

VOLLEYBALL

At 20-6, Cloquet looks to keep rolling

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Five words — “we’re excited for the playoffs” — shows the excitement and kind of season the Cloquet volleyball team has had thus far. With a gaudy 20-6 record, the Lumberjacks are in rarified air when it comes to Cloquet volleyball.

“We have a group of four seniors — Emerson Rock, Brea Rasmussen, Geneveve Fonoti and Laura Hecht — that all have three or more years of varsity experience,” said longtime coach Heidi Anderson. “We also have a group of hard-working underclassmen.”

That mixture of talent has given fits to opposing teams all season. Over the last seven games, the squad has gone 6-1, including a Monday night victory over Duluth Denfeld. The ‘Jacks beat the Hunters 25-14, 25-9 and 25-13 to take the home victory. And as if to prove their mettle even more, the Cloquet girls downed Hermantown on the road to win the Lake Superior Conference Championship Tuesday.

“We have made it through the grind of the season playing three weekend tournaments in a row and traveling to a string of away games,” Anderson said. “We have some tough section opponents down the stretch and the key is to stay healthy and injury-free. We had probably our strongest performance of the season against Proctor, perhaps followed by our poorest performance of the season against Grand Rapids. It’s now time to regroup and refocus and finish what we started.”

Last Tuesday the Lumberjacks downed a very good Proctor team 3-1, a team that was 15-4 up to that night. Then on Thursday of last week they fell to Grand Rapids 3-0 without Rock, their stalwart setter. However, the ‘Jacks bounced back Monday with an easy and convincing win over Denfeld in a game that saw Ava Carlson pound down 12 kills while Aili Buytaert and Geneveve Fonoti added six kills. Still without Rock, Carly Johnson and Ella Maslowski helped lead the offense with 16 and 12 set assists respectively.

As of Tuesday night, the Lumberjacks were in a fierce fight for playoff seeding with three other schools for the top four slots in Section 7AAA.



Above: Cloquet ninth-grader Ella Maslowski goes to the floor for a dig during Monday night’s volleyball match with Duluth Denfeld in Cloquet. **Right:** Sophomore Blythe Proulx puts a kill past Duluth Denfeld’s Mallorie Schwartz during the Lake Superior Conference match. Cloquet swept Denfeld 3-0. *Dave Harwig / Pine Knot News*

“Our final QRF ranking will depend on how we finish the last regular season game,” said Anderson. “We are close in points with Grand Rapids, Hermantown and North Branch for the No. 1 through No. 4 seeds in Section 7AAA.”

On Tuesday night, the Lumberjacks needed a win to capture the Lake Superior Conference championship, and that is exactly what they got on the road in Hermantown, beating the Hawks 25-21, 25-17, 24-26 and 25-22.

Against Hermantown, the ‘Jacks had four players with double-digit kills. Both Ava Carlson and Blythe Proulx had 13 kills while Geneveve Fonoti and Brea Rasmussen each had 10 kills. Aili Buytaert finished with nine kills. The ‘Jacks also got impressive efforts from Carly Johnson who had 41 set assists and 19 digs, while Quinn Danielson was amazing in the back row with 25 digs.

“Sue Wasbotten runs a strong program at Hermantown, and we have had some big battles over the years,” said Anderson. “To go to their place and have an all-around solid team performance that we did was a great way to end our regular season to get win No. 20 on the road at Hermantown.”

All in all, Anderson is pleased with the season so far and is excited about the upcoming playoffs.

“I’ve been working with these players in various capacities since they were in fourth through sixth grade,” Anderson said. “This season is a culmination of all their efforts over the years. They remind me a lot of the team I coached back in 2013 or 2014 that made it to the section final in terms of work ethic, volleyball IQ, team culture and love of the game. I think we still have our best volleyball ahead of us.”



Cross country ...

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Quinn FierkeLepp has made the biggest jump for the Panthers this season, as he transitioned from junior varsity to being the fourth runner now on varsity.

“Our goal is to improve each race and be ready for a strong performance at sections,” said Polson.

Raptors

The Carlton/Wrenshall Raptors continue to make strides and gain confidence in advance of

the section meet in Cloquet next week.

“We started this year with many new and young faces,” said Raptors coach Erik Holter. “Of the 25 student athletes we have on the current roster, 10 are brand new to the sport. Although the team is made up of many just trying it out for the first time, we’ve had plenty of success that’s come from both raw talent and hard work.”

The good news for the Raptors is their hard work is now starting to pay off.

“Many of our runners have continued to improve as the

season has progressed, with most hitting personal bests in race times and peaking at the right moments,” Holter said. “The girls varsity team has been a real threat this year, earning several placements in the top three at meets.”

At the Polar League Conference Championships, the Raptors girls team took third place overall, but were without one of their top runners.

“Brielle Simula, a seventh-grader from Carlton, is a first-time runner who has quickly blossomed into a top runner for us,” said Holter. Simula placed

sixth in the Class A race in Proctor Tuesday.

He said the girls team should be a favorite to take first or second at sections, which would earn them a berth at the state meet.

As for the boys, they have a split between returning veteran runners and a couple of runners who are younger — eighth- and ninth-graders — who are experiencing their first year in the sport.

“Although they lack experience, they possess a great deal of raw talent and hard-working mentalities that have allowed

them to find themselves earning spots on the boys varsity team,” said Holter.

He pointed to Jack Riley as one of the boys who has a good chance to go to state.

“Riley has placed himself among the elite runners this year through the work he’s put in during the season, but more importantly, the off season leading up to it,” Holder said. “Time will tell for how this team will end up in the rankings, but I have nothing but faith in their abilities, work ethic, and mental toughness, which will get them far, both on and off the course.”