

SPARTANS 3 | TIGERS 0

NPA sweeps Kingman Academy for first 2A win

Spartans remain perfect at home with dominant victory

BY BRENDEN MARTIN
Sun Sports Editor

The Northland Preparatory Academy volleyball team earned its first 2A Conference victory Wednesday night with a 3-0 sweep over the Kingman Academy Tigers, 25-16, 25-18, 25-14.

The win maintains the Spartans' perfect record at home to start the season.

"It feels good not to have to be here late tonight and go to five sets," Spartans head coach Corie Murphy said. "I thought our team got better as the match went on — which is always nice to see. It's easy to get a lead and take it for granted. I was happy that our kids pushed through."

Each of the three sets NPA won played out in a fairly similar fashion. Both the Spartans and Tigers went back and forth in the early points before the host pulled away with big runs.

Murphy said she was happy with the way her team built up steam as each set unfolded.

"We tend to be a slow-starting team, but then we wake up and realize it's time to go," Murphy said. "I thought they



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Northland Prep's Makenna Murphy (12) and Mackenzi Parkinson (9) put up a block during a match against Kingman Academy Wednesday at Northland Prep Academy.

did a good job later in the match of working on some defense things that we worked on this week in practice."

NPA got off to a good start in the first set. After forfeiting the first point due to a service error, NPA jumped out to a 4-2 lead before Kingman Academy bounced back to even the score. Anytime the Tigers got a point on the board, the Spartans rattled off a couple of points like clockwork.

Three separate 3-0 runs for NPA led Kingman Academy to call a timeout down 12-7 in the first set. The Spartans came out of the timeout scoring six of the next seven points in part due to a few

kills from junior Mackenzi Parkinson, who made her presence known to close out opportunities.

"That's what's special about this team," Murphy said. "Everybody knows everybody else's strengths, and they rely on those and trust each other."

The Tigers mounted a 4-0 run late, but the Spartans took the first set, 25-16, on a service ace from senior Malia Turner.

Turner was the key player who helped NPA pull away in the second set. Senior Zillah Wildblood-Crawford got a kill to tie the set at 8-8 and return the serve to the Spartans. Turner rattled off three consecutive aces to take an

11-8 lead. She led the Spartans with five aces in total.

"She's been a great server for us, but she's gotten even better this season," Murphy said. "She's been way more consistent. She just put a little more heat on those serves with a little bit more confidence."

Murphy said Wildblood-Crawford was dealing with an injury after the Spartans' 4-2 showing at the Longhorn Invitational in Payson late last month. The team was working through different lineups, but Wildblood-Crawford worked her way back into playing shape.

Wildblood-Crawford led the way with 18 of the team's 34 kills. She is up to 99 kills this season and is just 53 away from 1,000 in her career.

NPA had another 5-0 run late in the set to take it, 25-18, thanks to a set-winning kill from senior Piper McGourin.

"It was really fun," Turner said. "We have a great student section cheering us on, so that makes it even better."

The third set proved to be NPA's strongest, feeding into the trend of the Spartans being a team that gets stronger as a match goes on. The Spartans won the first point of a set for the first time and started with a 3-0 burst that culminated with an ace from senior Karlie Zeglin.

The Tigers closed the gap early to cut the Spartans' lead to 9-8, but NPA pulled off a match-high six straight points to extend the lead to 15-8.

Parkinson was especially effective late in the final set, using his length in front of the net to put down big-time kills. She put down the match-winning point on a free ball perfectly placed for her to end with 10 kills on the night.

"We've been playing some higher-level teams," Turner said. "That's been challenging but fun. It's nice to come here and get a sweep and get it on the record."

NPA improved to 2-2 in regular season play, with its one previous victory coming against 3A Tuba City last week.

The Spartans will have nearly a week off before staying home to play 3A Page on Tuesday, Sept. 16.

"We're actually going to take a couple days off," Murphy said. "I think they need to stay healthy right now. They're going to rest, stay healthy, catch up on schoolwork and hopefully come back rested next week."

Kingman Academy (4-1, 1-0 2A West) was handed its first loss of the regular season. The Tigers were scheduled to play in the Mary Jo Goldey Tournament hosted by Lake Havasu High School on Saturday.

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Running a loop and arriving somewhere else

BY CALEB SCHIFF
Special to the Daily Sun

For those who run very far, doing so can often create existential thoughts. One of the most common thoughts is "why am I doing this?" or "is pursuing this goal worth it?" This is likely because running very far is an elective activity, one humans no longer have to do, and it's easy to recall how comfy our bed was only hours before.

Lately, with the combination of training and work stress, I was asking myself the following questions:

When we take on big goals, what are we asking of ourselves and, indirectly, of others?

A short list: time, discomfort, inconveniences, sacrifices, missed opportunities.

What is on the other side?

A short list: shared accomplishment, learning, bonding through struggle, understanding of one another, inspiration, joy, grief, resilience.

In late August, I ran the Ultra Trail Mont Blanc

(UTMB), a 100-plus-mile loop around Mont Blanc. Passing through three countries and climbing and descending 33,000 feet, it's a "big goal" for many ultrarunners. Having never run a 100-mile race, it was certain to push my comfort zone and, hopefully, be an experience to grow from.

Signing up for UTMB was additionally challenging for me this year. Work pressures were at a high point with having a new restaurant opening earlier this March. Either one of these is, frankly, enough to take on in a single year. The added pressure of these two — relatively ambitious — goals resulted in personal fatigue and a short-fused temperament. At times it felt selfish and antithetical to "health." It caused the existential questions I proposed at the top of this article.

Since completing UTMB a few weeks ago, I've been able to relax, reflect, rest and get back to work. I've had the chance to talk through these topics and am feeling resolved. I realize how



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Caleb Schiff poses for a photo during the Ultra Trail Mont Blanc.

much ultrarunning is more of a team sport than one might think, and that is why, I believe, this sport has such a growth trajectory. Even if you aren't the one running there is a draw to watching those overcome adversity, and we all need that inspiration in a fast-paced world. Goals might be personally defined, but they are never done alone. The effort is shared, and the accomplishment is for others, too, whether it comes in the form of motivation, learning or shared experiences.

I am so grateful for the loved ones who support my crazy ideas and am-

bitions, and I know I am not alone. While I cannot answer why I have to seek out these things, I've been given the freedom from my loved ones to do so, who realize it's as much a part of me as my name or height. If your loved ones support you to do hard things, I encourage you to thank them often.

Chasing big goals isn't for everyone, but I argue it's a necessity for all. Accomplishing big things creates lore, stories and pride. Think about the ambitions for the moon landing, marriage equality or ending apartheid in South Africa and how they united large parts of

society. The vast majority of people had no part in their accomplishments, per se, yet we are all better off for them and continue to find inspiration from their completion.

There was a lot of lore around this year's UTMB, with some of the worst weather in the race's history. Yes, stories to share and remarkable adversity, but it was not the storyline of the race. Rather, what you heard from the participants, and my own experience, was the support the runners had on the course and in training. Coincidentally, it is where my mind went to when I was out there wet, cold and tired. My thoughts were of my managers who give me confidence to leave our busy company, family following along, friends joining for long runs and, of course, those who greeted me out on the trail morning, day and night, and then into another morning to greet me at the finish line.

I went into UTMB with so much gratitude for the chance to see what is possible, but it is not what

got me to the finish line. Rather, it was the boost I got from people who believed in me more than I believed in myself.

Long-distance running is not the most practical of sports to take up, but I believe its rapid growth is partly due to the vulnerability it forces onto its participants. This raw, human condition tugs at our actual existence, one that is based on survival, relying on loved ones and lots of grit. Modern humans have been around for about 300,000 years and struggling together is the only thing that has allowed us to not go extinct. That surely is a goal worth pursuing.

Caleb Schiff is a husband, runner and business owner in Flagstaff, where he's enjoyed the trails since 2005. If not running in the forest, you can find him preparing for his next run or working with his teams at his restaurants. Rachel Smith is the coordinating editor for the High Country Running column. You can email her at rachscheid18@gmail.com to contribute to this column.

EAGLES

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"Cailee, she's just an athlete," Johnson said. "She's a softball player. Last year, she came out just to have fun and then she was thrust into (playing quarterback). This year, she's more comfortable, and I think that's going to be the key."

Johnson said he is hopeful that Edgewater will be fully cleared to practice next week. He expects her to be ready to play in games in October.

"When Aubrey comes back, it'll give us an opportunity to kind of have a competition again to keep each other sharp," Johnson said. "It gives us, as play callers, opportunities to really do stuff. In flag football, I can have two quarterbacks on the field at once."

Both Culwell and Edgewater are capable of being effective in the run and pass game at the same time.

Another aspect of coaching a fairly new sport is keeping up with the regular updates and rule changes the AIA introduces. One of the most important things players will need to know is what happens if a flag falls off without a defender pulling it. If that happened last year, the play would be blown dead. If a flag falls off a ball carrier this year, the play continues until a defender touches them.

"I'm telling them to keep playing until the whistle," Johnson said. "If you don't hear a whistle, the play is not over."

Johnson cited last year's regression to the number of seniors lost from the team's inaugural roster



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Flagstaff's Mona Reynolds, right, pulls a flag during a drill at flag football practice on Thursday at Flagstaff High School.

in 2023. That roster included Maya Evans and Aspen McCallie, whose presence on offense and defense gave the Eagles a lot of flexibility.

"When you lose those types of athletes and their speed, IQ and all of that, you have to kind of take a step back and try to figure it out," Johnson said. "Last year, that's kind of what we did."

"My first year, I feel like we played schools that didn't really know what was happening," Maloney said. "Last year, I felt like we had a fully new defense and half of a new offense. Going into this year, we all have practice. Most of our starting lineup is returners."

This year will bring some newcomers looking to replace the speed

that was lost. Eagles junior Kayden Payne has run track for the last two years. She joins the flag football team as a potential key piece.

"She's one of the fastest kids we have on the field," Johnson said. "She's adapting. She's learning. She asks questions when she needs to and then she goes hard. Her natural athletic ability will help us a lot."

The third year of flag football for the Eagles brings another region realignment. Flagstaff played in the 4A Mountain Sky Region last year, which included regular Grand Canyon Region faces, plus Mayer High School.

This year, the Grand Canyon Region is being introduced to the flag football world. Lee Williams and Mohave also join the region this year

after playing in the 4A Colorado River Region in 2024.

"We know that throughout the school year, the Grand Canyon Region has some quality teams," Johnson said. "Prescott is probably the cream of the crop. Coconino is probably still going to be very solid. We've got to earn our way. It's going to be fun when we get to region play."

Prescott went undefeated in the regular season last year and made it to the 4A championship game, where it lost to No. 1-seed St. Mary's, 10-7. The Badgers beat Coconino in the semifinal, 28-21. Flagstaff looks to take the helm in the Grand Canyon Region's introduction to flag football. The Eagles will open the season against the Westview Knights at Flag High on Tuesday at 3:30 p.m.