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ESIAC VOLLEYBALL CHAMPIONSHIP | GUNSTON 3 — SALISBURY CHRISTIAN 0

Herons add final touch to perfect season

Sweep Jaguars for second consecutive conference championship, completing 18-0 campaign

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1 of 2



Gunston School's volleyball team poses for a group shot Tuesday after sweeping Salisbury Christian for a second straight ESIAC champio
WILLIAM HAUFE/STAR DEMOCRAT

CENTREVILLE — David Henry rarely calls timeouts.

In fact, Gunston School's head volleyball coach is the portrait of chill as he sits courtside, arms folded across his chest with perhaps one leg propped on the other.

“It’s a very experienced team,” said Henry, who for that reason usually opts to let his players work through a tough stretch instead of calling timeout. “I start two seniors and the rest are juniors. They’ve just played a lot of volleyball, and a lot of volleyball together. And we’ve played some really good teams along the way. So we’ve been down before and they’re resilient.”

But last Wednesday, with host Severn holding a second-set lead on the way to forging a 1-1 tie with the unbeaten Herons, Henry called time.

“It might have been 22-19 them,” Henry said. “And Jill (Labrador), my assistant, before I could even say anything, said something to the team. ‘You know, we’re the undefeated team here. We need to play like we’re undefeated. Right now they look like they’re undefeated.’ And I think that kind of turned them on. Like, ‘you know we worked really hard for this. This wasn’t given to us.’”

Gunston won the next two sets for the win, and wouldn’t drop another set over the remainder of its schedule. That schedule ended Tuesday, when the Herons swept Salisbury Christian, 25-13, 25-15, 25-18 to win their second consecutive Eastern Shore Independent Athletic Conference championship, capping a perfect 18-0 season.

“I think last year a lot of our goals were to go undefeated. And we got close to it,” senior captain and two-time ESIAC Player of the Year Liv Labrador said of last season’s 16-1 team. “So I think this year we all kind of had a fire in our hearts to not lose.”

The Herons dropped just four sets the entire season — only one to an ESIAC opponent — were never taken to five sets, and swept 14 of their 18 opponents.

“I don’t think anyone goes into a season thinking they’re going to be undefeated,” Henry said.

Oh?

“I didn’t want to say it out loud,” Liv Labrador said when asked if she thought a perfect season was within reach. “There’s always a chance something could go the other way, but …”

Junior captain Alie Merkle didn’t hesitate when asked at what point in the season she thought Gunston could run the table.

“Day one,” Merkle said.

Henry admitted he thought he might again have something special heading into the season.

“The girls really worked hard right from the get-go,” Henry said. “We did some open gyms in the summer. I had fantastic turnouts for that. I had almost two dozen girls for every open gym, and that included kids who were on jayvee.”

A strong preseason showing against four-time defending Bayside Conference champion Queen Anne’s County bolstered Henry’s optimism. A sweep of North Caroline in the annual Bulldog Classic bumped that optimism up another notch.

“That was a huge deal,” Henry said. “It opened their eyes that we’re a strong team.”

The biggest lead Gunston managed in the early stages of Tuesday’s opening set was 10-7 before the Jaguars (16-5) pulled even at 10-all. The match remained tied at 12-12 before junior Serena Hill (11 digs, team-high 24 assists, three aces) went on a 12-point run from the service line that virtually put away Game 1 at 25-13.

Game 2 was tied four times — the last coming at 13-13 — before the Herons again steadily pulled away. After Salisbury Christian sent a return wide, senior Scotia Hopper (team-high 21 digs, two assists) reeled off three straight service points, including an ace for a 17-13 edge. The lead was at four, when Merkle (match-high 12 kills, seven digs, two aces) served five straight points for a 22-15 lead. Moments later, KK Griffin put down a two-handed kill to cement to 25-15 win.

“I think we have so much team chemistry,” said Liv Labrador, who finished with nine kills and six digs. “Even if player by player, position by position, some teams are better than us, we have so much more energy, so much more love for the people around us, that makes us better. I think it mainly comes down to that.”

Salisbury Christian built a 4-0 lead to open the third set. Henry never flinched and never considered calling time.

“We always cheer each other on if we’re down, and we try to lift each other up,” Merkle said.

Henry also knew his team’s resilience would surface in unison with its greatest strength — defense.

“Resilience. That’s a word we use a lot,” Henry said. “Teams tend to get frustrated with us because our defense is so strong. A lot of times teams have hit on us, and they expect their hits to be kills. We not only dig ‘em, we give a counter attack.

“That’s been our strength the last two or three years actually,” Henry continued. “Our defense has been spectacular. It generates our offense. But defense has really carried us.”

The third set was tied 7-7 and 8-8 before a long return by the Jaguars put Gunston up 9-8. It was still a one-point difference when the Herons turned a long Jags return, Liv Labrador’s back-to-back kills and Merkle’s tap-down winner into a 15-10 lead. Salisbury Christian wouldn’t get any closer than three the rest of the way, as Mariana Wichlinski (two blocks) smacked the second of her two kills to seal the 25-18 final.

“I thought Salisbury Christian played great,” Henry said. “We’ve seen them many times on film, we’ve played them twice already. I thought that was the best they played all year. I thought their defense was much better. I thought their serve-receive was much better. I thought they really challenged us at the net.

“But again, our resiliency,” added Henry, who got a strong performance from Addison Coldwell (seven kills, three digs). “Before the championship game last year, my pregame word was control. Control your emotions. This year it was purpose. Play with a purpose. Every swing, every set, every pass should be with a purpose. Every serve with a purpose. And I think that calms them down. They deserved to be undefeated. They really played well all year.”