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## Durango overtakes state runner-up Silverado as early favorite

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Windows of opportunity can be mercilessly small in high school sports.

With new players always coming in and older veterans perpetually heading out, it's important to seize chances while they last.

The Silverado High volleyball team came ever so close in November, storming into the state tournament and taking a lead in the championship match before falling victim to a stunning rally by Damonte Ranch.

A new season has arrived, and the Skyhawks are hoping for one more chance at the state title. Several key seniors graduated in the spring, however, and talk has shifted away from Silverado in favor of another traditional power.

It's been awhile for Durango coach Bob Kelly, but his team is regarded as the one to beat. Though the seasoned coach is cautiously optimistic, he's been around long enough to know that there are no guarantees in volleyball.

"Things are looking fine," said Kelly, whose squad won its last state title in 2003. "We've got a few holes but also some strengths."

Among those strengths will be veteran leadership. Senior setter Markie Malone and senior outside hitter Jordan Nitz are two of the top players in the state. Kelly knows the duo could carry the Trailblazers far.

"(A championship) is within reach for us," Kelly said. "But it's also within reach for a lot of other schools. There's a lot of parity this year, and no one's going to dominate."

He could be right. In the Sunrise Region, Silverado again looks strong.

But Coronado might have the personnel to take control of the region. With an energetic new coach and several of the top players in town, the Cougars also have their eye on the crown.

"This team is one that could be special," Coronado coach Brock Mitchell said.

But there are other contenders. No one's counting out perennial power Green Valley in the Sunrise, and Las Vegas appears poised to go undefeated again in league play.

In the Sunset, there will be competition for Durango. Centennial marched deep into the playoffs before being ousted early in last year's state tourney. Bulldogs coach Shannon Alia isn't sure what to expect of her team after losing six seniors to graduation, but her hopes remain high.

"Potentially, we can be a better team than last year," said Alia, whose squad lost just one league game last year.

Despite roster losses, Sierra Vista and Shadow Ridge are in roughly the same position and capable of beating anyone in town.

"We had nine seniors graduate (after last season)," Shadow Ridge coach Karissa Guthrie said. "But the girls have really impressed me. We still have a really good team, and we're going to be up there competing for the division."

Most coaches feel their team has a chance because most see more parity in Southern Nevada this year.

"It's really anybody's year," Palo Verde coach Amy Rogers said.

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