



‘Sisterhood’ serves team success

Junior Makenna Sanders and Freshman Leah McCulley condition together before practice. (photo: Lucena Hanna)

BY KYLEIGH HUGHES

One tradition continues to connect players on Papio South’s championship-winning volleyball team: Big Sis/Little Sis. Now in its fourth year, this tradition pairs varsity and JV players with freshmen and reserve players—creating bonds beyond the court.

The purpose? To build confidence, connections, and a tight-knit community.

“Trying to find ways to connect all of us together was important to me,” said Coach Katie Tarman, who heads up the varsity team. She introduced the idea four years ago after seeing it at River City Juniors Volleyball Club, led by Coach Deb Grafentin. “I just loved how fun it was for the girls, and how excited they got to receive something from their Big Sister or Little Sister,” Tarman said.

The Big Sis role focuses on taking the Little Sis under their wing, offering support, encouragement, and guidance both on and off the court. Whether it’s writing a heartfelt note, powering through conditioning together, or simply being someone to talk to, the relationships built through this tradition create meaningful connections among the different levels of the teams.

“The Big Sis/Little Sis bond brings the whole team closer together, reminding us that we all have something to give and something to learn from one another.”

**Coach Jaci Karn,
Freshman Volleyball**

“They’re a lot more alike than they are different,” Tarman said. “I think [younger players] learn how to be more confident because they actually have to go talk to their Big Sis, and that’s hard sometimes; but once they have those conversations, I think it gets a lot easier. And then they realize: ‘Oh, they’re not so scary; they’re just older girls.’”

Freshman Volleyball Coach Jaci Karn, who coordinated the pairings, said she looked deeper than grade level or team. “I also try to match them based on compatibility and opportunities for leadership,” Karn said. “The goal is to give each athlete a ‘bonus friend’ and a safe space for extra support within

the Papillion South Volleyball program.”

Junior Lyric Judson and her Little Sis, sophomore Jasmine Cole, were paired up this year.

“My favorite thing about Big Sis/Little Sis is that the older, more experienced girls get to help the younger ones get used to playing in a big program,” Judson said. “I think it’s hard for them to feel like they have a voice, and

it’s good for them to have someone to look up to.”

Cole agreed, sharing how much it meant having Judson’s support. “Having a Big Sis made me feel more confident and supported, because she always encourages me during conditioning and makes sure that I am doing it right. She makes me feel like we are doing something hard together and I’m not alone.”

Also paired up this season: junior Makenna Sanders and her Little Sis, Lea McCulley, a freshman.

“I think that we are definitely a close program,” Sanders said. “It has been hard not playing on the same days, but

when we do, it is so fun and enjoyable. I think that it helps build connections between people of different ages and teams.”

McCulley echoed that sentiment, saying, “My favorite thing about Big Sis/Little Sis is getting to know upperclassmen that I don’t get to see inside school, and we give each other little gifts, like a candy bar before games to wish each other good luck.”

That bond has paid off on the court, with the varsity team ranked No. 1 among Class A teams in the state as of Oct. 8, with a record of 20-5 overall and a district record of 9-0. Judson has been a team leader along with Senior Kami Dyrstad, with Judson averaging 3 kills per set and Dyrstad with 5 digs per set.

“I think we have been pushed in so many ways that have definitely made us better. We took a trip to Vegas to play the top teams in the country and we had to play some amazing volleyball,” Judson remarked. “I think that made us work so much harder and has transferred to practice and games here in Nebraska because we know what we are actually capable of now.”

While in Las Vegas, the team played on Sept. 19 and 20, winning their matches against Palo Verde (Las Vegas), South Torrance (Torrance, CA), and Mercy (Louisville, KY). They fell to Iolani (Honolulu, HI), Casteel (Queen Creek, AZ), and Harvard-Westlake (Studio City, CA).

Judson expressed her excitement for the upcoming postseason, saying



Senior Ella Eymann, is poised and ready to serve during a match against Marian. (photo: Trey Lovings)

“We did also win the Monarch Invite this year by beating the team that beat us last year in the championship, so it is definitely a great full circle moment. I am very excited to keep making memories and get back to work with the postseason coming up.”

Sanders said both connection and continued communication have been key. “As a team we are doing well,” Sanders said. “We have to do a lot of check-ins to keep on track. There is always something to work on, which continues to drive us. We are performing well but need to continue being in control of the game and not letting the game control us.”

For Judson, it was ongoing encouragement that kept the team

performing at its high level. “I would describe this team culture as encouraging. We do a ton together and it’s very encouraging and fun,” Judson said. “I think the way the girls get each other gifts and talk to each other in the halls is really cool.”

From the outside, Big Sis/Little Sis might seem simple, but its impact has helped shape players into stronger leaders, better teammates, and more confident individuals.

As Tarman put it: “I think connecting with one another and being kind and hard working really matters. It just connects us as individuals, as people, as volleyball players, as females. I think that’s what it’s all about.”



The varsity team greets Marian at the net before beating the team in three sets to one on Sept. 23. (photo: Trey Lovings)