Area teams ready for most 'exciting' time

BY ERIC NARCISSE
Staff writer

The volleyball regular season can be quite the grind.

But this week, the opportunity to compete in the state volleyball tournament makes it all worthwhile for several teams.

State volleyball tournament

Several coaches describe this as "the best time of the year."

"This time of year is always exciting," Westminster Christian coach Keith Leon said. "This is like the best time of the year. This time of year, the state volleyball tournament, is what we look forward to from the beginning to the end."

Episcopal School of Acadiana coach Sara Robichaux called the final week of the season "bittersweet."

"It's an exciting time, but I mean, it's also kind of bittersweet," Robichaux said. "We really love this group of girls, and especially the senior class. Since the beginning of the year, we have all said we're going to be crying sad tears no matter if we win a title or not because this group is really special."



FILE PHOTO BY ROBIN MAY

The Westminster Christian front line prepares to receive the ball against Teurlings Catholic on Oct. 1 at Teurlings. The top-seeded Crusaders are hoping to bring home an elusive state title this weekend at the Cajundome.

The Crusaders and Falcons are among six Acadiana-area teams — including Iota, Catholic High of New Iberia, Lafayette Christian and Northside Christian — set to compete in the state volleyball tournament across divisions III, IV and V. The tournament gets underway at 9 a.m. Thursday at the Cajundome.

"This is our seventh year in a row making it to the state tournament, and we don't take it for granted," Panthers coach Gary Westcott said. "You know, it's a lot of work, a lot of luck and a lot of praying for no injuries. It's an honor to go, and we're looking forward to it."

No. 3-seeded Iota will face No. 6-seeded Lutcher at 3 p.m. Thursday on Court 4.

In Division V, the No. 1-seeded Crusaders will face No. 8-seeded First Baptist Christian at 11 a.m. on Court 4, while the No. 2-seeded Falcons will take on No. 10-seeded Northside Christian at 9 a.m. on Court 1.

The Falcons are seeking to reach the state finals for the first time since 2021 when they were the state runner-up.

"I feel like we flew under the radar this year for the most part, which is really kind of nice," Robichaux said. "We really are starting to peak at the right time."

The Crusaders last reached the title game in 2024, but Leon believes this could be the year they get over the hump.

"It feels different," Leon said. "These kids have been trusting the process since they were freshmen. We're playing at a high level, and it feels like this could be the year if we stay focused."

In Division IV, the No. 3-seeded Panthers will face No. 11 John Curtis at 11 a.m. on Court 1.

"We've been playing well all year," Westcott said. "I think it's starting to click, and we've really come together as a team. I'm feeling good about our chances, even though we got some really tough competition coming up."

The No. 5-seeded Knights take on defending state champions Newman, who are the No. 4 seed, at 11 a.m. on Court 2.

Bryan Barrett, who will step away as the Knights head coach after this season, finds himself more excited than normal.

"I don't know if it's because I got more skin in the game this year, because my daughter's a senior, but I'm more excited about this playoff for some reason than I have been in a while," Barrett said. "I always get excited for the playoffs.

"That's my time of the year, but for some reason, I just feel like there's a little bit more skin in the game for me this year."

In Division III, No. 3-seeded Iota will face No. 6-seeded Lutcher at 3 p.m. Thursday on Court 4.

RABALAIS

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the Tigers have roughed up the six teams they outclassed but lost to the three best teams they've faced (Ole Miss, Kentucky and Alabama). Those results don't inspire a lick of confidence. Especially since Texas and Tennessee are at least on par with those three best teams that already have beaten LSU, generally speaking. Either way, Kiffin deserves more time to prove himself and his methods.

Is it fair to have expected LSU to challenge for a CFP title during his first year?

NIL and the transfer portal certainly have broken the old rules that said a coach had to get at least two or three recruiting classes in before you could expect title contention. Indiana, of all teams, making the CFP in Year One under Curt Cignetti and UCLA being 9-0 under first-year coach Bob Chesney say it can be done. It has certainly reset the bar for a school with LSU's resources and tradition.

That said, the flip side of this new era is there are no guarantees. Certainly not when you flip as much of the roster as Kiffin had to, bringing in more than 60 transfers and freshmen. That's a lot to make work in a short time.

In some ways, it's been great. Players such as Dilin Jones, Jackson Harris, Princewill Umanmielen and Ty Benefield have been huge additions. Sam Leavitt has been a mixed bag. Sean Thompkins, who got to fill in for an injured Weston Davis at right tackle against Bama, and wide receiver Jayce Brown haven't contributed much.

Yes, LSU spent a sizable fortune on this roster, like the total revenue of Walt Disney World on a holiday weekend day sizable. But money is no guarantee. If it were, the New York Mets wouldn't have finished last in the National League East with baseball's second-priciest roster.

What about all of the celebrities coming down Victory Hill?

The part of me that despises the vulgar chants and vulgar T-shirts in Tiger Stadium was quick to side with the folks who think Kiffin parading Victory Hill with the likes of Kevin Costner and Shaquille O'Neal and Angel Reese needs to go, along with the sideline basketball goal and fire extinguisher. It's not a good look when you lose. But that's all it is. A look. A perception.

I sincerely doubt Kiffin missed any practice time last week to take a call from Costner's people.

I read a critique of Kiffin that said he wants all of the attention on himself. That he has a huge ego. That doesn't make him much different from every football coach I've ever covered.

Kiffin wants to combine Hollywood glitz with Nick Saban accountability. It sounds like a tough mix, but when he led Ole Miss to an 11-1 regular season in 2025, no one complained.

If Kiffin and LSU miss the CFP, they will get the ridicule. The scorn. The withering criticism. The only cure for that is winning.

Saban had coaches and players on full blast his entire career. No one criticized him for being inhumane because he was a winner. It is the same for Kiffin as he marches down Victory Hill to the beat of his own drummer — a famous drummer such as Ringo Starr, perhaps.

What could the future hold for Kiffin and LSU?

There was pressure on Kiffin to lead LSU to the College Football Playoff this year. If the Tigers don't make it, the pressure ratchets up enormously next season, especially since the CFP expands to 24 teams.

Kiffin and other coaches got what they wanted: A bigger playoff means more job security, though so do expectations.

Perhaps a more pertinent question is if the Tigers wind up in the Gator Bowl, will LSU boosters still be bought in?

Kiffin has said repeatedly the rosters will be better going forward.

That takes money. A favorite quote from "The Right Stuff" certainly applies: "No bucks, no Buck Rogers."

Perhaps Shaq or Costner can write a check.

FOOTE

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"We're going to have to push through that a little bit," Desormeaux said. "I know these dudes want to play. They've been pushing through a lot, so I expect those guys to be ready to go."

Then there's the mental approach.

The historians among us warned about the program's history in Hattiesburg. Yet in the postgame interview session, a team leader admitted to not taking Southern Miss seriously enough.

Well, here we are again.

Sure, the Cajuns have won 15 of the last 18 games over the Warhawks, but 10 of those 15 games were single-digit wins. Just last season, it took overtime to beat UL-Monroe 30-27 at home with a bowl berth on the line. And UL-Monroe has won two of its last three games.

"You've got to learn that every opponent you play deserves your maximum effort, respect, discipline, preparation," Desormeaux said.

On Thursday in Monroe, we'll see exactly how mature the Cajuns have become.

The Cajuns also need to make the Warhawks earn their points.

Quarterback Lunch Winfield has thrown pick-sixes in the last two games. Overall, UL opponents have scored six non-offensive touchdowns this season in nine games.

When UL-Monroe last beat UL 21-17 in Monroe in 2022, the Cajuns snapped a ball over the punter's head to set up an 8-yard scoring drive, and the defense gave up a 75-yard TD run and an 89-yard reception. ULM didn't do much other than those three plays, but it didn't need to for the upset win.

Desormeaux explained Monday the interception return Saturday was more complicated than the one in Hattiesburg.

"On the call, they ended up running a cloud coverage to the field, which was not what we were expecting in '12' personnel," he said. "It's not an excuse. It is what it is, but he had an opportunity to get rid of it a little bit earlier but he held onto it.



STAFF PHOTO BY BRAD KEMP

UL coach Michael Desormeaux confers with quarterback Lunch Winfield during Saturday's game against South Alabama.

"He lost track of where the defender was ... it's a safe throw and you throw a pick on it. If I get somebody wide open for him, then he probably doesn't throw it there and he doesn't have to get to his third progression."

UL-Monroe has a veteran quarterback in Aidan Armenta, and the Warhawks ran it for 268 yards in Jonesboro to beat Arkansas State on Saturday.

Just like going into the Southern Miss game, there's a little rest on the other side of this underrated challenge in Monroe on Thursday. UL-Monroe would love nothing more than to beat UL.

A mature Cajuns squad will understand how unacceptable losing to Louisiana Tech, Southern Miss and UL-Monroe in the same season would be around these parts.

So is it the biggest test of the season?

You bet it is.

CAJUNS

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hind the arc. SUNO made just 17 of 33 free throws for 51.5%. Had the Knights shot a higher percentage at the line, things would have been more interesting than anyone in Lafayette ever expected.

The game featured 41 turnovers, with 24 committed by the visitors. The Cajuns outrebounded SUNO 45-32.

"I thought we did some good things with our press early on that created some turnovers," White said. "I thought our guys were playing hard, communicating on defense and just making it hard for SUNO to get the ball into their actions or get the ball up court."

UL's two most experienced players, De'Vion Lavergne and Jamyron Keller, struggled to knock down shots. Lavergne was 4-of-13 shooting for 11 points, three rebounds, two assists and three steals. Keller was 5-of-19 shooting and 4 of 14 from 3-point land for 16 points and nine rebounds.

It's been an interesting transition for Lavergne, who was forced to play point guard last season because of injuries and now is in between the two guard positions.

"I would say it's been a little bit more challenging, adjusting from being a point guard last year, and I was the main point guard," Lavergne said. "So the ball was in my hands most of the time. Now I'm moving without the ball, hunting my own shots as well, still trying to get others involved. So it's just a little adjustment. And over time, it's going to get better."

No UL player shot over 50% from the field.

Perhaps the most encouraging sign for UL is true freshman Derrick Florence showed his athleticism by getting 10 rebounds off the bench in 18 minutes, many of them in an acrobatic manner.

Another positive is the UL coaching staff was able to see a lot of young players who normally wouldn't get significant minutes. For example, 6-foot-10 freshman Mikhail Dulkay finished with 10 points, four rebounds and two steals in 26 minutes.

"I still need to get my defense better," Dulkay said. "Here, there is another speed, so where I used to play in Russia, the speed is lower and the level of athleticism is lower. So I've got to try to get lower in the stance and defense and guard multiple positions.

"That's how I will be on the floor and just be aggressive every time I touch the ball. I can create, I can create for myself, I can create for everybody else on the floor."

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TYSON

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learning experience."

Tyson said he "couldn't believe" that his first catch resulted in a fumble. Browns linebacker Carson Schwesinger punched the ball loose as New Orleans was threatening to score, and Cleveland recovered the turnover at the 1-yard line.

Tyson would make up for the play later. As careful as the Saints were to manage his reps early — the first-rounder didn't even take the field until there were 51 seconds left in the first quarter — they trusted him to be out there late. Half of Tyson's 18 snaps came in the fourth quarter, and each of his two fourth-quarter drives resulted in points.

Notably, Tyson was a third-down valve for quarterback Tyler Shough. Three of his five targets came on such plays, leading to two crucial conversions in the fourth. His biggest catch was a 7-yard completion on third-and-5, which set up the 33-yard strike to Chris Olave that paved the way for New Orleans' go-ahead touchdown late.

Tyson's routes revealed how the Saints see his value. They used him on crossing and drag routes over the middle, an area that Shough hasn't targeted frequently this year. They used him in the red zone, and the rookie even got so wide open on one sequence that he tossed up his arms as Shough took a 2-yard sack.

Simply put, he looked like the missing piece to a wideout group that includes Olave and Devaughn Vele.

"We're going to keep getting him the ball," Olave said. "He's one of our best players when on the field."

Next up

The Saints' most important game to date is Sunday's first-place NFC South showdown against the Carolina Panthers.

This isn't your typical first-place battle.

Like the Saints, the Panthers are 3-5. And like the Saints, Carolina already has made a notable staff change this season, firing defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero late last month.

The Panthers moved on from Evero largely because Carolina has been unable to stop the run. Carolina has allowed more than 200 yards rushing twice this season, and the Panthers rank 28th in run defense, giving up 133.4 yards per game.

That could bode well for New Orleans, which had success on the ground over the weekend in its win against Cleveland. The Saints rushed for 160 yards, led by Audric Estime's 72 yards on 15 carries.

Odds and ends

■ Cam Jordan played just 12 snaps against the Browns, his fewest since Nov. 3, 2024. That game against the Panthers led to the dismissal of former coach Dennis Allen. On Sunday, Jordan played just four snaps — one of which was a kneel-down — after he missed a sack on an unblocked look at quarterback Shedeur Sanders.

■ Moore gave an interesting answer when asked whether he expected Kendre Miller to return to the practice squad if the running back cleared waivers. The coach noted the Saints didn't have an open spot right now. But that was also the case when Moore previously said the team planned to bring back Jayden Price after cutting him. Never say never, but Miller's time with the Saints looks officially over. New Orleans released him over the weekend.

■ Tyler Shough was sacked five times, tied for a season high, against the Browns, but his most confusing sack came in the third quarter when the quarterback identified Cleveland's Myles Harden as a blitzer before the snap, only for Harden to go completely unblocked off the line of scrimmage. How did that happen?

Moore chalked up the play to a "miscommunication," though he did not single out who was at fault.