

Better numbers improve Lady Dawgs' chances

**By Mike Lee
Eagle Contributor**

Last year in her first season as Mullin's volleyball coach, Megan Howard had five players – not even enough for a starting lineup – show up the first week for preseason practices. Eventually, the Lady Dawgs had nine players.

When this year's preseason practices began, Howard welcomed 15 players – enough to field a varsity team and junior varsity team.

Why the big increase in participation?

"The girls commented that they've never had the same coach for two years in a row," Howard said. "They know I'm still here because of them. They know my expectations. They know my desire to make them better. We built really good relationships last year, and we made it to the playoffs."

Mullin qualified for the playoffs last year by finishing fourth among the six Class 1A teams in the 2A/1A combo District 8-2A. The Lady Dawgs lost in bidistrict to perennial state power Water Valley.

"The girls showed up this year, and we all have the same goal. We want to get back to the playoffs and get past the first round – together," Howard said.

The Lady Dawgs' roster includes five seniors, three juniors, four sophomores, and three freshmen.

Howard is the first Mullin volleyball coach to return for a second season since 2016. She promised her players during the 2020-2021 school year that she would return for this year.

"The biggest difference I notice this year – besides a lot more players being on the court – is the consistency carried over from last year," Howard said. "It took all of last year to get the players to buy into

what we were doing as a program. I'm talking about volleyball, basketball, and track. I promised them I would be back, and I kept that promise."

Mullin lost only one player from last season, so the Lady Dawgs hope to move ahead of Gustine and Zephyr and challenge Lingleville and Rochelle for the district championship. Lingleville, Rochelle, and Gustine all have new coaches this season.

The District 8-2A/1A schedule opens for Mullin with a road match at Coleman on Sept. 11. Mullin's district home opener is scheduled for Sept. 14 against De Leon. Coleman and De Leon are both Class 2A teams in the 2A/1A combo district.

Mullin was scheduled to play about 12 nondistrict matches before open-

ing district.

Seeking a third consecutive playoff berth, the Lady Dawgs return eight players who started or gained significance experience last season – including fourth-year outside hitter Montanna Day, libero Taylor Lee, and right-side player Zoe Maas. All are seniors.

Junior returnees include middle blocker Kaitlyn Hernandez, setter Natalie Vega, and defensive specialist Abril Martinez. Sophomore returnees are middle blocker Tyranny Latta and defensive specialist Allie Powell.

"We have more court knowledge," Howard said compared to last season at this time. "We're able to adapt to rotation changes. We're more consistent and have better basic skills."

Junior varsity candidates include seniors Chasity Byers and Kaylie Foytik, sophomores Eden Pledger and Melisa Bocanegra, and freshmen Samantha Leonhard, Ryleigh Krischke, and Kamryn Featherston.

"Our kids need that consistency. They need to know people care about them," Howard said. "It's not just about winning. We're making sure everybody gets to play, and that everybody is valued."

The Lady Dawgs have dedicated their season to Lewis "Pop" Sims, a longtime Mullin resident, school supporter, and sports fan. Sims, who died from COVID at age 80 in January, was always in the grandstands cheering on the Bulldogs and Lady Dawgs, Mullin school officials said.



Members of the 2021 Mullin Lady Dawgs volleyball team are, back row from left: Kamryn Featherston, Chasity Byers, Samantha Leonhard, Montanna Day, Kaitlyn Hernandez, Eden Pledger, and head coach Megan Howard; and front row from left: Natalie Vega, Taylor Lee, Zoe Maas, Allie Powell, Ryleigh Krischke, and Abril Martinez. Not pictured are Tyranny Latta, Melisa Bocanegra, and Kaylie Foytik.