and we're also kind of small," says Amy. "So we have to play lights-out defensively to keep us in matches.

"But we've got a lot of great kids. And they're working hard. We're getting better, and we're going to knock some people off.

"Jeff is starting to make a name for itself. And with this team, I think the sky's the limit."