Rising Above the Net: Junior Boys Volleyball Serve Up a Season to Remember

Bump. Set. Spike. Score. Game. Gold.

Let's rewind to before they made Sir Wil Athletics history, where it all started with a tryout. A few months ago, no one expected the junior boy's volleyball team to go all the way. They weren't the obvious favorites. Last season, they finished 8th out of 10 teams in the East Division of Tier 2 with only two wins and six losses; so it's safe to say they entered this season as the underdogs. That said, given their previous track record last season, tryouts felt different this year. No spots were safe and nothing was promised. Everything was on the line. It became like a battleground, where effort spoke louder than reputation.

"What caught my attention at the tryouts was the competitive nature of the sessions and the growth I witnessed in player development from the previous season," said Coach Marks, the team's coach. The newcomers showed up nervous, feeling unsure if they belonged. "Seeing everyone trying out, knowing there was a lot of competition and everyone was good, was one of my biggest fears," admitted Jacob Trieu, a ninth-grader athlete. This nervousness wasn't just the case for the freshmen either; now veteran players like Kieran McStravick and William Blacker, who had played as Grade 9s the year before had something to prove too. Their spots on the team were an uncertain gray shade of guarantee and so were their reputations. Eventually, however, after all the games, sets, spikes, and endless drills, Coach Marks made himself a roster, a lineup of athletes that would later become a dream team. The moment the team list was announced and practices started, there was an underlying tangible spark within the players; like something big was quietly but steadily brewing.

When asked what made this year different, McStravick didn't hesitate saying, "We had a lot more hard work to do this time. We practiced a lot harder. We had a lot more experience from last year too, and we were just more competitive. We wanted to win more." Blacker directly echoed the statement saying, "I think our teamwork and showing up to practices improved from last year. Our experience kind of grew from last year's team and players too." The pressure was on and it was also clear from the very beginning that everyone had the same collective goal: to go far. Coach Marks captures the goal best, "To dominate every game, while encouraging players to have fun and celebrate their successes as much as possible, to never take anything for granted, while giving their opponents the best version of themselves on the court." Soon, it became clear that this year's team had the potential to do exactly what they'd hoped and practiced for: to go far. Once the win streak began, the atmosphere shifted. The team began steamrolling the competition. "I always tell my players that if you are on the team, you are there for a reason," Coach Marks said. "The team had the right amount of talent and drive to go all the way. I just wanted them to believe in their talent and their teammates. They believed in themselves from the start, thus they already felt that they were special and I felt the same way from day one."

It wasn’t long before the players began to fully believe and realize it too.

“One of the biggest moments for us this season was after our third game,” said newly appointed team co-captain Sabih Mohammed. “We realized we’d gone 3-for-3 for 3 games. We were undefeated. That’s when we started to think about the rest of the season, our other games, and playoffs because we hadn’t even lost a set yet.” That being said though, with a perfect record came pressure. The spotlight was growing and, as expected, egos were inflating. When asked how he kept the team grounded, Coach Marks didn’t hesitate. “Hard work and adversity keep us all grounded, in sport and life. When it comes to volleyball, you need to learn to let it go and focus on the next point. It’s a sport where momentum can change in an instant. But if you fight through adversity and trust those around you, you can weather the storm and come out on top. The players worked hard together every day, and they were aware of their weaknesses. That dedication kept them humble and pushed them to improve.”

However, beneath the navy blue and maroon jerseys were people. People, whose private battles were only added onto by the natural stress, doubt, and pressure inflicted by sports. These student-athletes weren’t just dealing with on-court opponents; they were getting through personal struggles too. As co-captain, Mohammed had to gracefully carry himself and his team on his shoulders. “I think the pressure honestly came from the other teammates,” he said. “Being captain meant I had to be a leader for them. That was a lot.” For star player William Blacker, it was his recurring injuries that almost kept him off the court. “I think it was my injuries that made me kind of almost give up the season,” he admitted. “Until I saw my teammates and they kind of lifted me to play through it.”

By the end of the regular season, the spark felt earlier had turned into a powerful flame. A streak that couldn’t be stopped. The team had gone undefeated the entire season and scattered talks of the boys potentially even winning the playoffs started to spread. The win wasn’t just about the team anymore either. It was about the school and what it would mean for the athletics program, for spirit, for pride. They were becoming a symbol of what was possible; and before we knew it, they were in the finals.

The final game didn’t start as expected though. They fumbled the first two sets to Lisgar putting Sir Wil on the brink of defeat. McStravick remembered it vividly, “I almost gave up when we were two down to Lisgar in the finals,” he said. “It was a tough time. We didn’t think we were going to win. Everybody was about to give up. But before the third set, I looked around and saw my teammates and they were the ones who motivated me to keep going.” When the third set came along, our athletes came back on the court, but not just to win, to also fight for each other because it was now or never. The moment they'd practiced and played for was finally here and they weren't going to let it go without a battle.

“Hard work always pays off,” McStravick stated. “So always work your hardest whether it’s practice or in games.” At that moment, the match wasn’t just about volleyball. It was about every lesson they’d learned that season. It was about support, trust, and staying together as a team. In life, things are messy and unexpected. In sports, however, there are rules, boundaries, and teams of people who want nothing but the best for you. A built-in support system means there's always going to be someone supporting you by your side even in your toughest moments.

Then there it was, set 5, the final point. Bump. Set. Spike. Score. Game. Gold. “For me,” said Mohammed, “when the final point landed, my first thought was like wow. Honestly, I was in shock because this was my first high school championship. I was just up in excitement and yelled. Honestly, I couldn’t be more excited than I’ve ever been.” The truth is, the moment was more than a win for these boys, it was a moment of significance they would think back to for the rest of their lives. “This championship,” said Coach Marks, “represents the bravado and swagger that is now starting to make its way back into our school culture. It started with the flag football team last year and continued with the boy's hockey last semester. We have talent at Sir Wil. It’s not only acceptable to be proud of yourself, it's necessary.”

This wasn’t just a volleyball win. It was the culmination of each practice, each serve, and each set this season. Yet, in the grand scope of the world, it was just a school championship; but maybe that’s the point because what’s big in your world doesn’t have to be big in everyone’s. What may seem small to others can feel like everything to you. This season was about more than volleyball. It was about seeing efforts turn into something worth celebrating, for yourself and others.