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Rockets volleyball blasts off with signature win *by Kent Zakour*

Staff Writer

The undefeated Richard Montgomery High School girls volleyball team picked up its first signature victory of the year Monday by defeating visiting fifth-ranked Walter Johnson 25-23, 25-16, 16-25, 25-14.

"We haven't really ever experienced anything like this," junior outside hitter Emily Jiang said. "We've been at the bottom. To get a win like this, over a team that went to the [Class 4A West] Region finals last year, is a big deal. We got a long way to go, but it kind of validates that we are good team."

Jiang's 11 kills were key in the Rockets (6-0) balanced attack. Standout middle hitter Jackie Nelligan paced the offense with 16 kills and seven aces, but significant contributions were also made by Judy Fan (six kills) and Melanie English (five kills).

"[Sophomore setter] Danielle [Spencer] did a great job getting us all involved tonight," Jiang said. "In the past, we relied on Jackie way too much, but with her getting hurt [sprained ankle] last year was actually a blessing since people had to play. This year, we've really focused on being a diverse offense even when she's on the floor."

With seven matches remaining, the Rockets are expected to be favored in all the contests except for an Oct. 25 trip to reigning 4A state champion Sherwood.

"It's definitely something exciting to think about," Jiang said.

On Monday, the Rockets started slow as Wildcats (4-2) setter Brigid Morris (25 assists) served for the initial five points of the contest. The Wildcats built a 13-7 advantage following a double touch violation, but the Rockets rallied to take a 23-22 lead. After a timeout, Nelligan then recorded two kills on the ensuing three points to win the set.

With a 7-5 advantage in the second, Nelligan took over the match from the service line. Wildcats coach Bill Morris called two timeouts in attempt to disrupt her rhythm, but they were unsuccessful. By the time Nelligan, who has given an oral commitment to play for Washington University (St. Louis), was off the line her team led 18-5.

"I've enjoyed watching Jackie play and she's a great player," Morris said. "We made 14 errors in the second game and that isn't going to cut it. ... People put a lot of expectations on us after what we did last year and rightfully so, but this team is still very young and finding its way."

Morris' squad stayed alive with a strong performance in the third. Middle Kristen Larrick recorded four of her team-high 11 kills in the set and the Wildcats led by as many as 13, 22-9. Teammate Stephanie Paul also contributed with eight kills.

The Wildcats were within two, 11-9, midway through the fourth, but a Jiang kill sparked a 14-5 run to end the match.

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