

Armwood's Emilee Taylor reaching striking new heights

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By Eduardo A. Encina

SEFFNER — Asked if she ever thought she'd lead Hillsborough County in kills, Armwood outside hitter Emilee Taylor lets out a nervous laugh.

"No, I didn't," she says. "Never."

But she's at the top now, leading the county with 5.3 kills a game and leading the Hawks to their best season in five years.

With Armwood's 25-15, 26-24, 29-27 win over district foe Riverview on Tuesday night, the Hawks (9-1) improved to 5-0 in Class 5A-8.

A victory in their regular-season finale at Newsome on Thursday can clinch the No. 1 seed and put the Hawks well on their way to their first district title since 2004, the second of back-to-back district crowns.

"That would mean a lot, because not only is this team young and a lot of seniors graduated from last year," said Taylor, one of just three returning players from last season. "It would mean a lot to me and show everyone that you can do anything."

Taylor had 19 kills, five blocks and four digs — all team highs — in Tuesday's win over the Sharks. Many of those points came when the Hawks needed them most, like when Armwood trailed 21-17 in the second game then rallied to take the set. Taylor scored three of the final six points — one with a tip over the net and another with a thumping spike that showed her range.

"I think she knows it's her senior year, it's her last year to play in high school," Armwood coach Mike Wyatt said. "She's really taken a leadership role. She's level-headed and she takes it all in stride. She's one of the best we've had."

It's a daily act for a player who has quickly developed into one of the county's best.

Taylor the junior and Taylor the senior are much different, thanks to an offseason playing for the Brandon-based Synergy Volleyball Club.

The result is one of the most complete players in the county — a powerful hitter, a superior blocker and a good passer. She is among the county leaders in kills per game and hitting percentage (46.6). Even on a mis-set, Taylor finds a way for the ball to rifle off her hand for a kill.

"She just has a knack for finding a way to get to the ball," Wyatt said.

But what has really made Taylor a more complete player is her serving. She is second in the county in aces per game (1.6), trailing only Brandon's Lindsey Watson (2.1).

"Last year I'd just try to hit it as hard as I can," Taylor said. "This year, I've worked more on placing the ball."