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RANDLEMAN - When the final week of the Piedmont Athletic Conference volleyball season began this week, there were two things that had to happen for the Randleman Tigers to earn an outright regular-season league championship.

First, the Tigers had to win its final league contest against Trinity on Tuesday and then Southwestern Randolph would have to defeat Uwharrie Charter Academy on Oct. 10, the final day of the regular season. The Tigers did their part, getting off to a slow start, but recording a 3-1 win over the Bulldogs at Trinity High School. Then the Tigers

turned into Cougar backers with SWR earning an emotional and thrilling five-set victory over the Eagles Thursday night.

The results left the Tigers with an 11-1 conference record and the Eagles at 10-2. It was the first league championship for a RHS volleyball team since 2010.

"We are really excited," veteran RHS coach Kerry Mitchell said as her team finished the regular season 17-3 overall. "The girls put in a lot of work on and off the court, in the classroom and in other sports. They have put in so much work and it's really exciting to see that everything is paying off, especially for the seniors."

In this final week, UCA had a pair of games remaining with Wheatmore and SWR, while the Tigers had just the one early-week game against Trinity. The Tigers knew it could tie for the conference championship (with both RHS and UCA winning out), finish second (with a loss to THS and UCA winning out) or finish first by themselves with a win and at least one UCA loss. With UCA topping Wheatmore Tuesday, the first step for the Tigers was the match with Trinity. Prior to that battle, Mitchell had to make a key decision.

"One of my oldest coaching mentors and I always debated, do you want the girls to know what's at stake or do you want them to go out and just play like it's any other game?" Mitchell said. "I wanted our girls to know the situation and that they controlled their destiny, their path. We talked about RPI and how that could change and winning a conference championship outright compared to being co-champions. They knew what they were playing for against Trinity. It wasn't to put extra pressure on them, but to let them know they had something to fight for and could control."



Mitchell almost regretted that decision when the Bulldogs came out and grabbed Game 1, 25-15.

"I was thinking just that," Mitchell said with a chuckle when asked if she regretted the decision to emphasize to the players everything that was on the line. "But the girls responded, they understood. They were playing not to lose versus going out aggressively and confidently and doing the things that got us there. A conference champion should be able to handle that extra pressure."

The Tigers did and responded with wins of 25-14, 25-20 and 26-24.

Just like much of the season, the Tigers were led by a group of core players and those who contributed in ways not always seen by casual fans.

Natalie Roach, Kadie Green and Camryn Vickery played outstanding defense, with Vickery setting up a talented front line that included Camden Scott, Hailey Hinshaw, Ava Jones, Mollie Hall and Kaylee Phillips. Others contributed as well.

Now the Tigers couldn't control what happened next. They could only watch as the Cougars, who lost to the Eagles the first time they played, recorded a 25-21, 17-25, 22-25, 25-21, 15-11 win over UCA, clinching the outright championship for the Tigers.

"We had talked earlier in the week about controlling what we can control," said Mitchell, who watched the game from home. "That was before and during the Trinity game. We had to control our effort in executing plays and then what happens, happens. But I'll certainly sleep a little better earning an outright championship rather than a co-championship."

It was a long four-year process for the seniors.

"We have known each other for a long time and knew we had the pieces to build a successful program," Mitchell said. "I would tell them going into their sophomore year, their junior year and now their senior year and this group has taken everything I said to heart. They are highly motivated. And you don't always see that."

After the conference tournament, which begins Monday, the opening round of the state 2-A playoffs will begin Oct. 22, pushed back from Oct. 19 to allow those teams affected by Hurricane Helene to play more games. And for the first time since 2010, the Tigers will enter the state playoffs as regular-season conference champions.