JUCO water polo preview: Foothill squad loaded

Something must give during the women's water polo showdown between College of San Mateo and Foothill College this season.

CSM sophomore goalkeeper Daria Kekuewa, who led the state in saves last year, is an All-America candidate. Foothill sophomore attacker Anna Kim returns as an actual All-American after a freshman season in which she scored 38 goals.

But their success in 2012 largely depends on the plethora of new faces in the pool.

"The good thing is when I look up and down the roster we have depth at different positions," Foothill coach Jeff Bissell said. "That's what gives me optimism heading into the season. There is a lot of competition at practice."

After a runner-up finish in the Coast Conference, the Owls return four sophomores. That includes Kim's foil on offense Caroline Norton, a second-team all-conference selection who, like Kim, anticipates the counter-attack, is an asset on defense and can post up on offense.

"It's nice to have those two girls around," Bissell said. "With all the new girls that are here, they lead the way in what it takes to be a player at Foothill and how hard you have to work to reach the goals that you have set for yourself."

The goal is to reach the playoffs, and the Coast champion earns an automatic bid. Utility player Sarah Magee (Mountain View) and redshirt sophomore Jaimie Breen (Woodside) add veteran depth, while the newcomers include a trio that belonged to the Stanford water polo club: Notre Dame-Belmont products Gurpuran Singh and Dana Delucchi plus Menlo School-Atherton standout Hailey Smith.

Delucchi will compete for the starting goalkeeper spot with fellow freshman Ashley Arras, who led Leland-San Jose to the Central Coast Section Div. I title last year.

"The level at practices has been raised," Bissell said. "It's good energy, for sure."

Practice at CSM during the summer revolved around defense, defense ... and more defense.
"I don't like to go to offense because I don't necessarily have all of the pieces to the puzzle in the summer," CSM coach Randy Wright said.

Three sophomores are surrounded by eight freshmen at CSM, with the team's success largely depends on Kekuewa's ability to guard the cage.

"She's a stud," Wright said. "She was 50/50 (about playing this season). She was thinking about redshirting because she knew our team would be young."

The determining factor in her return was the emergence of Miya Oto, a transfer from San Jose State who turned into a three-time All-American on the swim team at CSM in the 50-, 100- and 200-meter freestyle in the spring.

"She's not the biggest size, but she flies," Wright said of Oto, who during the summer was part of a relay team that crossed the English Channel. "She can probably swim with the ball faster than anyone can flat-out swim."

Oto's speed will allow Kekuewa's outlet passes to spark isolated counter-attacks. Sophomore center Andrea Carranza (Woodside) will be looked upon for additional offense, along with freshmen Erica Staben (Menlo-Atherton), Kelly Dwyer, Jasmine Zaldivar and Santa Clara transfer Sinclaire Cheong.

"To tell you right now the positions for everybody, I have no idea," said Wright, who is concerned the inexperience in the pool will result in a rash of turnovers. "We're trying to be a little bit more of a motion offense this year. It's going to be a little more free flowing and we'll try to use our position and speed."

The season was supposed to start this weekend at the CSM mini-tournament, but it was canceled after a few teams backed out. Instead, their campaigns begin Sept. 13 against Delta College -- a match at CSM in the afternoon, then another one at Foothill in the evening.

"I'm itching," Bissell said. "I'm ready."

The next two days, both teams will compete at the West Valley Tournament in Saratoga. CSM's doubleheader on Day 1 of the event includes Merced and Diablo Valley -- the North's representatives at last year's state finals.

"I'm taking a bunch of young, little puppies into the big pool, and we'll see what
happens," Wright said. "Hopefully you look at the first week and we'll turn those puppies into Bulldogs."

• CSM and Foothill will co-host the Coast/Big 8 Crossover Tournament on Oct. 12-13. Not only will the event play an important role in the selection of the four at-large qualifying spots for the postseason, it will allow coaches to gain better perspective when it comes time to select All-NorCal and All-America squads.

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