

If Laura Lee Holman says, “In the beginning ... ,” she probably has a story to tell about starting the volleyball program at New Hope High School.

The first stories were written Monday, July 16, 2012, in what then was still the New Hope Middle School gym. Fifty-four students attended the first of two tryouts to try to win a spot on the high school’s inaugural squad.

Holman helped the volleyball program take its initial steps and then grow in its first two seasons before she left New Hope in 2015 to take a teaching / coaching position at North Pike High.

This year, Holman will get an opportunity to be a part of new stories in a new but familiar place. The high school gym isn’t the same one where she coached the New Hope volleyball and girls basketball teams or where she excelled as standout guard for the Lady Trojans, but that’s not going to stop her from making new history.

“Coming back to New Hope has been wonderful,” Holman said. “I am so glad to be here. The facility upgrades are amazing. They were just kind of getting started before I left, so it has been neat coming back and seeing some of the teachers who taught me and some of my former co-workers.”

In addition to working as a social studies teacher at New Hope High, Holman will serve as an assistant coach for the junior high girls basketball and softball teams.

Holman and New Hope volleyball had their biggest success in 2013, when the team, led by senior Silvia Sartori, a transfer student from Germany, earned a 3-2 victory against Lewisburg in the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) Class 5A State Tournament. New

Hope then lost to eventual state champion Lake Cormorant 3-0 in the Final Four.

Allison Woolbright took over the program after Holman served as head coach for the first two seasons and helped it become one of the best in Class 5A. In 2019, 2020, 2022 and 2023, New Hope advanced to the Class 5A Final Four. Annie Woolbright (Jones College) and Megan Neeb (Mississippi University for Women) played key roles on the 2023 team, which proved to be Woolbright's last season.

Woolbright's retirement opened the door for Holman to return to a place she knows very well. Ginny Swedenburg and Maggie Griggs will serve as assistant coaches to help a program that has only one senior – middle hitter Andie Wright – and four juniors – defensive specialist (DS) Karlie Brown, setter / outside hitter Aubrie Kate Forrester, setter Lexi McBrayer and DS Roni Kate West -- keep growing.

"It's a season full of challenges," Holman said. "They're getting a coach who hasn't coached volleyball in nine years. The sport has grown so much since I have been gone. I am having to learn, learn, learn. I am more of the student right now and they have been the teachers for a little while, but I am starting to get my feet under me and starting to put this thing together."

Forrester said she likes the atmosphere Holman has created and feels Holman will help the program continue its success. She acknowledges there will be growing pains because inexperienced players will be in key roles, but she likes what the Lady Trojans have done so far.

New Hope (4-4) opened its season Saturday by finishing second in the silver bracket at the MHSAA Volleyball Invitational. It lost to Starkville 3-2 on Monday. The teams will play the rematch at 6 p.m. Monday at New Hope.

Forrester feels New Hope has made a lot of progress in a short amount of time and that “a bunch of stuff” came together vs. Starkville and that “it felt like there was chemistry that had been there for a while.”

Said Forrester, “I think things are starting to come together so quickly because everybody realizes if we want to go farther than just round one of the playoffs we’re going to have to put in work like we did against Starkville, we’re going to have to communicate with each other on and off the court and bond as a team.”

Wright said Holman is doing her part by communicating with the players and learning their playing style. In turn, Wright said the players have learned what Holman expects and understand she has high standards.

“I think it has really made us a lot better as fast as possible,” Wright said. “I think we have all been really into the challenge and we want to take it and go as far as possible.”

Holman likes the promise the team has displayed in the first few weeks. She credited Woolbright for elevating the program and said she is excited to work with Swedenburg and Griggs, who played volleyball at The W, to raise the bar higher.

“We looked like a young team (at the MHSAA Volleyball Invitational),” Holman said. “I challenged the players to do some things differently and they came in Monday against Starkville and played at a level I didn’t think they would be able to play at until later in the season. I was really impressed with the way they stepped up. I think that weekend showed them (the potential) is here and we can still uphold that tradition.”