

Practice makes perfect

Streaking Newton South turns winning into science

By KAT HASENAUER CORNETTA

NEWTON — The whiteboard rules the day at each Newton South boys volleyball practice. Lions coach Todd Elwell manages practice with the help of a double-sided whiteboard that looks as though it was dragged in from math class. Each day's two-hour practice is detailed on it, with multiple sections, charts and numbers outlining each drill. The week's theme and the day's inspirational quote preside over the plan.

At one practice last week, the theme was "confidence," and highlighted was a quip from legendary Celtics coach and team-builder Red Auerbach: "I can't stand a ballplayer who plays in fear. Any fellow who has a good shot has got to take it and keep on taking it. So he misses — so what?"

The whiteboard is a cog in Elwell's organizational method. It's a system that works, with Newton South entering this week's MIAA tournament with a 19-0 record this season and a 44-0 record over the last two.

"Newton South volleyball is always taken seriously," said captain Brendan Duggan, one of 10 seniors. "With coach and his organization and coaching skills, it's always going to be taken seriously."

After clinching last year's state championship with a 3-0 shutout of Agawam, the Lions haven't blinked, clinching their third

straight Dual County League title with a 3-0 win over Lincoln-Sudbury Wednesday. They have been taken to more than three sets in just four games this season, and the Lions won the prestigious Rhody Invitational, a multi-state tournament, in early April.

So much of Newton South's sustained success comes from volleyball legacy at the school, but technology has played a major role. When Elwell took the helm from Massachusetts Volleyball Hall of Famer Judy Kennedy a decade ago, game stats were still kept by hand. Now with iPads and apps designed for tracking every statistic, practice may have a math class air about it, but it's actually an efficient machine.

"After Year 3 or 4, I started to ask the right questions and do the right things," said Elwell. "We base everything we do on science and stats. It's like 'Moneyball.' Volleyball is 'Moneyball.' There are so many stats you can take away and use to get better."

Relying on stats could strike some as bland, however, Lions practices are anything but boring. Laughing and joking permeates the court. At one point last week, co-captain Jonathan Lee found himself face-first in the net, and started laughing before his teammates joined in.

Elwell called out to Lee: "How high's the net?"

"Too high!" a few teammates said.

"If everything is so strict and



serious all the time, whenever we make a mistake, we'll be very hard on ourselves, which won't help during a game," said Lee.

As the postseason looms, Newton South hopes its combination of joy and science is enough to stay ahead of the competitors.

"We were lucky enough that by our junior and senior years, we were able to win states and now in our senior year, hope to repeat," said Duggan. "I think it says a lot about the work we have put in, the work coach has done and the trust that we have in each other."

STAFF PHOTOS BY PATRICK WHITTEMORE

JUST AS IT'S DRAWN UP: Newton South volleyball coach Todd Elwell stands in front of his renowned whiteboard as he addresses players during practice at the school on Thursday. At right, senior captain Jonathan Lee elevates to spike the ball over the net. The Lions are in the midst of a 44-game winning streak.

