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ASHEBORO - Expectations and standards.

Expectations are what you believe a team can accomplish. Standards are the work ethic, teamwork and accountability that some programs demand in order to reach those expectations. Uwharrie Charter Academy volleyball coach Lee Kennell admitted he didn't know what expectations to have when the volleyball season began. But he knew the standards were in place for another successful campaign.

Those standards, which were set years ago, have been instrumental in leading the Eagles to a 22-2 record and a tie for first in the ultra-competitive Piedmont Athletic Conference with a 9-1 league mark.

The Eagles, who are ranked fourth in the 1-A West Region in the latest RPI poll, entered this week with two regular season matches remaining, a home game with Wheatmore and a road tilt at Southwestern Randolph.

Though Kennell said he really didn't know what to expect from his team, he quickly found out the standards for the program were still in place as 30 girls participated in a July trip for a team camp at the College of Charleston.

"The overnight tournaments are invaluable," Kennell said. "Having to room with someone, the long bus trips, those are the reasons we take those. It has all the intangibles you can't get at home."

Along with some very tough competition. During that camp, the team began to bond and Kennell began to put the pieces together as far as rotations and roles for players.

"The last day of that tournament, we played 17 sets against some of the best teams in North Carolina and South Carolina," Kennell said. "We were playing some of the best teams we're going to play all year. I learned a lot about them. They were going to play for each other."

When the season started, the Eagles opened with sweeps of Chatham Charter and North Davidson before embarking on another overnight trip to South Carolina where the Eagles played five matches in two days. UCA advanced to the finals of that tournament before falling to a team they had defeated earlier.

But once again, Kennell learned even more about his team.



*Eagles coach Lee Kennell.
Photo provided.*

"When you play in a good tournament, you're playing a lot of good teams," Kennell said.

"Getting those games in on the front end of the schedule helps again in finding rotations and who is going to play where. And you learn their routines at night. That goes further than anything you can learn on the court."

It was easy to see, Kennell said, that this group realized the importance of keeping the high standards of the volleyball program intact. And it was kept by the student-athletes who policed each other, not just from the coaching staff.

"The one thing we talk about is player accountability," Kennell said. "If the only accountability you have is from the coaches, you will be average at best. It's players holding other players accountable for those standards."

That means great leadership and the Eagles have had great leadership for years.

"You're not going to be great every year, but to be great you have to have that accountability," he said. "Not just from seniors and juniors. If you have sophomores and juniors leading, you know you can be special."

The Eagles earned a key PAC win on Oct. 1 when they defeated Randleman in five games. UCA was swept by the Tigers in the first meeting between the volleyball powers.

Caroline Way, Morgan Lowe, Kayden Faglier, Anna Brewer, Emory Johnson and Sadie Upchurch led the charge.

"The big difference was our mentality going in," Kennell said. "We talked about wanting to take the fight to them. That has to be our game plan every night."

As the regular season winds down, the Eagles, who have played most of the season without Liza Moore, an all-county selection last year, because of an injury, will first compete in the PAC Tournament and then in state 1-A playoffs. UCA is looking to make some noise once postseason play begins. Last year, UCA advanced to the third round.

"When you start from Day 1 you are preparing for that. Every practice, every game. You are preparing to get ready for the playoffs," Kennell said. "That's where playing the teams in our conference and out of our conference can help you. There are some great teams in the 1-A classification and we've played a lot of great teams."