

Volleyball: East Forsyth secures top seed in region tournament



East Forsyth's Chelsea Torrence spikes the ball against North Oconee during a Region 8-4A tri-match Tuesday at home. (Photo by Nicholas Sullivan)



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When East Forsyth's Mataya Orth recorded an ace to close out a Tuesday home sweep of North Oconee, it felt like a culminating moment for all the Broncos.

For head coach Chris James and seniors Macy Meadows and Emma Kissell, the 25-12, 28-26 win made four years of building a program from the ground up all worth it. For juniors like Orth, who helped forge a new path following East Forsyth's 1-30 debut campaign, the undefeated regular season in Region 8-4A symbolized a crowning achievement. For freshmen standouts such as Chelsea Torrence and Madelyn Moog, the earned right to host the region tournament offers the opportunity to set a high standard for years to come.

"We've got a bunch of girls that have been putting in the effort and haven't always seen the results on paper, but they've seen the building each day in practice," James said. "Now, the rest of the world gets to see it."

"They've been working really hard. They're an awesome group of kids. It's all them. I had little to nothing to do with it. ... I'm really happy for them. They've earned it."

Having flawlessly navigated through their initial four region matches, the Broncos knew their showdown with the Titans would decide the No. 1 seed and hosting rights for the region tournament.

Even still, East Forsyth expertly took care of business in its tri-match opener against Flowery Branch, dispatching the Falcons by scores of 25-11 and 25-6. After North Oconee followed suit with a similar sweep of Flowery Branch, the Broncos dominated the opening set against the Titans, closing on a 20-7 run.

Behind back-to-back kills from Akshaya Bavanandan, East Forsyth sprinted to a 4-0 advantage in the second set. North Oconee responded with its best stretch of the match — eventually pulling out to a five-point lead on multiple occasions, the last of which came at 20-15.

At that point, James called timeout, and the Broncos answered back with four consecutive points. Trailing 23-20, Moog and Kissell registered consecutive kills to fuel another 4-0 run. Kissell staved off set point with a kill that evened the score at 25-apiece.

Later, with East Forsyth sitting on match point, Orth served up an ace that North Oconee sent into the bleachers full of rowdy Broncos fans celebrating a 10th straight victory.

"Honestly, I saw a little bit of resiliency," James said of the win. "We've been talking about that. A big thing in our program is 'Character Matters.' They've been building trust in themselves, trust in their teammates and trust in our systems. That helps in a game like that."

Said Orth, "It proves that even though we're a new program, we have the ability, the players and the chemistry to win big games like that."

Offensively, junior Mandy Karavite paced East Forsyth with 11 kills. Moog and junior Kimmi VanNorman racked up eight kills apiece, with Kissell and Torrence each adding a half-dozen.

Meadows dished out a team-high 16 assists, and Orth led the Broncos with 18 total digs. Torrence contributed nine assists and eight digs.

An ace from Orth marked a fitting end on a night when East Forsyth produced double-digit aces in both matches, with 11 in the opener and 10 in the nightcap.

Orth and Karavite led the way with five aces each, while Torrence added four — all against North Oconee — to her well-rounded final line.

"We definitely have the capability to be a really strong serving team," James said. "I think that's one of the things that benefits us. We don't necessarily worry about acing the other team; we worry about getting them out of system and trying to make them a little bit more predictable."

Despite having secured the top seed in the seven-team region, the Broncos haven't booked their place in the Class 4A state playoffs just yet.

East Forsyth (27-7, 6-0) did earn a bye in the double-elimination region tournament and will face either fourth-seeded Walnut Grove or No. 5 seed Madison County Oct. 8 in the second round. A victory in that match would qualify the Broncos for the state tournament for the first time.

"It's a new thing for a lot of us, being in this position," James said of preparing to host the region tournament, which will culminate with Oct. 10 seeding matches. "We've got to work at it in practice. What are we going to do in practice that is going to make us better in the next match and the next match after that?

"It's new to us. I'm really proud of these girls, but it's something that we're going to have to work at to make sure that we're prepared."

Even though the team will look to improve over the coming week, including during the regular-season finale Oct. 3 against Johnson (Gainesville), Orth believes the display East Forsyth put on Tuesday night counts as a playoff-caliber performance.

"If we play like that," she said, "we're going to state."