

# Patriots feeling homesick

September 10, 2008 - MUSCLE SHOALS - Seven games into its 2008 season, the Northwest-Shoals volleyball team is feeling a little homesick.



Daniel Giles/TimesDaily

NWSCC volleyball coach Angie Byrd talks to her players during practice.

Fresh off a season-opening tournament in Missouri and trip to Lawson State, the Patriots didn't even get in a full practice before losing their gym to Hurricane Gustav evacuees.

Northwest-Shoals (6-1, 1-0 Alabama Community College Conference) was supposed to play its home-opener tonight against Gadsden State (6-1, 0-1). Instead, the defending ACCC champions will travel to Gadsden City High School for a 7 p.m. tilt against the 25th-ranked team in the country and a team the Patriots played the last two seasons in the ACCC championship game.

"We're just kind of bummed out because we really wanted to play a home game," sophomore libero Katie Martin said. "We haven't played a home game in forever. We only have seven this year. But it's almost better for us to go on the road and work out all the kinks before we come home and play for all the locals."

Sharpening their skills on the road, the Patriots have tried to find a new identity after losing top players in setter Lana Pigg and 6-foot-3 middle blocker Jordan Kent, the 2007 ACCC Player of the Year, from last season's squad.

Despite having one player - freshman middle blocker Bethany Morgan - as tall as 6 feet Patriots coach Angie Byrd believes her team has found its strength.

"This year, we are really strong on defense," Byrd said. "We're a great defensive team. As far as offense, we still have a little more work to do. It's coming along, but our defense is what's really winning us games right now."

Martin, sophomore outside hitter Kelley Givens and sophomore front-line player Megan Springer entered the season as defensive leaders for the Patriots, while sophomore right-side hitter Whitney Cockburn has blossomed into an asset in that phase of the game.

"She has come a long way," Byrd said of Cockburn. "She's playing really good defense this year. She's like a brand new person. She gets everything up. She works hard, and that's what's helped her come around so well."

Springer owned the right side last season and would frequently sub in and out for Cockburn. This season, Cockburn has been able to hold that position as the team rotates around.

"Last year, I knew I didn't really play defense a lot, so that was something I really wanted work on," Cockburn said. "And it is easier knowing that you're sticking to one position."

The additions of Bethany Morgan and freshman Chloe Malone have bolstered the front line, while fellow freshmen Stevi Hyche, Hannah Morgan, Shannon Thompson give the Patriots a 6-5 sophomore-to-freshman ratio.

Cockburn, Martin, Givens, Springer, middle blocker Magen McGuire and setter Ashton Pettus round out the sophomore class.

"All I hear every year from the freshman at first is, 'It's so much faster in college,'" Byrd said. "Having six sophomores from the year before, it balances it out and lets (the freshmen) know what to expect."

Players say some of those expectations became clear after a 3-1 finish in Missouri.

"We all kind of came together in Missouri," Cockburn said. "We all realized what we have to work on and what we have to do to get better. We finally clicked as a team."

Added Martin: "Last year, we had two main players. This year, it will be all of us working for a point."

The road schedule won't get any easier for Northwest-Shoals, which already boasts a win against Faulkner, a four-year school.

The Patriots also will travel to tournaments in Illinois in October and in Pensacola, Fla., beginning Friday, where No. 10 Hillsborough (Fla.) looms.

"There's nothing like a good bus ride," Martin joked. "But when we go to these tournaments, we play nationally ranked teams," Martin said. "So it really helps us, and you can tell when we play teams in our conference."