

Cover story: Lady Oilers working hard to continue successful tradition

By Mike Courson

By the numbers, the Central Plains volleyball team has established itself as one of the top programs in all of Kansas. In 2014, the Lady Oilers lost just three games and pulled out a third-place finish in Class 2A. The next year, the girls posted a rare perfect season en route to a state title. Last year, the girls came up just one win shy of another state championship.

Coach Lisa Crites, back for a second season as head coach in Claffin, knows the past is not an indicator of the future. Central Plains has maintained a level of success despite losing four all-state caliber players over the past two seasons, but nothing is guaranteed in the world of high school volleyball.

"It takes a lot of effort, a lot of time, a lot of commitment to maintain a program," she said. "If we dip in any of those areas, it's all over. We don't take any of this for granted. We know it doesn't come easy. The girls know they're not entitled to success."

Senior Taylor Oeser has been a major contributor over the past three years. She said camaraderie is a big piece of the puzzle at Central Plains.

"Our attitude toward each other is huge," she said. "I believe the reason why we have been so successful the past three years is because we love playing with each other and we get along really well on and off the court. I couldn't imagine playing with any other group of girls. It's really cool to be a part of such a great team."

Senior Cassidy Pflughoeft had a small

role on the 2014 squad but developed into a serious player after that, earning all-state honors a year ago. She's ready to step into a leadership role for her final season.

"My main goal as a senior leader is to keep team morale high so we continue to work together - so we can remain competitive throughout the season," she said.

Senior Julie Donecker stepped into a starting role last year. With the absence of Cassidy Crites and Kylee Kasseleman, two all-state players from last season, Donecker's role will continue to grow in 2017.

"We will miss the talent and experience Kylee and Cassidy brought to the team, but we are prepared to work hard this year," Donecker said. "We look forward to this season, and we hope to carry on the tradition of years past. The success Central Plains has had in previous seasons motivates us to want to replicate that."

Two other seniors will see more action this fall. Kylie Lamatsch helped fill in when Chelsey Bieberle went down with a season-ending injury last year. Darian Hubbard saw limited playing time in 2016 but will be an important piece on the floor this year.

As a group, Crites is ready for the new group of seniors to step into its leadership role. "They just have to get the feel of what it means to lead the team," she said. "I know they love volleyball and they love the team so it will all work out."

Everyone agrees that success comes only with hard work. If everyone does her job, another state run is not out of the

question.

"Losing most of our key players is really tough," Oeser said. "When we get in the gym we know we can be successful depending on how hard we work. I think we have the potential to do great things again this season."

For Crites, those successful teams of the past are merely motivation to each new team. "I like to approach it as an expectation has been set," she said. "It's a benchmark. We want to maintain that and keep the success of our program going. It doesn't come just because we want it; it comes because we work at it."



Central Plains has lost just six volleyball matches over the past three seasons. This year's group of seniors is working hard to continue that success. Pictured, from left: Kylie Lamatsch, Julie Donecker, Cassidy Pflughoeft, Darian Hubbard, and Taylor Oeser. (photo by Mike Courson)

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